

President Ebert's Address to the Opening Session of the German Assembly *7 February 1919*

The German revolution of 1918 brought the abdication of Kaiser Wilhelm II and the consequent creation of a new constitution and a new assembly. The first president of this new government, President Ebert, gave these opening remarks.

The Imperial Government welcomes through me the Constituent Assembly of the German nation.

With a special warmth I greet the women who for the first time appear in the Imperial Parliament with equal rights.

The Provisional Government owes its mandate to the revolution. It will return it into the hands of the National Assembly. In the revolution, the German people rose against an obsolete collapsing tyranny. (Hisses from the Right.)

As soon as the right of the Germans to self-determination is assured, it returns to the road of legality. Only on the broad highway of Parliamentary discussion and decision can the urgent changes in the economic and social spheres be progressively achieved without destroying the Empire and its economic position. ("Hear, hear.")

Therefore the Government welcomes in this National Assembly the supreme and single sovereign in Germany. (Applause.)

We have done forever with the old kings and princes by the grace of God. (Loud applause on the Left; hisses on the Right; renewed loud applause on the Left; cries from the Right, "Wait!")

We deny no one his sentimental memories, but as surely as this National Assembly has a great Republican majority, so surely is the old God-given dependence abolished forever. The German people is free, remains free, and governs itself for all the future. (Cries from the Independent Socialists, "With Noske.")

This freedom is the one hope which remains to the German people - the one way by which it can work itself out of the bloody morass of war and defeat. We have lost the war; this is not the consequence of the revolution. (Cries from the Right, "Oh, oh!" Cries from the Left, "No, never!")

Ladies and gentlemen, it was the Imperial Government of Prince Max of Baden which began the armistice which made us defenceless. After the collapse of our allies, and in view of the military and economic situation, there was nothing else for it to do. ("Hear, hear.")

The revolution declines the responsibility for the misery into which the evils of the old autocracy, and the arrogance of the military threw the German people. ("Hear, hear." Loud applause from the Socialists; protests from the Right.)

It is also not responsible for our serious shortage of food. ("Hear, hear." Protests, and a cry of "Soldiers' Councils.")

The fact that by the hunger blockade we have lost many hundreds of thousands of human lives - that hundreds of thousands of men, women, children, and aged people have fallen victims

to it - disposes of the story that we could have managed with our food supplies if the revolution had not come.

Defeat and food shortage have handed us over to the enemy Powers. But not only we, but also our enemies, have been terribly exhausted by the war, and the feeling of exhaustion among our enemies springs from their effort to indemnify themselves at the cost of the German people, and the idea of exploitation is brought into the work of peace. These plans of revenge and oppression called for the sharpest protest. (Loud applause from all sides.)

The German people cannot be made the wage slaves of other nations for twenty, forty, or sixty years. (Loud applause.)

The fearful disaster of the war for all Europe can only be repaired if the peoples go hand in hand. (Applause.)

In view of the misery of the masses of the peoples; in view of the mass misery on every side, the question of guilt seems almost small. Still, the German people is resolved itself to call to judgment all against whom deliberate guilt or deliberate baseness can be proved. But those ought not to be punished who themselves were victims - victims of the war, victims of our former lack of freedom. ("Hear, hear," from the Socialists.)

To what end, on their own witness, did our enemies fight? To annihilate Kaiserism. Kaiserism exists no more. It is abolished forever. The very fact of this National Assembly proves it.

They fought "to destroy militarism." It lies in ruins, and will never rise again. (Cries from the Independent Socialists, "you are setting it up again.")

According to their solemn proclamation, our enemies fought "for justice, freedom, and a permanent peace," but so far the armistice conditions have been of unprecedented severity and have been pitilessly carried through. Without more ado, Alsace is treated as French territory. The elections to the National Assembly prescribed by us have been illegally prevented. ("Shame!")

The Germans have been driven out of the country - ("Shame!") - and their properties sequestered. The occupied territory on the left of the Rhine has been cut off from the rest of Germany. The attempt is being made monstrously to extend the provision of the armistice agreement that no public property is to be made away with, and to turn it into a general financial enslavement of the German people.

Though we have long been in no condition to renew the war, our eight hundred thousand prisoners of war are still kept back and most seriously threatened by psychological collapse and the hardship of forced labour. ("Shame!")

In this act of Might policy, there is no trace of the spirit of reconciliation. The armistice conditions are explained on the ground that they were imposed on the old Hohenzollern regime.

What justification is there for continually intensifying them against the young Socialist Republic, in spite of the fact that we do our very utmost to satisfy the very heavy obligations laid upon us?

We warn the enemy not to drive us to extremities. Any German Government may one day be compelled, like General Winterfeldt, to renounce all further participation in the peace negotiations and thrust upon the enemy the whole burden of the responsibility until the new order of the world!

Let them not place before us the dangerous choice between starvation and disgrace. Even a Socialist People's Government, and this one above all others, must hold fast to its principle that it would rather suffer the extremity of want than be dishonoured. (Loud applause.)

If to the millions who have lost everything in the war and fear to lose nothing more were added also those who believe that Germany has nothing to lose, then tactics of desperation would irresistibly prevail. Germany laid down her arms in confidence, trusting in the principles of President Wilson. Now let them give us a Wilson peace, to which we have a claim. (Applause.) Our free People's Republic - the whole German people - aims at nothing other than to enter with equal rights into the League of Nations, and there win for itself a position of respect by industry and probity. (General applause.)

Germany can still do the world many services. It was a German who gave the workers of the world scientific Socialism. We are on the way to leading the world once again in Socialism, since we serve that Socialism which alone can be permanent, which increases the prosperity and the Kultur of the people - Socialism in process of realization.

Once more we turn to all the peoples in the world with the urgent appeal to see that justice is done to the German people - not to permit the annihilation of our hopeful beginnings by the oppression of our people and our economic life. The German people has won its right to self-determination at home. It cannot sacrifice that right abroad. We cannot renounce uniting the whole German nation in the framework of a single Empire. (Applause.)

Our German-Austrian brothers as far back as November 12th last in their National Assembly declared themselves to be part of the great German Republic. (Applause.)

Now the German-Austrian National Assembly has again, amid storms of enthusiasm, sent us its greeting and given expression to the hope that our National Assembly and theirs will succeed in again uniting the bonds which violence tore asunder in 1866. (Applause.)

German-Austria must be united with the Motherland for all time. (Applause.)

I am sure that I am speaking for the whole National Assembly when I welcome this historic manifestation sincerely and joyfully, and reply to it with heartfelt fraternity. (Loud applause.)

The brothers of our blood and destiny can be assured that we will welcome them with open arms and hearts in the new Empire of the German nation. (Applause.)

They belong to us and we belong to them. (Applause.)

I may also express the hope that the National Assembly will empower the future Imperial Government to negotiate as soon as possible with the German-Austrian free State concerning the final union. (Applause.)

Then there will be no more frontier post between us. Then we shall really be a single people of brothers. (Loud applause.)

Germany must not again fall into the old misery of disintegration and confinement. It is true that history and the past stand in the way of the creation of a strongly centralized unitary State, but the different tribes and tongues must be harmonized into a single nation with a single speech. (Applause.)

Only a great united possibility of developing our economic life - a politically capable, strong, single Germany - can secure the future of our people. (Applause.)

The Provisional Government has entered into a very evil heritage. We were the liquidators of the old regime. ("Hear, hear," from the Left; protests from the Right; applause on the Left.)

We, with the support and at the request of the Central Council of the German Workmen's and Soldiers' Councils have applied all our strength to overcoming the danger and misery of the transition period. We have done everything to set economic life in motion again. (Protests from the Right.)

These continued interruptions (turning to the Right) prove truly that in the hard days which Germany has passed through in the last few weeks and months you have learned little indeed. (Storms of applause from the Left.)

If the success of our work has not corresponded with our desires, the reasons must be rightly appreciated. Many employers, accustomed to the high secured profits which the war economy in the old monarchical and protectionist State created for them, have neglected to display the necessary initiative. Therefore, we address to the employers the urgent appeal to help with all their strength the restoration of production. (Applause.)

On the other side we call to the workers to employ all their strength in work, which alone can save us. ("Hear, hear.")

We understand the psychology of those who, after an undue expenditure of strength in time of war, now seek relaxation. We know how difficult it must be for those who have lived for years on the battlefield to settle down to peaceful work; but it must be. We must work and create values, otherwise we collapse. ("Hear, hear.")

Socialism means organization, order, and solidarity, not high-handedness, perversity, and destruction. There must no longer be room for private monopolies and capitalist profit without effort in time of national emergency. Therefore, profit is to be methodically obviated where economic development has made a trade ripe for socialization.

The future looms before us full of anxiety. In spite of all that, we trust in the indestructible creative power of the German nation. ("Hear, hear.")

The old foundations of the German position based on force are forever destroyed. The Prussian hegemony, the Hohenzollern army, the policy of the shining armour have been made impossible among us for all future. As November 9, 1918, follows on March 18, 1848, so must we here in Weimar complete the change from Imperialism to Idealism, from world power to spiritual greatness. ("Hear, hear.")

Now must the spirit of Weimar, the spirit of the great philosophers and poets, again fill our life, fill it with the spirit described in Faust and in Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre. Not roaming in the interminable and losing one's self in the theoretical, not hesitating and wavering, but with clear vision and firm hand taking a firm hold on practical life.

So will we set to work with our great goal clear before our eyes. To maintain the right of the German people, to anchor firmly in Germany a strong democracy and to fill it with true social spirit and Socialist character. ("Hear, hear.")

So shall we create an Empire of right and of righteousness, founded on the equality of everything that wears the form of mankind.