

14. German Counter Proposals

29 MAY 1919

COVERING LETTER TO THE GERMAN COUNTER PROPOSALS OF 29 MAY 1919

Mr. President:

I have the honor to address to you, herewith, the observations of the German Delegation with regard to the proposed Peace Treaty. We came to Versailles, expecting to receive propositions of Peace on the proclaimed basis. We had the firm desire to do all we possibly could, to accomplish obligations accepted by us. We expected the Peace of Right which had been, promised to us. We were grieved when we read this document to see what conditions victorious might demanded of us. The more, we entered the spirit of that Treaty, the more we were convinced of the impossibility of carrying it out. The demands of that Treaty are beyond the strength of the German people.

It is demanded that we renounce, with a view to the reconstitution of Poland, a territory which is indisputably German, that we renounce Eastern Prussia, entirely German, German parts of Pomerania, Danzig, a city which is essentially German, a former Hanseatic city which we must allow to be constituted into a free State under the sovereignty of Poland. We must accept that Eastern Prussia be cut off the political body of which she is a part, that she be condemned to decay, and bereaved of her northern extremity, essentially German. We must renounce, in favor of Poland and Czechoslovakia, Upper Silesia, in spite of the narrow political bond which has kept it united to Germany for over 750 years, in spite of the German life which fills it and though it constitutes the very basis of industry in the whole of Eastern Germany. Districts where the German element is in majority must be given to Belgium, without sufficient guarantees in favor of the independence of a plebiscite which shall only be made after they are given away. The country of the Saar, essentially German, must be separated from our Empire, and its reunion to France must be prepared, though we do not owe France any populations but only coal.

During 15 years, the Rhine territory must be occupied and the Allies will keep after 15 years, the facility of refusing to retrocede this country; during this period they will be free to do all that may cause the economic and moral ties to slacken between that country and the motherland, and finally warp the mind of the population.

A Germany, thus partitioned and weakened, must, though the payment of war expenditures has expressly been given up, declare herself ready to bear the weight of all the expenditures of her adversaries, which amount to twice the national and individual wealth of Germany. The adversaries, even now, going beyond the basis agreed to, demand the reparation of the damage supported by the civil population, reparations for which Germany must also answer in the name of her Allies. The sum to be paid is to be settled and ulteriorly modified and increased in a unilateral manner by the adversaries. The limit will be indicated by the capacity of payment of the German people, the degrees contemplated do not depend on the conditions of its existence but solely on the possibility in which it will find itself to satisfy the demands of its enemies by its work. The German people would thus be condemned to a perpetual slavery.

In spite of these exorbitant demands, the reconstruction of our economic life is, at the same time, made impossible. We must give our merchant fleet, give up all foreign property. We must transfer to the adversaries our property rights over all German enterprises in foreign lands even in our Allies countries.

Even after the conclusion of Peace the enemy states will have the right to confiscate the totality of German wealth. No German businessman, in the countries of these States, will be sheltered against such war measures. We must give up the whole of our colonies, German missionaries will not even have the right to exercise their profession. Therefore it is our very existence, from a political, economic, and moral point of view, which we must renounce.

Even at home we must sacrifice our right of self-determination. The International Commission on Reparations has received a dictatorial power even over our whole national life, in the realm of economy and culture, its rights being much in excess of those ever possessed, over the territory of the Empire, by the Emperor, the Bundesrat and the Reichstag together.

This Commission has full power over the economy of the State, the communities and the individuals. Education and Public Health are absolutely under its control. It can maintain the whole German people in intellectual slavery; it can, with a view to raising the payments to which she is obliged, fetter the work of social provision in favor of the German workers.

In other realms also, the sovereignty of Germany is suppressed. The principal waterways are subject to an international administration; Germany is compelled to build, on her territories, the canals and railways requested by the adversaries, to give her assent to treaties, the tenor of which is unknown to her and which shall be concluded by her adversaries with the new Eastern States, even beyond her frontiers. The German people is excluded from the League of Nations, to which the work in common of the world is entrusted.

Thus, a whole nation must sign her own proscription, more than that, her condemnation to death.

Germany knows that she must consent to sacrifices, in order to obtain peace. She knows that, in conformity with a convention, she has promised these sacrifices; she is ready to go to the extreme limit of what is possible.

1. Germany offers to anticipate all other nations, by her own disarmament, to show that she wants to help create the new era of Peace of Right. She sacrifices obligatory military service and reduces her army to 100,000 men, abstraction being made for transitory measures. She even renounces the warships that her enemies still wish to leave to her. But this with the understanding that she will be immediately admitted with the same right as the other states, into the League of Nations and that a true League of Nations will be formed, including all the Nations, animated by good will, even the enemies of today. This League will have the sentiment of responsibility before Humanity, as foundation, and will have a power of coercion, sufficiently strong and worthy of confidence, to protect the frontiers of its members.

2. As far as territorial questions are concerned, Germany takes rank, without restrictions, on the ground of Wilson's program. She renounces her rights of sovereignty over Alsace-Lorraine, but desires a free plebiscite. She gives to Poland the greater part of Posnania, the territories indisputably inhabited by Poles and the capital of Posen. She is ready to insure to the Poles by the cession of free ports at Danzig, Koenigsberg and Memel, by a chart governing navigation on the Vistula and by special treaties regarding railways, free and certain access to the sea without international guarantees. Germany is ready to insure the economic supply of France in coal, especially from the Saar coal field, until restoration of the French mines. The parts of Schleswig which have a Danish majority will be given to Denmark after a plebiscite. Germany requests that the right of self-determination be also respected in favor of the Germans of Austria and Bohemia. She is ready to put all her colonies under the administration in common of the League of Nations, if she is recognized as mandatory for the latter.

3. Germany is ready to make the payments incumbent upon her according to the peace program agreed upon, up to the maximum sum of 100 billion marks gold, of which 20 billion marks gold are to be paid by May 1, 1926, the other 80 billion marks gold in annual sums without interest. These sums are in principle to represent a percentage fixed according to the revenue of the Empire and the German States. The quota will approach the former budget of peace times. For the first ten years, it shall not exceed a billion marks gold. The German taxpayer shall not be taxed less than the most highly taxed taxpayer among those represented on the Commission of Reparations.

Germany supposes from this that she will not have to make other territorial sacrifices than those heretofore cited, and that she will be permitted all liberty of movement at home and abroad.

4. Germany is ready to put all her economic force at the service of reconstruction. She desires to collaborate by her work in the reconstruction of the ravaged districts of Belgium and the North of France. For the deficit in the production of the mines destroyed in the North of France she will furnish as high as 20 million tons of coal for the first five years, 8 million tons a year for the next five years. Germany will facilitate other deliveries of coal to France, Belgium, Italy, and Luxemburg. Moreover, Germany is ready to furnish important quantities of benzol, coal tar, sulphuric ammonia and dye-stuffs, and pharmaceutical products.

5. Finally, Germany offers to put her entire merchant tonnage at the disposal of the world's commerce, to put at the disposal of the enemy a part of the cargoes, which shall be put to her credit toward the damages to be repaired, and for a term of years to construct for them in German yards a tonnage whose figure exceeds their demands.

6. To replace the river boats destroyed in Belgium and the North of France, Germany offers her own river fleet.

7. Germany thinks that she sees an appropriate means of rapidly fulfilling her obligations in the way of reparation, by according industrial participation, especially in the coal mines, to insure the delivery of coal.

8. In accord with the wish of organized laborers the world over, Germany desires to see the laborers of every country free and equal in their rights. She wishes to see them insured, by the Peace Treaty, in their right to participate, by their own decisions, in social politics and social insurance.

9. The German Delegation reiterates its demand for a neutral examination of the responsibility for the war and crimes committed during the war. An impartial commission should have the right to examine under its own responsibility the archives of all the belligerent countries and of all the principal participants.

Only the assurance that the question of guilt will be examined without prejudice can give to the hostile countries the state of mind necessary to the constitution of the League of Nations.

These are only the most important propositions that we have to make. As to the other great sacrifices, and details, the Delegation refers to the enclosed memorandum and its supplement.

The time limit given us for the drawing up of this memorandum was so short that it was impossible to exhaust all the questions. A fruitful and useful discussion could take place only by means of oral conversations. This peace is to be the greatest treaty of history. It is without precedent to carry on such vast negotiations by means of written notes only. The sentiment of nations that have made such enormous sacrifices requires that their fate be decided by a public and unrestricted exchange of ideas, after the principle: "Public Peace Treaties," which have been drawn up publicly; and henceforth there must be no international conventions of any sort, but diplomacy must always operate publicly and under the eyes of the world.

Germany must sign the treaty that has been presented to her and must carry out its conditions. Even in her misfortune, right is too sacred to her for her to stoop to accept conditions that she can not promise to fulfil. It is true that in the course of the last centuries the peace treaties of the great powers have always proclaimed the right of might. But each one of these treaties is one of the causes that has started or prolonged the world war. Wherever in the course of this war the conqueror has spoken to the conquered, as at Brest-Litovsk or at Bucharest, the affirmations of power were only the germs of future discord. The lofty aims which our enemies have been the first to give to their way of conducting the war, require a treaty in a different spirit. Only the collaboration of all nations, the common labor of all arms and brains, can create a durable peace. We are under no illusions as to the depth of the hatred and bitterness which are the fruits of this war; and nevertheless the forces working for harmony in humanity are today stronger than ever. The historic task of the Peace Conference at Versailles is to bring about this harmony.

GERMAN UNCONDITIONAL ACCEPTANCE

23 JUNE 1919

Sir,

The Minister of Foreign Affairs has requested me to submit the following note to Your Excellency:

The government of the German Republic is overwhelmed to learn from the last communication of the Allied and Associated Powers that the Allies are resolved to enforce, with all the power at their command, the acceptance even of those provisions in the treaty which, without having any material significance, are designed to deprive the German people of their honor. The honor of the German people cannot be injured by an act of violence. The German people, after their terrible sufferings during these last years, are wholly without the means of defending their honor against the outside world. Yielding to overpowering might, the government of the German Republic declares itself ready to accept and to sign the peace treaty imposed by the Allied and Associated governments. But in so doing, the government of the German Republic in no wise abandons its conviction that these conditions of peace represent injustice without example.

[Signed]

von Haniel
