

Georges Clemenceau's Letter of Reply to the Objections of the German Peace Delegation, May 1919

Sir:

The Allied and Associated Powers have given the most earnest consideration to the observations of the German Delegation on the conditions of peace.

The reply protests against the peace, both on the ground that it conflicts with the terms upon which the armistice of November 11, 1918, was signed, and that it is a peace of violence and not of justice.

The protest of the German Delegation shows that they utterly fail to understand the position in which Germany stands today. They seem to think that Germany has only to "make sacrifices in order to attain peace," as if this were but the end of some mere struggle for territory and power.

I

The Allied and Associated Powers therefore feel it necessary to begin their reply by a clear statement of the judgment passed upon the war by practically the whole of civilized mankind.

In the view of the Allied and Associated Powers the war which began on August 1, 1914, was the greatest crime against humanity and the freedom of peoples that any nation, calling itself civilized, has ever consciously committed.

For many years the rulers of Germany, true to the Prussian tradition, strove for a position of dominance in Europe. They were not satisfied with that growing prosperity and influence to which Germany was entitled, and which all other nations were willing to accord her, in the society of free and equal peoples. They required that they should be able to dictate and tyrannize to a subservient Europe, as they dictated and tyrannized over a subservient Germany.

In order to attain their ends they used every channel in their power through which to educate their own subjects in the doctrine that might was right in international affairs. They never ceased to expand German armaments by land and sea, and to propagate the falsehood that this was necessary because Germany's neighbours were jealous of her prosperity and power.

They sought to sow hostility and suspicion instead of friendship between nations. They developed a system of espionage and intrigue which enabled them to stir up internal rebellion and unrest and even to make secret offensive preparations within the territory of their neighbours whereby they might, when the moment came, strike them down with greater certainty and ease.

They kept Europe in a ferment by threats of violence, and when they found that their neighbours were resolved to resist their arrogant will they determined to assist their predominance in Europe by force.

As soon as their preparations were complete, they encouraged a subservient ally to declare war against Serbia at forty-eight hours' notice, knowing full well that a conflict involving the control of the Balkans could not be localized and almost certainly meant a general war. In order to make doubly sure, they refused every attempt at conciliation and conference until it was

too late, and the world war was inevitable for which they had plotted, and for which alone among the nations they were fully equipped and prepared.

Germany's responsibility, however, is not confined to having planned and started the war. She is no less responsible for the savage and inhuman manner in which it was conducted.

Though Germany was herself a guarantor of Belgium, the ruler of Germany violated, after a solemn promise to respect it, the neutrality of this unoffending people. Not content with this, they deliberately carried out a series of promiscuous shootings and burnings with the sole object of terrifying the inhabitants into submission by the very frightfulness of their action.

They were the first to use poisonous gas, notwithstanding the appalling suffering it entailed. They began the bombing and long distance shelling of towns for no military object, but solely for the purpose of reducing the morale of their opponents by striking at their women and children. They commenced the submarine campaign with its piratical challenge to international law, and its destruction of great numbers of innocent passengers and sailors, in mid-ocean, far from succour, at the mercy of the winds and the waves, and the yet more ruthless submarine crews.

They drove thousands of men and women and children with brutal savagery into slavery in foreign lands. They allowed barbarities to be practiced against their prisoners of war from which the most uncivilized peoples would have recoiled.

The conduct of Germany is almost unexampled in human history. The terrible responsibility which lies at her doors can be seen in the fact that not less than seven million dead lie buried in Europe, while more than twenty million others carry upon them the evidence of wounds and sufferings, because Germany saw fit to gratify her lust for tyranny by resort to war.

The Allied and Associated Powers believe that they will be false to those who have given their all to save the freedom of the world if they consent to treat this war on any other basis than as a crime against humanity and right.

This attitude of the Allied and Associated Powers was made perfectly clear to Germany during the war by their principal statesmen. It was defined by President Wilson in his speech of April 6, 1918, and explicitly and categorically accepted by the German people as a principle governing the peace:

Let everything that we say, my fellow countrymen, everything that we henceforth plan and accomplish, ring true to this response till the majesty and might of our concerted power shall fill the thought and utterly defeat the force of those who flout and misprize what we honour and hold dear.

Germany has once more said that force, and force alone, shall decide whether justice and peace shall reign in the affairs of men, whether Right as America conceives it or Dominion as she conceives it shall determine the destinies of mankind.

There is, therefore, but one response possible from us: Force, Force to the utmost, Force without stint or limit, righteous and triumphant Force which shall make Right the law of the world, and cast every selfish dominion down in the dust.

It was set forth clearly in a speech of the Prime Minister of Great Britain, of December 14, 1917:

There is no security in any land without certainty of punishment. There is no protection for life, property, or money in a state where the criminal is more powerful than the law.

The law of nations is no exception, and until it has been vindicated, the peace of the world will always be at the mercy of any nation whose professors have assiduously taught it to believe that no crime is wrong so long as it leads to the aggrandizement and enrichment of the country to which they owe allegiance.

There have been many times in the history of the world criminal states. We are dealing with one of them now. And there will always be criminal states until the reward of international crime becomes too precarious to make it profitable, and the punishment of international crime becomes too sure to make it attractive.

It was made clear also in an address of M. Clemenceau of September, 1918:
What do they (the French soldiers) want? What do we ourselves want? To fight, to fight victoriously and unceasingly, until the hour when the enemy shall understand that no compromise is possible between such crime and 'justice.' ... We only seek peace, and we wish to make it just and permanent in order that future generations may be saved from the abominations of the past.

Similarly, Signor Orlando, speaking on October 3, 1918, declared:
We shall obtain peace when our enemies recognize that humanity has the right and duty to safeguard itself against a continuation of such causes as have brought about this terrible slaughter; and that the blood of millions of men calls not for vengeance but for the realization of those high ideals for which it has been so generously shed.

Nobody thinks of employing - even by way of legitimate retaliation - methods of brutal violence or of overbearing domination or of suffocation of the freedom of any people - methods and policies which made the whole world rise against the Central Powers.

But nobody will contend that the moral order can be restored simply because he who fails in his iniquitous endeavour declares that he has renounced his aim. Questions intimately affecting the peaceful life of nations, once raised, must obtain the solution which justice requires.

Justice, therefore, is the only possible basis for the settlement of the accounts of this terrible war. Justice is what the German Delegation asks for and say that Germany had been promised.

Justice is what Germany shall have. But it must be justice for all. There must be justice for the dead and wounded and for those who have been orphaned and bereaved that Europe might be freed from Prussian despotism. There must be justice for the peoples who now stagger under war debts which exceed 130,000,000,000 that liberty might be saved. There must be justice for those millions whose homes and lands, ships and property German savagery has spoliated and destroyed.

That is why the Allied and Associated Powers have insisted as a cardinal feature of the treaty that Germany must undertake to make reparation to the very uttermost of her power; for reparation for wrongs inflicted is of the essence of justice. That is why they insist that those individuals who are most clearly responsible for German aggression and for those acts of barbarism and inhumanity which have disgraced the German conduct of the war, must be handed over to a justice which has not been meted out to them at home.

That, too, is why Germany must submit for a few years to certain special disabilities and arrangements. Germany has ruined the industries, the mines, and the machinery of neighbouring countries, not during battle, but with the deliberate and calculated purpose of enabling her

industries to seize their markets before their industries could recover from the devastation thus wantonly inflicted upon them.

Germany has despoiled her neighbours of everything she could make use of or carry away. Germany has destroyed the shipping of all nations on the high seas, where there was no chance of rescue for their passengers and crews. It is only justice that restitution should be made and that these wronged peoples should be safeguarded for a time from the competition of a nation whose industries are intact and have even been fortified by machinery stolen from occupied territories.

If these things are hardships for Germany, they are hardships which Germany has brought upon herself. Somebody must suffer for the consequences of the war. Is it to be Germany, or only the peoples she has wronged?

Not to do justice to all concerned would only leave the world open to fresh calamities. If the German people themselves, or any other nation, are to be deterred from following the footsteps of Prussia, if mankind is to be lifted out of the belief that war for selfish ends is legitimate to any state, if the old era is to be left behind and nations as well as individuals are to be brought beneath the reign of law, even if there is to be early reconciliation and appeasement, it will be because those responsible for concluding the war have had the courage to see that justice is not deflected for the sake of convenient peace.

It is said that the German Revolution ought to make a difference and that the German people are not responsible for the policy of the rulers whom they have thrown from power.

The Allied and Associated Powers recognize and welcome the change. It represents a great hope for peace, and for a new European order in the future. But it cannot affect the settlement of the war itself. The German Revolution was stayed until the German armies had been defeated in the field, and all hope of profiting by the war of conquest had vanished.

Throughout the war, as before the war, the German people and their representatives supported the war, voted the credits, subscribed to the war loans, obeyed every order, however savage, of their government. They shared the responsibility for the policy of their government, for at any moment, had they willed it, they could have reversed it.

Had that policy succeeded they would have acclaimed it with the same enthusiasm with which they welcomed the outbreak of the war. They cannot now pretend, having changed their rulers after the war was lost, that it is justice that they should escape the consequences of their deeds.

II

The Allied and Associated Powers therefore believe that the peace they have proposed is fundamentally a peace of justice.

They are no less certain that it is a peace of right fulfilling the terms agreed upon at the time of the armistice. There can be no doubt as to the intentions of the Allied and Associated Powers to base the settlement of Europe on the principle of freeing oppressed peoples, and redrawing national boundaries as far as possible in accordance with the will of the peoples concerned, while giving to each facilities for living an independent national and economic life.

These intentions were made clear, not only in President Wilson's address to Congress of January 8, 1918, but in "the principles of settlement enunciated in his subsequent addresses" which were the agreed basis of the peace. A memorandum on this point is attached to this letter.

Accordingly the Allied and Associated Powers have provided for the reconstitution of Poland as an independent state with "free and secure access to the sea." All "territories inhabited by indubitably Polish populations" have been accorded to Poland. All territory inhabited by German majorities, save for a few isolated towns and for colonies established on land recently forcibly expropriated and situated in the midst of indubitably Polish territory, has been left to Germany.

Wherever the will of the people is in doubt a plebiscite has been provided for. The town of Danzig is to be constituted a free city, so that the inhabitants will be autonomous and not come under Polish rule and will form no part of the Polish state. Poland will be given certain economic rights in Danzig and the city itself has been severed from Germany because in no other way was it possible to provide for that "free and secure access to the sea" which Germany has promised to concede.

The German counter-proposals entirely conflict with the agreed basis of peace. They provide that great majorities of indisputably Polish population shall be kept under German rule.

They deny secure access to the sea to a nation of over twenty million people, whose nationals are in the majority all the way to the coast, in order to maintain territorial connection between East and West Prussia, whose trade has always been mainly seaborne. They cannot, therefore, be accepted by the Allied and Associated Powers.

At the same time, in certain cases the German note has established a case for rectification, which will be made; and in view of the contention that Upper Silesia, though inhabited by a two to one majority of Poles (1,250,000 to 650,000, 1910 German census), wishes to remain a part of Germany, they are willing that the question of whether Upper Silesia should form part of Germany or of Poland should be determined by the vote of the inhabitants themselves.

In regard to the Saar basin, the regime proposed by the Allied and Associated Powers is to continue for fifteen years. This arrangement they considered necessary both to the general scheme for reparation, and in order that France may have immediate and certain compensation for the wanton destruction of her northern coal mines. The district has been transferred not to French sovereignty, but to the control of the League of Nations.

This method has the double advantage that it involves no annexation, while it gives possession of the coal field to France and maintains the economic unity of the district, so important to the interests of the inhabitants. At the end of fifteen years the mixed population, who in the meanwhile will have had control of its own local affairs under the governing supervision of the League of Nations, will have complete freedom to decide whether they wish union with Germany, union with France, or the continuance of the regime established by the treaty.

As to the territories which it is proposed to transfer from Germany to Denmark and Belgium, some of these were forcibly seized by Prussia, and in every case the transfer will only take place as the result of a decision of the inhabitants themselves, taken under conditions which will insure complete freedom to vote.

Finally, the Allied and Associated Powers are satisfied that the native inhabitants of the German colonies are strongly opposed to being again brought under Germany's sway, and the record of German rule, the traditions of the German Government and the use to which these colonies were put as bases from which to prey upon the commerce of the world, make it impossible for the Allied and Associated Powers to return them to Germany, or to entrust to her the responsibility for the training and education of their inhabitants.

For these reasons, the Allied and Associated Powers are satisfied that their territorial proposals are in accord both with the agreed basis of peace and are necessary to the future peace of Europe. They are therefore not prepared to modify them except as indicated.

III

Arising out of the territorial settlement are the proposals in regard to international control of rivers. It is clearly in accord with the agreed basis of the peace and the established public law of Europe that inland states should have secure access to the sea along navigable rivers flowing through their territory.

The Allied and Associated Powers believe that the arrangements which they propose are vital to the free life of the new inland states that are being established and that they are no derogation from the rights of the other riparian states. If viewed according to the discredited doctrine that every state is engaged in a desperate struggle for ascendancy over its neighbours, no doubt such arrangement may be an impediment to the artificial strangling of a rival.

But if it be the ideal that nations are to cooperate in the ways of commerce and peace, it is natural and right. The provisions for the presence of representatives of non-riparian states on these river commissions is security that the general interest will be considered. In the application of these principles, some modifications have however been made in the original proposals.

IV

The German Delegation appear to have seriously misinterpreted the economic and financial conditions. There is no intention on the part of the Allied and Associated Powers to strangle Germany or to prevent her from taking her proper place in international trade and commerce. Provided that she abides by the treaty of peace and provided also that she abandons those aggressive and exclusive traditions which have been apparent no less in her business than in her political methods, the Allied and Associated Powers intend that Germany shall have fair treatment in the purchase of raw materials and the sale of goods, subject to those temporary provisions already mentioned in the interests of the nations ravaged and weakened by German action.

It is their desire that the passions engendered by the war should die as soon as possible, and that all nations should share in the prosperity which comes from the honest supply of their mutual needs. They wish that Germany shall enjoy this prosperity like the rest, though much of the fruit of it must necessarily go, for many years to come, in making reparation to her neighbours for the damage she has done.

In order to make their intention clear, a number of modifications have been made in the financial and economic clauses of the treaty. But the principles upon which the treaty is drawn must stand.

V

The German Delegation have greatly misinterpreted the reparation proposals of the treaty. These proposals confine the amount payable by Germany to what is clearly justifiable under the terms of armistice in respect of damage caused to the civilian population of the Allies by German aggression. They do not provide for that interference in the internal life of Germany by the Reparation Commission which is alleged.

They are designed to make the payment of that reparation which Germany must pay as easy and convenient to both parties as possible and they will be interpreted in that sense. The Allied and Associated Powers therefore are not prepared to modify them.

But they recognize with the German Delegation the advantage of arriving as soon as possible at the fixed and definite sum which shall be payable by Germany and accepted by the Allies. It is not possible to fix this sum today, for the extent of damage and the cost of repair have not yet been ascertained.

They are therefore willing to accord to Germany all necessary and reasonable facilities to enable her to survey the devastated and damaged regions, and to make proposals thereafter within four months of the signing of the treaty for a settlement of the claims under each of the categories of damage for which she is liable.

If, within the following two months, an agreement can be reached, the exact liability of Germany will have been ascertained. If agreement has not been reached by then, the arrangement as provided in the treaty will be executed.

VI

The Allied and Associated Powers have given careful consideration to the request of the German Delegation that Germany should at once be admitted to the League of Nations. They find themselves unable to accede to this request.

The German Revolution was postponed to the last moments of the war and there is as yet no guarantee that it represents a permanent change.

In the present temper of international feeling, it is impossible to expect the free nations of the world to sit down immediately in equal association with those by whom they have been so grievously wronged. To attempt this too soon would delay and not hasten that process of appeasement which all desire.

But the Allied and Associated Powers believe that if the German people prove by their acts that they intend to fulfil the conditions of the peace, and that they have abandoned those aggressive and estranging policies which caused the war, and now have become a people with whom it is possible to live in neighbourly good fellowship, the memories of the past years will

speedily fade, and it will be possible at an early date to complete the League of Nations by the admission of Germany thereto.

It is their earnest hope that this may be the case. They believe that the prospects of the world depend upon the close and friendly cooperation of all nations in adjusting international questions and promoting the welfare and progress of mankind. But the early entry of Germany into the League must depend principally upon the action of the German people themselves.

VII

In the course of its discussion of their economic terms, and elsewhere, the German Delegation have repeated their denunciation of the blockade instituted by the Allied and Associated Powers. Blockade is and always has been a legal and recognized method of war, and its operation has from time to time been adapted to changes in international communications.

If the Allied and Associated Powers have imposed upon Germany a blockade of exceptional severity, which throughout they have consistently sought to conform to the principles of international law, it is because of the criminal character of the war initiated by Germany and of the barbarous methods adopted by her in prosecuting it.

The Allied and Associated Powers have not attempted to make a specific answer to all the assertions made in the German note. The fact that some observations have been passed over in silence does not indicate, however, that they are either admitted or open to discussion.

VIII

In conclusion the Allied and Associated Powers must make it clear that this letter and the memorandum attached constitute their last word.

They have examined the German observations and counter-proposals with earnest attention and care. They have, in consequence, made important practical concessions, but in its principles, they stand by the treaty.

They believe that it is not only a just settlement of the great war, but that it provides the basis upon which the peoples of Europe can live together in friendship and equality. At the same time it creates the machinery for the peaceful adjustment of all international problems by discussion and consent, whereby the settlement of 1919, itself can be modified from time to time to suit new facts and new conditions as they arise.

It is frankly not based upon a general condonation of the events of 1914-1918. It would not be a peace of justice if it were. But it represents a sincere and deliberate attempt to establish "that reign of law, based upon the consent of the governed, and sustained by the organized opinion of mankind" which was the agreed basis of the peace.

As such the treaty in its present form must be accepted or rejected.

The Allied and Associated Powers therefore require a declaration from the German Delegation within five days from the date of this communication that they are prepared to sign the treaty as it stands today.

If they declare within this period that they are prepared to sign the treaty as it stands, arrangements will be made for the immediate signature of the peace at Versailles.

In default of such a declaration, this communication constitutes the notification provided for in Article II of the Convention of February 16, 1919, prolonging the armistice which was signed on November 11, 1918, and has already been prolonged by the agreement of December 13, 1918, and January 16, 1919. The said armistice will then terminate, and the Allied and Associated Powers will take such steps as they think needful to enforce their terms.

French text signed: CLEMENCEAU.