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THE GERMAN-POLISH BOUNDARY AT THE PARIS
PEACE CONFERENCE

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Darwin F. ^{FRAN} Bostick, B. A.
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PREFACE

Although a great deal has been written on the Paris Peace Conference, only in recent years have the necessary German documents been available for an analysis of the conference, not only from the Allied viewpoint but also from the German side. One of the great problems faced by the Allied statesmen in 1919 was the territorial conflict between Germany and Poland. The final boundary decisions were much criticized then and in subsequent years, and in 1939 they became the excuse for another world war.

In the 1960's, over twenty years after the boundaries established at Versailles ceased to exist, they continued to be subjects of controversy. The West German government still considers the boundaries established by the Paris Peace Conference to be the only legal frontiers and still desires a plebiscite in Upper Silesia. On the other hand, the Polish leader, Wladyslaw Gomulka, asserts that the right of self-determination was ". . . burned in the crematoria of the Nazi death camps. . . ."1

To understand the nature of this problem, it is necessary to study the factors which influenced the delineation of the German-Polish boundary in 1919. An important task of the statesmen who assembled at Paris was to affect the practical

¹New York Times, September 7, 1959, p. 2; *ibid.*, September 5, 1960, p. 2.

application of Woodrow Wilson's thirteenth point. By accepting this standard in November, 1918, they committed themselves to the establishment of a Polish nation consisting of ". . . territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea" ² As a result of this commitment, Allied leaders were forced to disguise national ambition and personal prejudice in the terms of Wilson's thirteenth point. German statesmen were even more hard-pressed by Wilson's program, which, if strictly applied, would result in extensive territorial losses for Germany.

From the conflict of national interests there emerged a compromise boundary which satisfied almost no one. After this boundary was destroyed by another world war, the victors were again faced with the complex task of reconciling conflicting strategic and economic necessities with the principle of self-determination. This time no agreement was possible, and the problem remained a significant factor in German-Polish and East-West relations. The methods by which the statesmen of 1919 arrived at a settlement are pertinent to the unsolved problem of today.

²United States Congressional Record, 65th Congress, 2nd Session, 1918, LVI, 681; House of Lansing, November 3, 1918, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1918 (Washington, 1933), Supplement 1, Vol. I, p. 456.

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CHAPTER I

THE ALLIED PROPOSALS

From the wreckage of defunct empires and dethroned dynasties resulting from the war of 1914-1918, there emerged a number of new political entities in Europe. Among these, Poland assumed the greatest importance and presented the most complex problems. The restoration of Poland was especially difficult because it had not existed as a nation after being partitioned in 1795 by Austria, Prussia, and Russia. In 1918 those three powers were defeated, and their dynasties which carved up Poland were destroyed. Only the support of the victorious nations was necessary for the restoration of the Polish nation.

Though most of the Allied statesmen and politicians were in sympathy with Polish national ambitions, they had no concerted plan to establish a new Poland. The idea developed during the war in various uncoordinated policy statements by Allied statesmen and in the preparations of Allied diplomats for the future peace conference. In November, 1918, Germany and the Allies committed themselves to an armistice agreement which called for the re-establishment of Poland and included a rather vague description of the territory which the new nation should encompass. The armistice agreement and the

subsequent peace treaty were based on the public statements of the President of the United States, Woodrow Wilson. As early as January 22, 1917, he told the United States Senate, "I take it for granted . . . that statesmen everywhere are agreed that there should be a united, independent, and autonomous Poland" ¹

In September, 1917, Wilson's adviser, Colonel Edward M. House, formed a committee of experts to begin preparation for eventual peace negotiations. In December, 1917, this committee, known as the Inquiry, submitted a memorandum to Wilson concerning American objectives. The experts called for the establishment of a Polish nation. They added, "Its boundaries shall be based on a fair balance of national and economic considerations, giving full weight to the necessity for adequate access to the sea." The Inquiry recognized that the unification of Poland would separate East Prussia from the rest of Germany, but this seemed so unlikely at the time that they suggested that Poland secure its access to the sea by way of the Vistula River. But if this became necessary, the result would be "the economic subjection of Poland and the establishment of an area of great friction." ²

¹United States Congressional Record, 64th Congress, 1st Session, 1917, XIV, 1742.

²Memorandum by the Inquiry, December 22, 1917, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1919, The Paris Peace Conference (Washington, 1942-1947) (hereafter cited as FRUS), I, 51-52.

Wilson apparently used the Inquiry memorandum in preparing his speech to Congress on January 8, 1918. In this address, the President laid down his famous Fourteen Points. In the thirteenth he said:

An independent Polish state should be erected which should include the territories inhabited by indisputably Polish populations, which should be assured a free and secure access to the sea, and whose political and economic independence and territorial integrity should be guaranteed by international covenant.³

In the meantime, the other Allies were also considering the future of Poland. As early as the autumn of 1916, the British Foreign Office prepared a memorandum on the subject. At that time, they favored the establishment of a Polish kingdom under a Russian Grand Duke. Poland could then become a buffer state between Russia and Germany. It would serve the useful purpose of weakening Germany by absorbing part of her population in Posen and elsewhere and by annexing a large part of the coal producing area in Upper Silesia. The British did not entirely overlook the desirability of drawing the boundaries along ethnological lines and of providing Poland with access to the Baltic.⁴

Even more committed to a strong pro-Polish policy was the French government because a strong Poland would strengthen

³United States Congressional Record, 65th Congress, 2nd Session, 1918, LVI, 681.

⁴David Lloyd George, Memoirs of the Peace Conference (New Haven, 1939), I, 13-14.

France against her traditional enemy, Germany. The extent of French support of Polish territorial claims was evident in a memorandum presented to the British Foreign Office on December 7, 1918. Ostensibly the unofficial speculations of Paul Cambon, French Ambassador, and Aimé de Fleuriau, French embassy secretary, the note was probably a trial balloon to prepare for the peace conference. The memorandum advocated the allocation to Poland of Posen, Upper Silesia, the southern districts of East Prussia, and the territory providing access to the Baltic.

Thus the three major Allied powers favored the reestablishment of Poland. In accepting the armistice, both France and Britain accepted Wilson's thirteenth point. The problem of the peace conference would be to determine which territories were "indisputably Polish" and by what means secure Polish access to the Baltic could be provided.⁵

When the Allied representatives assembled at Paris, the Poles enjoyed several initial advantages. First, and very important, was the strong support of the French, who were willing to support almost every Polish territorial claim against Germany. Another advantage was the support of the American delegation. David Lloyd George, the British Prime Minister, attributed this to the large Polish vote in the

⁵Laughlin to Acting Secretary of State, December 10, 1918, FRUS, I, 371-373.

United States and to the influence upon Wilson of Ignace Jan Paderewski, Polish musician turned politician. An important, and perhaps decisive, advantage was the fact that the Poles were represented at the peace conference while the Germans were not. These factors combined to provide the best possible circumstances for the success of Polish territorial claims against Germany.⁶

The Poles won the initial victory when they were allowed to participate in the first meeting of the Preliminary Peace Conference on January 18, 1919. The Allies thus recognized Poland and its right to be represented in discussions affecting its interests. Four days later, on January 22, the Allies resolved, because of chaotic conditions in Poland, to send an inter-allied commission to investigate. In discussing the instructions for this commission a week later, the Allies decided to call in a Polish representative. This gave the Poles their first opportunity to present their case.⁷

On January 29, Roman Dmowski, the President of the Polish National Committee, addressed the Supreme Council. Speaking first in fluent French, then in perfect English, the Polish representative began by describing Poland's precarious

⁶Lloyd George, I, 203-204; Bliss to White, January 9, 1919, FRUS, I, 385-387.

⁷Lloyd George, II, 631; Preliminary Peace Conference, January 18, 1919, FRUS, III, 158, 172; Supreme War Council, January 22, 1919, ibid., 670-675.

position, threatened by Bolsheviks, Ukrainians, and Germans. Concerning the territorial settlement, Dmowski stated that the starting point should be the Polish boundaries of 1772, before the first partition. He quickly added that the peace conference should not simply re-establish those boundaries but should only use them as a beginning. In the West, for instance, Poland would not accept the boundaries of 1772. Silesia, though it had not belonged to Poland since the fourteenth century, was still Polish in language and should be awarded to Poland. Dmowski also warned, "In settling the boundaries of Poland, the principle of including within those boundaries those territories where the Poles were in a large majority must not be accepted altogether."⁸

Thus, though German statistics showed the population of Danzig to be only 3 per cent Polish, and Dmowski estimated that Poles constituted only 40 per cent, he still urged that the city be given to Poland. He admitted that East Prussia presented a problem, and he urged the Allies to establish a small German republic with its capital at Königsberg. In summation, Dmowski suggested that in determining what was Polish territory, "a rough definition would be that such territory as had been oppressed by anti-Polish laws was Polish territory." The Allied statesmen concerned themselves only

⁸Council of Ten, January 29, 1919, *ibid.*, pp. 773-778; Lloyd George, I, 204-205.

with the first part of Dmowski's statement, leaving the discussion of the Polish frontiers to a later meeting.⁹

Soon after the interview with Dmowski, the inter-allied commission was established in Poland. The Council of Ten found that they lacked the time to examine all the reports from the commission. For that reason, on February 12, 1919, the Council accepted the suggestion of Arthur James Balfour, British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, that a committee of experts be set up to examine all reports from the Polish Commission and to send to the Council only those matters of greatest importance. Heading the Commission on Polish Affairs was Jules Cambon, the former French ambassador to Berlin. The American representative was Isaiah Bowman, president of Johns Hopkins University; and the British delegate was J. W. Headlam-Morley, Secretary in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.¹⁰

During the month from February 14 to March 14, 1919, Wilson returned to the United States. In his absence, Georges Clemenceau, French President of the Council and Minister of War, apparently tried to speed up the work of the peace conference. First he planned a meeting on February 19, with Balfour and Colonel House to expedite the delimitation of the boundaries. But on his way to the conference, Clemenceau was

⁹Council of Ten, January 29, 1919, FRUS, III, 780-782.

¹⁰Council of Ten, February 12, 1919, ibid., p. 1007; Council of Ten, February 13, 1919, ibid., p. 1014.

shot; and the meeting took place without him. At House's instigation, a number of American and British experts, including two members of the Commission on Polish Affairs, Headlam-Morley and Bowman, met on February 21. By the end of the meeting, the basic outlines of the boundaries were drawn, and the various territorial commissions had only to work out the details. Bowman, who had been director of the American Geographical Society of New York since 1915, was the man most responsible for determining the boundaries.¹¹

Continuing his campaign to speed up the conference, Clemenceau suggested to Colonel House on February 22, that the Allies should make peace with Germany as soon as possible. He believed, and House agreed with him, that Danzig should go to Poland. While informing Wilson of his discussion, House expressed the opinion that the British experts agreed with the French on the question of Danzig, but the British government did not.¹²

During Wilson's absence, the differences between Lloyd George and Clemenceau became more distinct. At a meeting attended by Lloyd George, Clemenceau, and Colonel House on

¹¹Isaiah Bowman, "Constantinople and the Balkans," What Really Happened at Paris, edited by Edward M. House and Charles Seymour (New York, 1921), pp. 159-160; James T. Shotwell, At The Paris Peace Conference (New York, 1937), p. 305; Paul Birdsall, Versailles Twenty Years After (New York, 1941), pp. 270-272.

¹²Birdsall, pp. 95-96; House to Wilson, February 23, 1919, The Intimate Papers of Colonel House, edited by Charles Seymour (Boston, 1928), IV, 334-335.

March 7, the Polish problem was discussed. The British Prime Minister informed Clemenceau that he opposed Marshal Foch's idea of placing the Polish-German frontier along a line from Danzig to Thorn. This would incorporate all of East Prussia in Poland, and Lloyd George "did not want any more Alsace-Lorraines in Europe, whether in the East or the West." Colonel House informed Lloyd George that the Americans favored granting Danzig to Poland. House suggested solving the problem of East Prussia by either internationalizing the area or making it into a separate republic. Clemenceau replied that the more separate republics established in Germany, the better it would be. Since the three men could not agree, they decided to postpone any further discussion until the report of the Commission on Polish Affairs.¹³

On the afternoon of March 19, 1919, the Commission presented its first report to the Supreme Council. As Jules Cambon read the report, he exhibited a map upon which a red line indicated the Polish claims and a blue line the boundary proposed by the Commission. Cambon demonstrated that, with a single exception, the Poles would receive less than they asked. He reminded the delegates of the difficulty of the Commission's task. They had tried to draw the boundaries along ethnic lines, while taking into consideration economic and strategic factors. Though admitting that Danzig was a

¹³Lloyd George, I, 188-189.

predominantly German city, the Commission proposed to give it to Poland for economic and strategic reasons. The Commission also suggested that a plebiscite be held in the district of Allenstein in southern East Prussia; it was inhabited for the most part by Protestant, Germanized Poles, whose allegiance to either Germany or Poland was questionable. The unanimous report was signed by the American, British, French, and Italian delegates.¹⁴

When Cambon had finished reading the report, Lloyd George began to question him.

Sitting forward in his chair, and speaking in an earnest voice, he proceeded to tear the report to pieces, and the argument he employed wiped the smiles from the faces and drove fear into the hearts of his listeners. "Gentlemen," he said, "if we give Danzig to the Poles the Germans will not sign the treaty, and if they do not sign our work here is a failure. I assure you that Germany will not sign such a treaty." There ensued a silence that could be heard. Everyone was shocked, alarmed, convinced.¹⁵

Lloyd George's basic disagreement with the Commission report was its inclusion of over 2,000,000 Germans in Poland. Not only would such boundaries contain the seeds of future wars, but the German government might well reject such extensive territorial losses.

Lloyd George singled out for his most vigorous criticism the provision awarding Danzig and its 412,000 Germans to Poland.

¹⁴Council of Ten, March 19, 1919, FRUS, IV, 413-14; Lloyd George, II, 635-637.

¹⁵Bowman, pp. 160-161.

He also denounced the awarding of Marienwerder, a predominantly German district between Danzig and East Prussia, to Poland. Cambon replied that the latter provision was necessary for Polish control of railroads running from Danzig to Warsaw. Lloyd George could see no reason to place thousands of Germans under Polish sovereignty for the sake of a railroad; it would be easier to move the railroad than to uproot the population. The British Prime Minister even suggested that the Germans should have been heard on the subject.

Wilson, after listening for some time to the debates on the merits of the two railroads, stated that he was afraid of endangering Polish control, but he agreed with Lloyd George on the undesirability of placing too many Germans under Polish sovereignty. Some means of balancing opposing strategic and ethnic considerations had to be found. He suggested that the Commission consider the old boundary of East Prussia as it had existed in 1772. This boundary would leave the railroad in question in Polish hands and would have some historic justification. It would be, in part, about midway between the line drawn by the Commission and that suggested by Lloyd George.

The British Prime Minister liked Wilson's idea and suggested that the Commission be requested to reconsider the boundaries of East Prussia with a view to changing them "in such manner as to exclude from the new Polish State territory historically as well as ethnologically Prussian, whilst ensuring to Poland secure access to the sea." Upon Wilson's

suggestion, the resolution only asked the Committee "to reconsider its recommendations in the light of the discussion."¹⁶

Lloyd George's criticism of the Commission report evoked bitter criticism in the French press and in segments of the British press. Some member of the Council of Ten obviously had not fulfilled his pledge of secrecy. Lloyd George demanded that some means be adopted to prevent the recurrence of such unauthorized leaks to the press. His complaint led eventually to the substitution of the Council of Four in place of the Council of Ten.¹⁷

The Commission on Polish Affairs considered the Council discussion of March 19, and reported their findings on March 22. In considering the Marienwerder district, they weighed the strategic, historic, and ethnic considerations, and concluded that the control of the Vistula River and of the railroads through that area was more important than the other factors. They contended that the large number of Germans to be included in Poland was primarily the result of the intricate intermixture of the populations over a wide area and not simply a matter of one small province. Lloyd George still expressed his discontent with the Commission report, but he agreed to accept it provisionally, with the understanding that

¹⁶Council of Ten, March 19, 1919, FRUS, IV, 414-419; Lloyd George, II, 637-642.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 642; Birdsall, p. 182.

the Supreme Council would make the final decision when considering the territorial provisions in their entirety.¹⁸

After this meeting, Lloyd George sought seclusion in the forest of Fontainebleau with a few of his advisers, including General J. C. Smuts, South African Minister of Defense. When the Prime Minister returned to Paris three days later, he brought with him a memorandum entitled: "Some Considerations for the Peace Conference Before They Finally Draft Their Terms." In this document, Lloyd George made a number of definite proposals concerning the peace treaty. He conceded that Poland should be given a corridor to Danzig, but it was to be drawn as nearly as possible along ethnic lines, without consideration of economic or strategic factors.¹⁹

On the morning of March 27, 1919, Lloyd George brought up the question of his memorandum in the Council of Four. The ensuing discussion indicated that Wilson was basically in agreement with Lloyd George. The President urged Clemenceau to accept the principle of showing moderation in dealing with Germany. Wilson did not fear future wars resulting from secret conspiracies of governments, but the Allies were dealing with a very dangerous subject in shifting populations from one nation to another. They must be careful not to deal unjustly with these people and thus promote dissatisfaction and

¹⁸Council of Ten, March 22, 1919, FRUS, IV, 449-454.

¹⁹Lloyd George, I, 266, 272; Birdsall, p. 186.

a desire for revenge among them. The Allies should not give their enemies the impression of being treated unjustly.

After a few similar remarks by Lloyd George, Clemenceau made a lengthy and impassioned plea, apparently hoping to bring Wilson back into line. The Frenchman began by assuring his colleagues that he was in basic agreement with them. He realized the necessity of exercising caution; he did not want the Allies to abuse their victory. However, he believed Lloyd George placed too much emphasis upon German resistance. The enemy had surrendered before Allied troops had even entered Germany. Marshal Foch and others had expected strong German resistance against giving up their fleet, but this had not been the case.

As for Wilson's statement, Clemenceau accepted it with one reservation. The President could not be guided by what the Germans thought was just or unjust. What the Allies considered just, the Germans would not accept as such. The Germans were a servile people and only understood force. There were some who said that the German government had changed, but Clemenceau reminded them that the Social Democrats in the New German government had been loyal servants of the old imperial government.

Turning to the Polish question, Clemenceau pleaded that the Allies should redress the injustice perpetrated against the Poles by Germany, not only in the partition of the eighteenth century but also in the attempted suppression of Polish

nationality in the nineteenth century. Clemenceau praised Lloyd George's desire to give the fewest number of Germans to Poland, but he could not agree with the British Prime Minister's statement that all strategic considerations should be disregarded in deciding the fate of Danzig and the corridor. Finally, Clemenceau urged that the frontiers which he desired were considered strategic necessities by the French military leaders. He could not disregard the advice of men who had saved France from destruction.

Lloyd George replied that military leaders would be the last people he would consult on political questions. Though he admired Marshal Foch, "in political questions, he is a child." Clemenceau should remember how Moltke forced Bismarck to accept a strategic frontier in 1871, leading finally to disastrous results. Lloyd George then proceeded to bolster his case by citing a letter from a British military leader, General Smuts of South Africa, who was especially concerned about the cession of Danzig to Poland. Trouble was certain to result between the German population and the Polish government. If Germany intervened in defense of the Danzig Germans, would the Allies go to war to maintain Polish sovereignty over Danzig? Lloyd George concurred in General Smuts' statement: "Poland cannot exist without the good will of Germany and Russia." Lloyd George's only positive proposal was that Danzig should become a free city. Neither Wilson or Clemenceau commented on his suggestion, and the meeting ended

without decision. Lloyd George's comments had obviously affected Wilson, but the President was still uncommitted.²⁰

The problem of Danzig was again brought up on the morning of April 1, 1919. The Council was discussing the difficulties of moving Polish troops in France to Poland. In considering the possibility of moving the troops through the Baltic by way of Danzig, Clemenceau suggested that the western boundaries of Poland should be determined. Both Wilson and Lloyd George were opposed to considering such an important topic in connection with the rather minor issue of transporting troops.²¹

However, by the afternoon meeting of the Council, Lloyd George and Wilson were ready to discuss the Polish problem. Wilson began by listing four possible solutions for Danzig. The first choice would be to make Danzig a free city, including within its boundaries the predominantly German territory in and around the city. The boundary of East Prussia would be extended westward to include the districts along the lower Vistula. A small strip of territory along the eastern bank of the Vistula would go to Poland, as a means of maintaining absolute control over the river.

The second proposal was to give Danzig to Poland. Marienwerder and other small areas along the Vistula would be given to East Prussia as in the first proposal.

²⁰Council of Four, March 27, 1919, Paul Mantoux, Les D lib rations du Conseil des Quatre (Paris, 1955), I, 41-48.

²¹Council of Four, April 1, 1919, ibid., pp. 105-106.

The third proposition was simply the report of the Commission on Polish Affairs. Both Danzig and the area along the Vistula would go to Poland under its provisions.

Headlam-Morley, a British expert, was the author of the fourth and final plan. He proposed that Danzig and the surrounding area be given to the League of Nations. The League would then place it under Polish control, while guaranteeing the relative autonomy of the city.

Wilson then summarized a few of the weaknesses of the four proposals. If Danzig were made a free city, there would be attempts to reunite it with Germany. The second proposal was a compromise. Headlam-Morley's plan would have the advantage of being guaranteed by the League of Nations, but for that reason, there would be considerable delay in implementing it.

Lloyd George quickly stated that he favored the combination of the first and fourth proposals, that is, a free city guaranteed by the League of Nations. He also advocated returning Marienwerder to East Prussia, while guaranteeing Polish railroad rights in that district. Upon Wilson's suggestion, he agreed to accept a plebiscite in that area.

By this time, Clemenceau had given in. He reminded his colleagues that they should make no decisions without consulting the Poles, who would find it difficult to accept the Allied agreement. Lloyd George and Wilson assured Clemenceau that the Council had every right to draw up a preliminary

agreement, and the Poles would have little choice but to accept it. Wilson then put the question: "Are we in accord on the formation of a free state of Danzig?" Lloyd George replied, "Yes, but under the authority of the League of Nations." When Wilson asked how this authority would be applied, Lloyd George suggested that the League be represented by a high commissioner in Danzig, much like the British Commissioner General in Canada or Australia. Clemenceau silently acquiesced in the agreement.²²

On April 9, the Council called in Paderewski to ask his opinion. Wilson informed him of the Allied decision to establish Danzig as a free city and discussed the various means by which Polish control and Polish access to the sea would be secured. Paderewski refused to accept those guarantees. He said simply: "It is necessary that Poland be strong, and she cannot be strong without Danzig." The possession of Danzig was a matter of life and death to the Poles. The 60,000,000 people of Germany had many fine ports. Did not 25,000,000 Poles deserve at least one? In vain Wilson and Lloyd George repeatedly emphasized the guarantees to Poland. Nothing they said could persuade Paderewski to accept the Danzig settlement or the plebiscite in Marienwerder. Throughout the entire interview with the Polish leader, Clemenceau sat in silence.²³

²²Council of Four, April 1, 1919, ibid., pp. 109-112.

²³Council of Four, April 9, 1919, ibid., pp. 198-202.

There is no indication that Paderewski's statement made any difference in the Allied proposals. A draft of the agreement on Danzig was completed by American experts on April 16, and was read to the Council by Wilson on April 18. It provided that Danzig would be a free city, guaranteed by the League of Nations. A high commissioner would represent the League of Danzig. Poland would have control of the customs service, the foreign relations, and the railroads of the free city, as well as free use of the port facilities. Marienwerder and two other small districts would be allowed a plebiscite to determine whether they would go to Germany or to Poland. Control of the Vistula River and special railroad rights through Prussian territory were granted to Poland. In return, Germany was guaranteed railroad transportation from East Prussia to West Prussia. These principles were embodied in the draft treaty which was presented to the Germans on May 7, 1919.²⁴

While the Allies debated the treaty's provisions, the German government also sought a solution to the eastern question. Though the Germans had the advantage of many years of experience in dealing with Poland, they were hampered by domestic difficulties and by a lack of knowledge concerning the Allied negotiations.

²⁴Council of Four, April 18, 1919, *ibid.*, pp. 271-272; Birdsall, pp. 187-188.

CHAPTER II

GERMANY--BACKGROUND AND PREPARATION

For over 100 years prior to 1914, the Polish question perplexed German statesmen. Bismarck, being especially fearful of a revived Polish state, devised a systematic program of repression in the 1870's which was continued by his successors without respite until 1914. Far from achieving its goals, this policy aroused Polish nationalism and solidified Polish resistance.¹

During the war of 1914-1918, the Germans altered their Polish policy. By 1916, the manpower of the German army forced Emperor William II, together with his counterpart in Austria-Hungary, to issue a declaration establishing Russia's Polish territory as an independent state. However, this manifesto did not have the desired effect of increasing Polish enlistments in the German army, because it failed to include the Polish territory controlled by Austria and Germany. By 1917 many Polish leaders were disillusioned by the flimsy promises of Germany, Austria, and Russia. Wilson's statement on Poland, together with the entry of the United States

¹Julia S. Orvis, "Partitioned Poland, 1795-1914," Poland, edited by Bernadotte E. Schmitt (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1947), pp. 64-65.

into the war, led many Poles to believe their ambitions could best be achieved by an Allied victory.

In the summer of 1917, a Polish National Committee was recognized as the "official Polish organization" by the Allies. It organized a 50,000-man Polish army which fought with the Allies in the final campaign of 1918 under the command of General Josef Haller. This action gave additional support to Polish territorial claims. By November, 1918, there were various movements under way to establish a Polish government. The time had passed when Germany might influence this new government to any significant degree. The Allies had, in effect, become arbiters between Germany and Poland.²

The strength of the Allied position was apparent in the armistice signed on November 11, in which Germany agreed to withdraw all her troops from occupied eastern territories within the German boundaries of August 1, 1914. Germany further conceded to the Allies free access to the evacuated areas by way of Danzig or the Vistula River.³ However, Germany continued to occupy Posen, an area with a large Polish population. The Poles, dissatisfied with this arrangement, precipitated an armed revolt on December 27, 1918, which soon spread into West Prussia and Silesia. Though they enjoyed

²Bernadotte E. Schmitt, "Rebirth of Poland, 1914-1923," ibid., pp. 70-76.

³Terms of Armistice with Germany, November 11, 1918, FRUS, II, 4.

initial success, Hindenburg and the German high command soon took control of the poorly organized German troops and drove the Poles back. This conflict was ended by the third renewal of the armistice, signed by the German representatives on February 16, 1919. Marshal Foch forced the Germans to agree to cease hostilities and withdraw their forces behind a demarcation line established by Foch himself.⁴

Both Poland and Germany could do little to settle their conflict, other than work to restore internal unity and order while the Allies made their decisions. In Germany the restoration of order proved difficult. The end of the monarchy had left a political vacuum which resulted in chaos, bloodshed, and violence. Finally, on January 19, 1919, elections for a National Assembly were held. On February 11, Friedrich Ebert, leader of the Social Democratic party and head of the provisional government, became President of the German Republic. A loose coalition cabinet was formed with Philipp Scheidemann, also a Social Democrat, as Minister President. The new government was faced with the problem of increasing unrest and dissatisfaction throughout Germany. In March, 1919, the attempt to establish a true Socialist Republic was crushed in a bloodbath which took over 3,000 lives in Berlin alone. Although these matters diverted the attention of the

⁴Schmitt, p. 76; Klaus Epstein, Matthias Erzberger and the Dilemma of German Democracy (Princeton, 1959), p. 295; Convention Prolonging the Armistice with Germany, February 16, 1919, FRUS, II, 15.

government, preparations for the peace conference were begun and continued.⁵

The center of German planning for the peace negotiations was a special committee in the foreign office, the Paxkonferenz. Directing the Paxkonferenz was Count Johann Bernstorff, former German ambassador to the United States. Before the Germans were summoned to Versailles, the principal activity of the Paxkonferenz was the preparation of memoranda on important topics. While the German delegation was at Versailles, the Paxkonferenz served as a clearing house in collecting information to aid the delegates and acting in their behalf in dealing with Scheidemann's cabinet.⁶

The leading personality in formulating German foreign policy before and during the peace conference was Count Ulrich Brockdorff-Rantzau, the German Minister of Foreign Affairs. When Brockdorff-Rantzau assumed this office in December, 1918, he brought to his new position twenty-five years of experience in the German diplomatic service. He accepted the position with the understanding that he could reject the treaty if it were "such as to deprive the German people of a decent livelihood."⁷

On February 14, 1919, Brockdorff-Rantzau outlined his foreign policy before the National Assembly. He conceded

⁵Rudolf Coper, Failure of a Revolution (Cambridge, 1955), pp. 239, 246.

⁶Alma Luckau, The German Delegation at the Paris Peace Conference (New York, 1941), pp. 28-41.

⁷Ibid., p. 55.

the right of Polish nationality and pledged that Germany would allow all indisputably Polish territory to be joined to the new state. While mentioning no specific provinces, he admitted it was questionable which areas fell into the category described in Wilson's thirteenth point. Anticipating German-Polish conflicts, he called for a non-partisan tribunal to settle territorial disputes. Brockdorff-Rantzau denounced the encroachment of Polish forces on unquestionably German territory and demanded the withdrawal of these troops. With a view to satisfying Wilson's demand for secure Polish access to the Baltic, he offered the Poles navigation rights on the Vistula River, as well as railroad and port concessions. Poland and Germany should not be quarreling over these matters, as Brockdorff-Rantzau pointed out, but should be united against the common enemy, Bolshevism.⁸

In March, 1919, the German government was preoccupied with the suppression of a series of workers' revolts. Not until the internal crisis had subsided did the cabinet seriously consider the forthcoming peace negotiations. In a lengthy cabinet meeting on the morning of March 21, each member of the government stated his ideas as to the course Germany should pursue. These discussions revealed that most of these important German officials were appallingly ignorant of Germany's position at that time. They talked of German

⁸Speech by Brockdorff-Rantzau, February 14, 1919, Ulrich Brockdorff-Rantzau, Dokumente (Berlin, 1922), pp. 51-53.

demands as though the Central Powers were the victors and not the vanquished. They wasted most of the meeting in futile discussions of Alsace-Lorraine, one territorial question which was irrevocably settled. Matthias Erzberger, Secretary of State without portfolio and President of the German Armistice Commission, even demanded a plebiscite in Alsace-Lorraine and suggested the exact form of the ballots to be used.

The one element of reality in this session was the opening statement by Brockdorff-Rantzau. The foreign minister warned the cabinet that Germany's enemies would present a complete draft of the treaty which would embody significant deviations from Wilson's program. Germany would be told to accept or reject the treaty. They would have only three possible courses of action: to reject the treaty, to offer a complete substitute treaty, or to offer counter proposals point by point. Brockdorff-Rantzau advocated the latter course of action.

In discussing Poland, the foreign minister reminded his colleagues of the provisions of Wilson's thirteenth point. The decisive part, as he saw it, was the phrase concerning indisputably Polish territory. He proposed that any conflict arising from this phrase be settled by a non-partisan tribunal which would base its decisions on popular plebiscites. The plebiscites should be limited to Posen because only in that province were there areas with predominantly Polish-speaking populations. All Germans, twenty years of age and older, who

had been residents of Posen for one year, including those who had fled during the war, could participate in the voting.

The foreign minister stated that plebiscites should not be held in Upper Silesia. This area had never been a part of Poland, and it was economically indispensable to Germany. Nor could a plebiscite be permitted in West Prussia because it contained no unquestionably Polish territory, and any losses in that province would endanger the connection between East Prussia and the rest of Germany. For the same reason, a Polish corridor to Danzig was out of the question. Polish access to the Baltic should be secured by free ports and by agreements concerning railroad traffic and navigation of the Vistula and Bug Rivers.

The most unusual aspect of this cabinet meeting was the near unanimity of disinterest regarding Poland and the eastern boundaries. Brockdorff-Rantzau's proposals concerning Poland were of so little interest that they were not even discussed. The cabinet minutes merely record that he discussed the territorial questions in detail; they do not contain his proposals.⁹

In the month following the cabinet meeting of March 21, German diplomats became more optimistic. Communications

⁹Minutes of the cabinet meeting of March 21, 1919, Auswärtiges Amt, Germany, microfilm, National Archives, Washington, D. C. (hereafter cited as AA) reel 1665, frame nos. D74193-D741805; Erich Brandenburg, Brockdorff-Rantzau, Hoover Institute and Library; Microfilm Collection DD231-B7a3, reel 8, frame nos. 397063-397071.

from Marshal Foch led them to believe that the Allies would prepare only a preliminary draft treaty which would be the basis for direct negotiations with Germany. Reports indicated that the draft would probably call for the cession of most of Posen to Poland without a plebiscite. The city of Danzig might be internationalized and tied to Poland by a corridor through West Prussia. The Germans knew Poland was also demanding part of Upper Silesia, but they did not know the extent to which the Allies would support the Polish claims.¹⁰

In March or April, 1919, the Foreign Office drew up a tentative statement of policy, apparently based on Brockdorff-Rantzau's cabinet proposal of March 21. At this point, the diplomats believed, as the foreign minister had on March 21, that Germany would be presented with a completed treaty. The Foreign Office recommended that the form of the German reply correspond to Wilson's Fourteen Points. The diplomats proposed to offer Poland shipping rights on the Vistula, as well as guaranteed railroad transit and a free harbor near Danzig. The draft suggested that conflicting territorial claims be settled by a nonpartisan tribunal which would base its decisions upon popular plebiscites. Changes would be made only when two thirds of the people in the district voted for the change.¹¹

¹⁰Minutes of the Committee for Peace Negotiations, First Session, April 15, 1919, speech of Ambassador Haniel von Haimhausen, Luckau, pp. 182-188.

¹¹Memorandum: Foreign Office Draft Proposals, ibid., pp. 195-198.

This Foreign Office draft became the basis for the official instructions for the German peace delegation, first presented to the cabinet on April 17, 1919. As in the tentative draft, the German delegation was instructed to call for a nonpartisan tribunal and popular plebiscites for disputed territories. The delegation was authorized to accept a plebiscite only in the province of Posen beyond the demarcation line established by Marshal Foch. The plebiscite should be limited to this area "because it is only there that an area which linguistically is almost solidly Polish can be found." This document was not intended for publication, so there can be no doubt it was a valid representation of the attitude of the German government. That responsible German officials, including Brockdorff-Rantzau, believed their definition of "indisputably Polish territory" could possibly be accepted by the Allies, almost defies belief. An American observer in Germany during this period accurately stated, "The entirely insincere belief that the armistice was only concluded on condition that President Wilson's program, as interpreted for the benefit of Germany, would be enforced, had become general."

The instructions also stated that only German citizens of at least one year's residency in the province in question would be allowed to participate in the plebiscite. Voting would be by communities, with territorial transfers only if supported by two thirds of those voting. The delegates were instructed to oppose a Polish corridor to Danzig and to offer

as a substitute navigation rights on the Vistula and Bug Rivers, as well as guaranteed railroad and port facilities.¹²

When this document was presented to the cabinet on April 17, it was read aloud section by section, with interruptions only when objections were raised. Although there were objections to certain sections, including some territorial provisions, there were no objections to the sections of the document dealing with Poland. When a revised draft was presented to the cabinet on April 21, the sections dealing with Poland were identical to the first draft and were still not contested. In the third and final draft of these instructions, there was still no change.¹³

Since the debates in the cabinet on certain sections of the instructions for the delegation were recorded in the minutes, any serious conflict over Poland would probably have been recorded as well. The lack of controversy concerning Poland and the failure to make any change in the original draft presented to the cabinet indicate that most of these high German officials were not cognizant of the importance

¹²Instructions to German Plenipotentiaries of Peace, ibid., p. 200; instructions for the German Peace Negotiations, AA, 1665, D741986-D471987; Report on the Political Situation in Germany by Ellis L. Dresel and Charles B. Dyar, May 10, 1919, FRUS, XII, 119.

¹³Minutes of the cabinet meeting of April 17, 1919, AA, 1665, D741978-D741982; instructions for the German Peace Negotiations, first draft, April 17, 1919, AA, 1665, D741986-D741987; ibid., second draft, April 21, 1919, AA, 1665, D742022-D742023; ibid., third draft, April 21, 1919, AA, 1665, D742046-D742047.

of the Polish question and were unaware of Germany's position of weakness. Their ignorance resulted in part from the naive belief that they would be hailed by the Allies as the destroyers of German militarism and imperialism and the founders of German democracy. They underestimated the intense hatred of the Allied peoples and their desire for revenge.

In spite of the apparent disinterest, Brockdorff-Rantzau informed the cabinet on April 22, that he planned to bring up the question of the eastern boundaries in a cabinet meeting in the near future.¹⁴ Apparently the necessity of last-minute decisions forced the foreign minister to abandon his plans, for within a week he was on his way to Versailles.

The composition of the German peace delegation was decided upon as early as March 22, 1919. It consisted of six delegates representing a cross-section of the political parties in Germany. The Social Democratic Party was represented by the Minister of Justice, Dr. Otto Landsberg, and Robert Leinert, the President of the Prussian Diet. Landsberg was a member of the right wing of his party, as were Ebert and Scheidemann. While serving as a jurist in a small town near the Russian border in the 1890's, he had developed an intense hatred for the Poles. As a Jew, he was offended by the anti-Semitism in Russian-Poland. When fighting broke out in Posen in late

¹⁴Minutes of the cabinet meeting of April 22, 1919, AA, 1665, D742067.

December, 1918, Landsberg urged that Germany declare war on Poland.¹⁵

The other Social Democrat in the delegation was Robert Leinert, President of the Prussian Diet and Mayor of Hanover. He was named a delegate on April 17, to replace Ambassador Adolph Müller in Bern, who asked to be relieved from serving as a delegate to the peace conference. In Leinert's case, the cabinet made an exception to their general rule against allowing individual German states to send their own representatives to the peace conference.

The Catholic Center Party would normally have been represented by Matthias Erzberger. However, he had been severely criticized for his work as chief German representative at the armistice negotiations and had no inclination to undertake an even more difficult task. Moreover, he believed the principal decision of accepting or rejecting the treaty would be made in the German cabinet, not at Versailles. For these reasons, Erzberger's close friend Johann Giesberts, the Postmaster General, was chosen as Catholic Center delegate.¹⁶

The Democratic Party was represented by Dr. Carl Melchior, a banker and financial expert, and Dr. Walter Schücking, a Professor of International Law and member of the Reichstag. The

¹⁵Luckau, pp. 54-55; Coper, pp. 21, 141.

¹⁶Luckau, pp. 54-55; Minutes of the cabinet meeting of April 17, 1919, AA, 1665, D741981; Matthias Erzberger, Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg (Berlin, 1920), pp. 366-367.

sixth and final delegate was Minister of Foreign Affairs Brockdorff-Rantzau. As a career diplomat, he was not a member of a political party, though Scheidemann considered him a Social Democrat.¹⁷

The first communication from the Allied and Associated Powers inviting the German government to send a delegation to Versailles arrived on April 18, 1919. Further communications indicated that the German delegation was expected to have full powers to negotiate with the other plenipotentiaries at Versailles.

On April 25, 1919, these six delegates met with Scheidemann and Ebert to discuss the extent of the powers to be granted to the delegation. Ebert officially appointed the delegates, authorizing them to receive a preliminary treaty from the Allied and Associated Powers and to negotiate with those powers as a group or with any one of them separately. The German delegation was free to negotiate on any topic, with the proviso that no agreement would become final until ratified by the German National Assembly.¹⁸

Thus, the legally appointed German delegation, with their powers delineated, and with detailed instructions, left Berlin

¹⁷Philipp Scheidemann, The Making of New Germany (New York, 1929), II, 304; Luckau, pp. 54-55.

¹⁸Simons to Under Secretary of State, April 25, 1919, AA, 1665, D742147; Appointment of German Delegation by Ebert, first draft, April 26, 1919, AA, 1665, D742148; French note of April 18, 1919, Luckau, p. 209; German note of April 19, 1919, ibid., p. 209; French note of April 20, 1919, ibid., p. 210.

on April 28, 1919. The six delegates, together with about 180 experts and assistants, traveled by special trains through Belgium and Northern France, arriving at Versailles on the evening of April 29.¹⁹

The period from the arrival of the German delegation at Versailles to the presentation of the treaty on the seventh of May was a period of increasing tension. The Germans at Versailles were kept as virtual prisoners, with the delegates and experts housed in one hotel, the technical staff at another, and the journalists at still another. Wooden fences connected the three hotels. The six delegates could take daily automobile trips, but the movements of the others remained restricted. The journalists were especially unhappy with these arrangements, undoubtedly having other plans concerning Paris. To make matters worse, the delegation waited from April 29 to May 4, without a word from the Allies about when the treaty would be presented. Finally, after warning the Allies that Landsberg and Giesberts would have to return to Germany, the delegation was informed that the treaty would be presented to them on May 7, 1919.²⁰

In the meantime, the German government and the German generals were becoming increasingly apprehensive regarding the Polish military threat. Though Marshal Foch restored

¹⁹Ibid., p. 59.

²⁰Ibid., pp. 59, 61-62, 126, 129.

some degree of order in the Eastern provinces with his demarcation line in February, 1919, German-Polish strife had continued. Moreover, as Brockdorff-Rantzau had warned, the Poles were soon subjected to Russian attack from the East. General Haller's Polish army was needed at home to counter this threat. Haller and Foch wanted to transport the Polish army by sea, taking advantage of Article 16 of the Armistice agreement which gave the Allies "free access to the territories evacuated by the Germans on their frontier, either through Danzig or by the Vistula"21

On April 2-4, 1919, the German Armistice Commissioner, Matthias Erzberger, went to Spa, Belgium. There he persuaded Marshal Foch to allow Haller's army to be transported across Germany to Poland by rail, rather than by sea through Danzig. The Germans were opposed to the latter method because they feared the Polish army might gain control of Danzig. Erzberger's biographer considers this agreement "Erzberger's "one unquestioned success during the armistice negotiations." The Allies were impressed by Erzberger's reasonable suggestions. Furthermore, they welcomed them since they were having difficulty securing the necessary ships to carry Haller's troops to Danzig.²²

²¹Epstein, pp. 295-296; Terms of the Armistice with Germany, signed November 11, 1918, clause XVI, FRUS, II, 4.

²²Epstein, p. 296; Minutes of the meeting of the American Commissioners Plenipotentiaries on March 13, 1919, FRUS, XI, 117; ibid., April 1, 1919, FRUS, XI, 142.

In April Haller's troops moved to Poland and began to take actions aimed more at Germany than at Russia. As a result, the German government eventually became alarmed and sent a formal note of protest to Marshal Foch on May 1, 1919. The Germans declared that Haller was concentrating his troops along the German frontier and that reliable sources predicted an imminent Polish attack on Posen and Upper Silesia. They reminded Foch that the German government had permitted the passage of Haller's army only after the Allied and Associated Powers had pledged that Poland would not undertake any warlike actions against Germany. If Polish forces invaded the Reich, Germany could not stand idly by.²³

On May 2, the Foreign Office informed the Supreme Command of the German army of the latest reports of Haller's activities and requested that the army keep the government informed of any new troop movements. The army was also advised to keep its defenses strong but, in view of the Versailles negotiations, it should not allow Polish activities to provoke German troops to reckless actions which would only aid Germany's enemies.²⁴

On the same day of this warning, General P. Nudant, French representative and President of the Inter-Allied

²³Langwerth to Brockdorff-Rantzau, May 1, 1919, AA, 2404, E213660-E213661.

²⁴Langwerth to Peace Delegation, May 2, 1919, AA, 2404, E213664-E213665.

Armistice Commission, tried to assuage German apprehension. He told a German official that any Polish aggression against Germany was most unlikely; most of Haller's troops were along the Ukrainian and other parts of the eastern front. They were being used to prepare a "bulwark against Bolshevism."²⁵

Nudant's statement might have been more convincing had there not been other disturbing developments in the eastern territories. In April, 1919, reports from the East indicated a noticeable immigration of Polish families into areas claimed by both Poland and Germany. German officials realized the importance of this immigration in any future plebiscites. Another disturbing factor was the growing number of young Polish men of military age entering West Prussia. The government and the army decided to try to halt further Polish immigration into German territories. The government also urged the delegation at Versailles to keep in mind the section of their official instructions demanding a one-year residence requirement for voting in any plebiscite in the eastern territories.²⁶

The movement of German refugees from areas controlled by Poland was equally disconcerting to the German government. Erzberger suggested that these refugees be colonized in other

²⁵ Hammerstein to Erzberger, May 2, 1919, AA, 2404.
E213666-E213667.

²⁶ Ministry of War to Ministry of Interior, April 16, 1919, AA, 2405, E213669; Bernstorff to Haniel Von Haimhausen, AA, 2404, E213668.

parts of Prussia. Other members of the cabinet warned that such a policy would weaken German nationality in the most critical areas. Moreover, the necessary land for the project was not available.²⁷

Another important factor in influencing German policy was the strange belief in German military circles that the Allies would soon seek German aid against the Bolsheviks. General Wilhelm Groener, the Quartermaster General of the army, believed that the Germans could name their terms, even to the point of demanding freedom to rebuild the German army. Apparently some members of the Foreign Office shared Groener's illusions, for on April 19, 1919, a representative of the Foreign Office asked General Nudant about possible German-Allied operations against Soviet Russia. Though Nudant considered such action improbable, he consulted Marshal Foch on the matter. Foch, of course, stated that German-Allied military cooperation was impossible until the conclusion of peace.²⁸

During the first week after the German delegation arrived at Versailles, the Paxkonferenz carefully fulfilled its duties by keeping the delegation informed of all new developments, such as the discussions with General Nudant and the Polish

²⁷Minutes of the cabinet meeting of April 30, 1919, AA, 1665, D742163.

²⁸Epstein, p. 296; Hammerstein to Erzberger, May 2, 1919, AA, 2404, E213666.

military threat. Bernstorff and his committee also reported to the delegation any information which they secured from informants. Unfortunately, much of this information was false.

For example, on May 3, 1919, information relayed to Versailles from reliable sources in Stockholm indicated that there were really two Allied drafts of the peace treaty. The first dealt harshly with Germany and, if rejected by the German government, would be replaced by the true Wilson draft. Another telegram of May 6, 1919, the day before the presentation of the treaty, informed the delegation that so reliable a source as Colonel House's personal representative, Ellis L. Dresel, believed the Allies would not give Upper Silesia to Poland.²⁹ The Germans were also misled by one of General Pershing's staff officers, Colonel Arthur Conger, whom the Germans believed to be one of Wilson's personal representatives in Germany.³⁰

The Germans relied on men like Conger and Dresel for the same reason that those two men were misinformed. Neither the Germans nor many Allied officials knew much about the proposed treaty because the negotiations of the Allies were cloaked in secrecy. Strict French news censorship, even

²⁹ Bernstorff to Peace Delegation, April 30, 1919, AA, 2404, E213662; Langwerth to Peace Delegation, May 3, 1919, AA, 2407, E215366; Telegram to Peace Delegation, May 6, 1919, AA, 2407, E215395.

³⁰ Epstein, pp. 306-307; Karl F. Nowak, Versailles (New York, 1929), p. 179.

extending to foreign correspondents in Paris, intensified the secrecy.³¹

As the day for receiving the Allied demands drew near, an atmosphere of gloom pervaded the German delegation. Sealed within their high wooden fence like animals in a zoo, surrounded by vengeful enemies, the German delegates assumed an air of impending martyrdom. Armed only with rumors and misinformation, they were ill-prepared for the Allied treaty which exceeded in its severity their most terrible predictions.

³¹Luckau, p. 70.

CHAPTER III

FORMULATION OF THE GERMAN COUNTERPROPOSALS

Shortly after three o'clock on the afternoon of May 7, 1919, the German delegation received the Allied conditions for peace in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles. They returned to their hotel and began the laborious translation of the 80,000-word treaty. It was soon apparent that the provisions of this treaty dealing with the eastern territories were much more severe than anticipated. Germany was required to cede much of the provinces of Posen and West Prussia to Poland. This territory, together with the transformation of Danzig into a free city, would provide Poland with a secure access to the sea. Parts of East Prussia and Upper Silesia were also to be ceded to Poland.¹

At 10:30 p.m., the delegation assembled to review the treaty. Giesberts staggered into the room and said:

Gentlemen, I am drunk. That may be proletarian, but with me there was nothing else for it. This shameful treaty has broken me, for I had believed in Wilson until today. When I talked with him in America, that Puritan said to me that the parochial schools in the United States were the best. From that day I believed him to be an honest man, and now that scoundrel sends us such a treaty.²

¹Luckau, pp. 65-69.

²Ibid., pp. 69-70, 124.

Giesberts' disillusionment was typical of the other delegates who agreed that the treaty was intolerable. To accept it would condemn the German people to slavery. Nevertheless, the delegation resolved not to break off negotiations but to draw up notes and counterproposals emphasizing the contradictions between the treaty and Wilson's Fourteen Points. They still hoped an appeal to neutrals and to Socialists throughout the world would lead to oral negotiations and to an acceptable treaty. If these were not possible, the rejection of the German notes would cause world opinion to blame the Allies for the failure of the negotiations.³

On the following day, May 8, Brockdorff-Rantzau called the delegates and experts together and asked for their general impressions of the treaty. Without exception, every speaker labeled the treaty unacceptable. Most of the experts expressed the hope that the treaty could be modified to conform to Wilson's Fourteen Points, but at least one official suggested that negotiations were hopeless.

Several of the delegates emphasized the importance of the territorial cessions demanded in the East. Erler von Braun, Food Administration Commissioner, informed the delegation that the cession of Alsace-Lorraine was of little importance, but the loss of the eastern provinces would mean

³Minutes of the meeting of the Peace Delegation of May 7, 1919, AA, 2403, E212374; Secret notes by Brockdorff-Rantzau, May 19, 1919, AA, 2402, E211862.

severe food shortages. These losses could not be made up by intensifying production in remaining German territory, because there would be a decline in the manufacture of artificial fertilizer resulting from the coal losses in Upper Silesia. Braun warned that this peace would result in starvation in Germany; the man who signed it would be signing Germany's death warrant.⁴

The German cabinet, meeting at Weimar on May 8, was equally shocked by the treaty, and they denounced the Allied draft as "territorial and economic dice throwing." They also resolved to withdraw German troops from occupied Russian territory as soon as possible so they could be placed opposite Poland. The cabinet authorized Brockdorff-Rantzau to inform the Allies that the proposed treaty was "intolerable and unrealizable" and that it made Lansing's note of November 5, 1918, a mere "scrap of paper."⁵

Brockdorff-Rantzau carried out these instructions in a note to Clemenceau on May 9, in which he rebuked the Allies for their deviation from the armistice agreement. He warned that Germany could not endure many of the Allied demands and that some of these provisions could not be carried out. The

⁴Speech by Brockdorff-Rantzau to Peace Delegation on May 8, 1919, AA, 2403, E212380-E212381; Minutes of the meeting of the Peace Delegation of May 8, 1919, ibid., E212382-E212399.

⁵Peace Delegation to Paxkonferenz, May 7, 1919, AA, 2407, E215409-E215410; Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 8, 1919, AA, 1665, D742196-D742198.

tactless "scrap of paper" phrase was not included in the note.⁶

For the next few days, the German reaction to the treaty retained its negative character. The forces favoring rejection of the treaty were strong in the cabinet. Initially, the cabinet authorized Scheidemann to inform the National Assembly that the treaty was "intolerable and impracticable" but not to use the word "unacceptable." But on the morning of May 12, two Democratic members of the cabinet demanded that Schiedemann use the term "unacceptable." Erzberger, supported by two Social Democrats, argued that this would be a mistake. If the government labeled the treaty "intolerable and impracticable" and was backed by strong national unity, the Allies would be just as impressed as if the word "unacceptable" were used. Moreover, in three or four weeks the government might well regret having used such a strong term. The Democrats remained firm in the face of Erzberger's logic and even hinted that unless their demand was accepted, they would resign from the cabinet and provoke a crisis. Erzberger, realizing the necessity for unity in facing Germany's enemies, reluctantly agreed to the Democratic demands.⁷

One of the first positive actions by the German government regarding the sections of the treaty dealing with Poland

⁶Brockdorff-Rantzau to Clemenceau, May 9, 1919, AA, 2407, E215441.

⁷Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 12, 1919, AA, 1665, E742212; Erzberger, pp. 368-369.

and the eastern territories, was in the field of propaganda. As employed by the Germans in May, 1919, propaganda had two purposes: to strengthen popular German resistance to the treaty, especially in the endangered eastern provinces, and to persuade the Allies to reconsider the Polish settlement.

As early as May 7, Brockdorff-Rantzau urged the full publication of the conditions of the treaty. He also advocated the use of "propaganda maps" to awaken the German people to the significance of the eastern settlement. On May 8, the cabinet published a special proclamation to the German people, in which they denounced the treaty as a "peace of violence" and urged united resistance against the dismemberment of Germany. At the same time, the cabinet decided to establish closer contacts with the press for propaganda purposes. On May 14, this policy was carried one step further by the decision of the German government to provide a large sum of money for the propaganda in East Prussia, on the condition that the Prussian government provide a like amount. On May 22, the cabinet also approved the spending of 1,000,000 marks for propaganda in Upper Silesia. As late as May 26, the cabinet discussed another proposal which would have provided money for propaganda in West Prussia.⁸ Public demonstrations

⁸Peace Delegation to Paxkonferenz, May 7, 1919, AA, 2407, E215409-E215410; Peace Delegation to Paxkonferenz, May 7, 1919, AA, 2407, E215408; Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 8, 1919, AA, 1665, D742197; Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 14, 1919, AA, 1665, D742221-D742222; Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 22, 1919, AA, 1665, D742318; Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 26, 1919, AA, 1665, D742344; The (London) Times, May 10, 1919, p. 14.

were encouraged during this period for the dual propaganda purposes of solidifying German public opinion and influencing the Allied governments.

In the area of foreign propaganda, the German government discouraged attacks against Wilson, believing that he represented Germany's only hope of revising the eastern boundaries. Some German officials believed the British and American people were ignorant of the flagrant violations of the principles of nationality and self-determination of peoples embodied in the Polish settlement. These officials believed that by informing the British and American people of the facts, pressure would be brought upon Lloyd George and Wilson to revise the eastern boundaries. However, the Germans were very careful to avoid the appearance of trying to influence Wilson with propaganda. Declarations from Germans in Posen, Silesia, and West Prussia were carefully considered as to their possible effects on Wilson because he might regard such pro-German declarations as mere propaganda. They would thus defeat their purpose and produce an adverse reaction.⁹

German propaganda activities in May, 1919, were conducted with the hope of altering the proposed settlement in the East. Shortly after the presentation of the treaty on May 7, the Paxkonferenz began receiving encouraging reports from abroad.

⁹Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 11, 1919, AA, 1665, D742206; Naumann to Brockdorff-Rantzau, May 13, 1919, AA, 2407, E215668-E215669; Langwerth to Peace Delegation, May 15, 1919, AA, 2405, E213699.

In Vienna the French ambassador, Henri Allize, deliberately distributed rumors to German diplomats. He indicated that France's demands against Germany could not be satisfied by territorial cessions to Poland. He stated that the cession of Upper Silesia was not in the interest of France and that even Clemenceau had serious reservations about the Polish boundaries. According to Allize, the boundaries were actually the result of Paderewski's influence on Wilson.¹⁰

On May 13, a more accurate informant told a German diplomat that Lloyd George had been opposed to taking Danzig and Upper Silesia from Germany. The informant stated that extensive changes in the preliminary treaty could be affected if the German government would maintain a firm position against the more obnoxious provisions. The terms of the preliminary draft were not to be considered as final.¹¹

Believing that revision of the treaty draft was at least possible, German officials began work on counterproposals soon after they received the treaty. The lack of concern existing prior to May 7, was no longer evident. Members of the cabinet, as well as the German representatives at Versailles, were now vitally interested in the Polish boundaries.

¹⁰Langwerth to Peace Delegation, May 10, 1919, AA, 2405, E213689; Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 10, 1919, AA, 1665, D742203.

¹¹Naumann to Brockdorff-Rantzau, May 13, 1919, AA, E215668; Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 13, 1919, AA, 1665, D742214; Langwerth to Brockdorff-Rantzau, May 12, 1919, AA, 2405, E213693.

German officials in both Weimar and Versailles soon realized that one of their chief problems would be that of communication. On May 8, 1919, the cabinet resolved to establish a system of political couriers between Berlin and Versailles in order to have verbal reports from the peace delegation. The peace delegation, meeting on the same day, decided that after the delivery of the German counterproposals, three members of the delegation would return to Germany to maintain close contact with the cabinet. The problem of communication was never adequately solved, and according to Matthias Erzberger, it was the cause of many subsequent difficulties between cabinet and delegation.¹²

On May 9, the Versailles delegation established five commissions to deal with the various aspects of the treaty. The purpose of these commissions was to draw up counterproposals to the Allied treaty. Brockdorff-Rantzau instructed the commissioners and experts not to draw up one comprehensive reply to the treaty but to overwhelm the Allies with a series of notes pointing out the illegality of individual Allied demands. The foreign minister believed that treaty revision could only be secured by demonstrating to the British and American public the numerous violations of Wilson's Fourteen Points embodied in the treaty. Public opinion would then

¹²Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 8, 1919, AA, 1665, D742196; Minutes of the meeting of the Peace Delegation of May 8, 1919, AA, 2403, E212375; Erzberger, p. 369.

force Wilson and Lloyd George to institute oral negotiations, eventually resulting in a satisfactory treaty.¹³

Although the Germans had many complaints about almost every clause of the treaty, they realized the necessity for emphasizing their most important grievances. On May 9, an attempt to commit the delegation to placing emphasis on the economic provisions of the treaty failed. On the following day, the delegation voted to consider as their primary objective the alteration of the territorial clauses of the treaty.¹⁴

Minister of Justice Otto Landsberg, who resented the proposed cession to Poland as much as any German, suggested on May 11, that German disarmament might be used as a bargaining point. They could renounce the use of conscription and accept limitations on the strength of the army and the navy, on the condition that German boundaries be guaranteed by the League of Nations. The delegation accepted his suggestion and forwarded it to Weimar.¹⁵

¹³Minutes of the meeting of the Peace Delegation of May 9, 1919, AA, 2403, E212400-E212401; Peace Delegation to Paxkonferenz, May 9, 1919, AA, 2407, E215421; Minutes of the meeting of the Peace Delegation of May 8, 1919, AA, 2403, E212375.

¹⁴Minutes of the meeting of the Peace Delegation, May 9, 1919, AA, 2403, E212400; Minutes of the meeting of the Peace Delegation of May 10, 1919, AA, 2403, E212403.

¹⁵Minutes of the meeting of the Peace Delegation of May 11, 1919, AA, 2403, E212406.

Within a week after the presentation of the Allied demands, open disagreement between the cabinet and the peace delegation became apparent. The chief opponents in the conflict were Brockdorff-Rantzau and Matthias Erzberger. The initial difficulty between the two men was their incompatible personalities. Brockdorff-Rantzau, an aristocratic diplomat, disliked having ignorant politicians interfere in foreign affairs; Erzberger, a skilled parliamentary leader, considered the foreign minister "a danger to the state."

The ill feeling between the two cabinet ministers had begun the previous winter. When Erzberger signed the third armistice extension, thereby accepting Foch's demarcation line of February 16, Brockdorff-Rantzau had almost resigned in protest. In May, 1919, the two men upheld substantially different viewpoints. To the foreign minister, German honor required that the treaty be rejected unless it were greatly modified. To Erzberger, self-preservation required the acceptance of the treaty however onerous its terms.¹⁶

In May, 1919, Erzberger became very critical of the decisions of Brockdorff-Rantzau and the peace delegation. He disagreed with the sending of numerous notes on specific items of the treaty. He pointed out that these notes would not influence public opinion, as the foreign minister hoped, because enemy censors would not allow them to be published in full.

¹⁶Epstein, pp. 300-304.

Furthermore, the tactics of the delegation had so involved them in minutiae that they were losing sight of the important points of German policy.¹⁷

Foreign minister and politician were also at odds on the Polish question. As the experts in the Foreign Office usually followed the foreign minister's lead, Erzberger sought to limit their role in drawing up counterproposals on the eastern frontiers. He persuaded his fellow cabinet members to provide the experts with detailed political instructions. He also suggested on May 13, that Germany accept the Polish boundaries laid down in the proposed treaty on the condition that plebiscites be carried out in the ceded territory. This proposal won little support among other cabinet members and was vigorously denounced by Count Bernstorff, the foreign minister's loyal subordinate.¹⁸

The Foreign Office experts could not be expected to agree with Erzberger. By the middle of May, they had developed their own plan for revising the eastern boundaries. Their most important goal was to retain Upper Silesia, a province important for its coal and its industrial capacity. The experts were afraid to risk a plebiscite in Upper Silesia because this province could throw off its share of the war

¹⁷Erzberger, p. 369; Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 13, 1919, AA, 1665, D742214.

¹⁸Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 13, 1919, AA, 1665, D742214-D742217.

guilt, the reparations, by voting for Poland. German diplomats hoped to persuade the French that Germany's retention of Upper Silesia was in their own interest because the French need for coal could be supplied from the mines of Upper Silesia. Furthermore, German Foreign Office officials hoped the promise of long-term coal deliveries to the French would cause them to renounce their claims to the Saar territory. The cardinal point of this plan was the rejection of any plebiscite in Upper Silesia. Eventually the experts of Versailles, the experts of the Paxkonferenz in Berlin, and the members of the peace delegation all supported this policy.¹⁹

Allied with the German diplomats in opposing plebiscites in the East, was the Prussian state government. On May 13, two Prussian officials presented their recommendations to the cabinet. They produced elaborate population statistics to show that plebiscites in the East were undesirable. If it became necessary to agree to plebiscites, the vote should be conducted by small communities or parishes rather than by large administrative areas.

In spite of the Prussian statement, a majority of the cabinet, led by Erzberger and Dr. Eduard David, minister without portfolio, upheld the view that the cession of West Prussia, Upper Silesia, or any other territory on the German

¹⁹Bernstorff to Peace Delegation, May 16, 1919, AA, 2407, E215708; Bernstorff to Peace Delegation, May 17, 1919, AA, 2407, E215709; Landsberg to Scheidemann, May 20, 1919, AA, 2407, E215799.

side of the demarcation line should take place only after a plebiscite. The cabinet reminded the Prussians that the plebiscite principle had been accepted as a part of Wilson's Fourteen Points. The cabinet made no attempt to determine whether plebiscites should be by communities or by larger districts. Most members favored the former proposal, but Erzberger favored the latter.²⁰

On May 17, 1919, the cabinet firmly stated the principle that no territory in the East, including Upper Silesia could be taken from Germany without a prior plebiscite. They hastened to add that an adverse vote did not necessarily mean that the area should go to Poland; historical, cultural, and economic factors should also be considered. Bernstorff informed the peace delegation of this resolution.²¹

In these cabinet discussions, Erzberger's general attitude toward Poland is evident. Because of his affinity for the Polish Catholics, he had been a staunch opponent of Germany's anti-Polish policy before the war. Early in the conflict, he favored a generous policy toward Poland, believing that a friendly Polish state would offer Germany more security in the East than direct annexations. He hoped a friendly

²⁰ Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 15, 1919, AA, 1665, D742224-D742225; Observations of Krahmer-Mollenberg (no date), AA, 2405, E213722-E213733.

²¹ Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 17, 1919, AA, 1665, D742231-D742232; Bernstorff to Peace Delegation, May 8, 1919, AA, 2407, E215792.

Poland could be created by voluntarily ceding Posen to the new state. In unsuccessful armistice negotiations with the Russians in March and April, 1917, Erzberger favored plebiscites, believing that the results would be favorable to Germany. His attitude had changed very little by the spring of 1919.²²

Friction between the cabinet and peace delegation began to develop within a week after presentation of the Allied demands. Brockdorff-Rantzau criticized the continued interference by the cabinet and asked to what extent the cabinet intended to participate in the formation of the counterproposals. On May 11, the cabinet unanimously resolved that the delegation should retain a free hand in the preliminary negotiations. But any positive counterproposals which deviated from the official instructions given to the peace delegation in April must have the approval of the cabinet.²³

Two days later, Dernburg, Minister of Finance, and Hugo Preuss, Minister of Interior, joined with Erzberger in criticizing Brockdorff-Rantzau's single notes. The cabinet resolved that the delegation should stop sending counterproposals to each provision in the Allied draft and should emphasize the important principles in a comprehensive note.²⁴

²²Epstein, pp. 70, 116, 165.

²³Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 11, 1919, AA, 1665, D742206-D742207.

²⁴Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 13, 1919, AA, 1665, D742214-D742217.

The peace delegation naturally resented the increasing interference by the cabinet. On May 15, Robert Leinert informed the other delegates that experts and commissioners at Versailles were sending memoranda to the Berlin authorities without the knowledge of the delegation. In a unanimous resolution, the delegation declared that no memoranda or notes should be sent without their approval. Leinert also warned that he had received information of the cabinet's intention to draft the answer to one of the French notes. The delegation condemned the cabinet action as interference with their privileges. They also discussed the question of sending more single notes or one comprehensive reply, but no decision was reached. The delegates met secretly at the conclusion of the meeting and discussed whether to submit future notes and counterproposals to the cabinet for their approval. They finally resolved to reject the cabinet request in this matter.²⁵

Obviously, some means of reconciling the cabinet and the delegation had to be found. The foreign minister's friends in Berlin warned him of the activities of Erzberger and Dernburg and urged him to return to Germany. If he could return unexpectedly and confront his enemies, they believed he could convince the cabinet of the validity of his policies.²⁶

²⁵Minutes of the meeting of the peace delegation of May 15, 1919, AA, 2403, E212412-E212413.

²⁶Naumann to Brockdorff-Rantzau, May 13, 1919, AA, 2402, E211833.

Because the political implications of such a trip might be misconstrued in Paris, Brockdorff-Rantzau refused to accept his friends' advice. But, since he still wished to re-establish personal contact with the Weimar government, the foreign minister agreed to a meeting with certain cabinet members in Spa, Belgium.²⁷

At a meeting of the delegation on the afternoon of May 17, Brockdorff-Rantzau informed his colleagues that he would be leaving for Spa later that evening. Dr. Melchior asked the foreign minister to point out to the cabinet members the necessity for making a substantial territorial offer in Posen and in West Prussia in order to retain Silesia, Danzig, and the territory connecting East Prussia with the remainder of Germany. They should also be informed of the finance commission's opinion that a significant financial offer was necessary to prevent intolerable territorial losses. The minutes did not contain the foreign minister's comments, but he apparently agreed with Melchior's statements.²⁸

Attending the meeting at Spa on May 18, along with Brockdorff-Rantzau, were Bernhard Dernburg, Minister of Finance, Rudolph Wissell, Minister of Economics, and Albert Sudekum, Prussian Minister of Finance. Shortly after the meeting began, the foreign minister brought up the problem

²⁷ Brockdorff-Rantzau to Paxkonferenz, May 16, 1919, AA, 2402, E211835.

²⁸ Minutes of the meeting of the peace delegation of May 17, 1919, AA, 2403, E212415-E212416.

which, as he saw it, was the reason for the conference. He assured the ministers that, judging from the international press, the negotiations were going well. However, the policy of the cabinet interference must stop. The Reich President, the cabinet, and the National Assembly appointed him to negotiate peace; and he intended to retain undisputed leadership of the delegation and the peace negotiations.

Brockdorff-Rantzau then assured the other ministers that he still hoped to achieve oral negotiations with the enemy. If not, the Allied rejection of his numerous notes and counterproposals would place the odium of rejection on them. He believed time was on Germany's side. If the Germans could hold out two more months, they could achieve an honorable peace. His entire policy depended upon the determination of the German people and the German government not to accept the treaty in its present form. He had to know the extent of their support if he were to deal effectively with the Allies.

Dernburg replied that the cabinet and the entire nation were determined to reject the treaty unless substantial concessions were made by the Allies. Brockdorff-Rantzau was authorized to reject the treaty unless these changes were made. However, Wissell contradicted Dernburg by saying that the German people were not prepared to endure the results of the rejection of the treaty, that is, enemy occupation of more German territory and an intensified hunger blockade. The initial popular reaction to the treaty was only a passing

enthusiasm, resulting from the shocking conditions of the treaty. This enthusiasm was already waning and would quickly be extinguished by the hunger blockade.

Near the end of the conference, Brockdorff-Rantzau again took the initiative. He asked if the other members were aware of the low intrigues against him by Erzberger. Dernburg, obviously embarrassed, told the foreign minister that the cabinet only wanted to make suggestions. He was still the leader of the negotiations and had the complete confidence of the government. But the cabinet would have to give certain instructions because they would eventually have to defend the treaty before the National Assembly and the nation.

Brockdorff-Rantzau indignantly stated that he would not carry out any instructions which he considered impracticable. Dernburg did not reply, and the foreign minister changed the subject to the war guilt question. Regardless of Dernburg's pledges of support and his friendly attitude throughout the conference, Brockdorff-Rantzau believed him to be in league with Erzberger.

So much of the meeting was devoted to the war guilt question and to financial matters that there was no time for a thorough discussion of the territorial settlement. Brockdorff-Rantzau was surprised that the government seemed so determined to resist all Allied territorial demands. He described Sudekum as "speaking like a reactionary minister of

earlier times." The Prussian minister was willing to make almost no concessions in Posen. When he demanded that a plebiscite in Upper Silesia must result to Germany's advantage, the foreign minister replied, "We hope for the best." Sudekum and Dernburg were opposed to the peace delegation's plan to make substantial military concessions in order to preserve Germany's boundaries. They were opposed to any further reduction of the army.²⁹

The conference at Spa did not really settle the conflict between the cabinet and the peace delegation. Erzberger, who was having little success in influencing the delegation, decided at this time to try to establish personal contact with Woodrow Wilson, without the knowledge of other German officials. On Monday morning, May 19, 1919, Erzberger had an interview with Colonel A. L. Conger, a United States Army staff officer. He presented Conger with several proposals for making the treaty more acceptable to Germany. Among other things, he asked for plebiscites in all eastern territories being taken from Germany. The plebiscites should be by secret ballot under the control of neutrals and should also apply to territory already under Polish control. Erzberger also stated that he could secure German acceptance of the treaty, though "it would require a certain amount of camouflage to put it over" On May 21, Conger's report of this conversation was forwarded to Wilson. There were no tangible

²⁹ Secret notes by Brockdorff-Rantzau, May 19, 1919, AA, 2402, E211859-E211870.

results of Erzberger's project and he succeeded only in alerting the Americans to German internal political struggles.³⁰

At eleven a. m., shortly after his talk with Conger, Erzberger attended an important cabinet meeting. Scheidemann informed the cabinet of a telegram from Brockdorff-Rantzau declaring that it was impossible to submit every note to the cabinet before submitting it to the Allies. He urged the cabinet not to impede the work of the delegation by sending instructions about which the delegation had not been consulted. The cabinet did not discuss the foreign minister's telegram, but upon Erzberger's suggestion, they agreed to continue work on the counterproposals.

The ministers also discussed the possibility of sending a few cabinet members to Versailles or Spa in order to come to an agreement with the delegation on the final content of the counterproposals. In view of the shortage of time, the cabinet resolved that the delegation should be requested to send no more single notes but to concentrate on the final comprehensive note. At the end of the meeting, Dernburg, who had just returned from Spa, alleged that he and Brockdorff-Rantzau had achieved complete agreement on the first part of the counterproposals.³¹

³⁰Fritz T. Epstein, "Zwischen Compiegne und Versailles," Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte, III (October, 1955), 439-444.

³¹Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 19, 1919, AA, 1665, D742233-D742235.

The increased tempo of Erzberger's activity can be seen in the meeting of the peace delegation at Versailles that same Monday evening. During the discussions, Giesberts reported that Erzberger had informed him of his belief that when all remedies were exhausted, the only choice left would be to sign the treaty.³²

The delegation also unanimously agreed to a telegram suggesting that the cabinet consider additional concessions to the Allies. However, the delegation wanted no additional territorial offers and especially no offer of plebiscites in the East. The concession they had in mind was a substantial financial offer. When Bernstorff read the telegram to the cabinet on May 20, they emphasized their disagreement with the delegation by declaring that the plebiscite principle must also be applied to Upper Silesia.³³

Two days later, on May 22, the cabinet was informed that Scheidemann, Dernburg, and Erzberger would leave that evening for Spa to consult with the delegation. One official reminded the cabinet that the Prussian government remained opposed to plebiscites in the East. If this concession were necessary, the government should at least demand that the same principle be employed in Austria and Bohemia.³⁴

³²Minutes of the meeting of the peace delegation of May 19, 1919, AA, 2403, E212324.

³³Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 20, 1919, AA, 1665, D742304-D742305.

³⁴Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 22, 1919, AA, 1665, D742317-D742318.

On the same day, Leinert and Landsbert informed their colleagues in the peace delegation of the experts' resolution, declining all responsibility if the cabinet persisted in its demands for plebiscites in the East. After a telephone message from the cabinet, the entire delegation decided to take a train to Spa that evening. Giesberts, who was in constant contact with Erzberger, informed the delegation that the probable reason for the cabinet's attitude was the recent information from abroad that the single notes were easier for the enemy to reject than a broad, comprehensive statement.³⁵

When the cabinet members and the peace delegation assembled at Spa on May 23, the hostility between Erzberger and Brockdorff-Rantzau was so intense that Bernstorff had to persuade the foreign minister to shake hands with his opponent. Upon Erzberger's suggestion, the ministers and delegates agreed that the comprehensive German counterproposals should be sent as soon as possible and that no more single notes would be delivered. The final construction of the counterproposals was left to the delegation, but there could be no deviation from the principles laid down by the cabinet.

Both Brockdorff-Rantzau and Erzberger agreed that the military provisions of the treaty were of little importance, and that concessions could be made in this area to obtain better economic and territorial terms. Erzberger also

³⁵Minutes of the meeting of the peace delegation of May 22, 1919, AA, 2403, E212425-E212426.

reluctantly agreed to the delegation's proposal for offering 100 billion gold marks interest free to the Allies as reparations. This offer was probably the outgrowth of earlier delegation discussions on making financial concessions to preserve German territory.

Because of the sketchy minutes of the second Spa conference, the exact course of the discussions cannot be determined. It would appear that on the whole, Erzberger emerged the victor in his encounter with the foreign minister. Dr. Walter Simons, Commissioner General of the peace delegation and the foreign minister's loyal assistant, said, ". . . if I had been in his [Brockdorff-Rantzau's] place at Spa, I would have opposed Herr Erzberger more sharply, when he compelled the delegation to accept a formula for the German reply which jeopardizes the success of our peace delegation." In any event, a compromise was affected which enabled the delegation to finish the comprehensive reply to the Allies.³⁶

In the final week before submitting the German counter-proposals, the peace delegation persisted in its distaste for plebiscites in the East. On May 25, Landsberg suggested to the other delegates that the demand for a plebiscite not be applied directly to Upper Silesia. Information from enemy countries indicated that the Allies did not really intend to

³⁶ Klaus Epstein, p. 314; Luckau, pp. 103, 127; Erzberger, pp. 369-370. Minutes of the meeting of the committee of the cabinet and the Versailles delegation in Spa on May 23, 1919, AA, 1665, D742324-D742325.

take Upper Silesia. The delegation agreed that the demand for a plebiscite would be placed in the counterproposals only as the last resort before territorial cessions.³⁷

The delegation also persisted in its preference for single notes. On May 27, the Versailles delegation asked the cabinet to approve a note on the war guilt question, which they planned to present to the Allies the next day. The cabinet, of course, refused the request and asked the delegation to discontinue the exchange of notes and to take no further action without cabinet consent. The delegation disregarded the cabinet decision and sent the note the following day.³⁸

In at least one matter, the delegation sought cabinet advice and abided by its decision. At Versailles, while reading the counterproposals for corrections, the delegation noticed an uncertainty regarding the proposed plebiscites. Would a simple majority or a two-thirds majority be required before an area was ceded? A telegram was sent to the Paxkonferenz in Berlin asking for the decision of the cabinet. Because of the lack of time, the delegation asked to be notified by telephone in code. If the decision was for a simple majority, the word "simple" should be repeated; if the cabinet decided on a two-thirds majority, the word "qualified" should be used.

³⁷Minutes of the meeting of the peace delegation of May 25, 1919, AA, 2403, E212427-E212428.

³⁸Minutes of the cabinet meeting of May 27, 1919, AA, 1665, D742348-D742350; Luckau, p. 287.

At one p. m., on May 28, a minor German official at Versailles received the answer: "simple."³⁹

On May 29, 1919, only twenty-four hours after the last important decision, the comprehensive German counterproposals were presented to the Allies. Even the presentation caused dissension within the German government. Parts of the counterproposals were published in Berlin by the cabinet on May 28, a day before their presentation to the Allies. This constituted a grave international discourtesy and was bitterly resented by the German foreign minister.⁴⁰

In the counterproposals, Germany based her territorial claims upon the broad principle of self-determination. The Germans stated: "In cases where Germany can give its consent to territorial cession, it must at least be preceded by a plebiscite in every community." The plebiscites should be conducted by neutrals, as Erzberger suggested to Colonel Conger. One year's residence in the community before the conclusion of the peace would be required for voting in the plebiscites. This was, of course, aimed at the Polish immigration which had disturbed German military leaders earlier in the spring of 1919. The German note also stated that "no material

³⁹Minutes of the meeting of the peace delegation of May 27, 1919, AA, 2403, E212432; Brockdorff-Rantzau to Paxkonferenz, AA, 2408, E216054; Pringsheim to Simons, May 28, 1919, AA, 2408, E216101.

⁴⁰Brockdorff-Rantzau to Scheidemann, May 29, 1919, AA, 2408, E216059-E216063.

advantages of any kind tending to influence the vote must be promised; especially inadmissible are promises in respect to eventual exemption from material obligations in case a bit of German territory should pass over to another State." This provision concerned the fear of the German experts that the inhabitants of the eastern provinces would vote to free themselves from the economic burdens of war guilt.⁴¹

The Germans rejected the cession of Upper Silesia, reserving some of their strongest arguments for this proposal. They claimed that no political connection had existed between Upper Silesia and Poland since 1163, and statistics showed the area to be predominantly German. Furthermore, Germany needed Upper Silesia, while Poland did not. The area provided 23 per cent of the entire German output of coal, which was the source of supply for 25,000,000 men. This loss of coal would not benefit the Allies since it would lessen Germany's ability to pay reparations. Moreover, the cession was not in the interest of the Silesian people because it would lower their standard of living. Using an argument certain to appeal to Lloyd George, the Germans stated:

By taking Upper Silesia away from Germany wounds would be inflicted on her which would never heal, and from the first hour of separation the recovery of the lost territory will be the burning desire of every German. This will greatly endanger the peace of Europe and of the world.

⁴¹German Counterproposals of May 29, 1919, Luckau, pp. 323-324.

The Germans also denounced the cession of most of West Prussia. Though emphasizing its historical connection with the rest of Germany, they also claimed there were more Germans than Poles in the area. The most important argument was that the cession of this area, together with the "purely German Hanseatic town of Danzig," would sever East Prussia from the remainder of Germany. Nor could the cession be justified as providing Poland with access to the sea. Germany was willing to offer free ports, navigation rights on rivers, and railroad facilities.

Only in Posen did the Germans admit that there might be substantial areas with Polish populations, though they rejected the claim that the province as a whole was indisputably Polish. They would give up those areas where Polish dominance could be demonstrated, but they disagreed with the Allies as to their extent. In general, the Germans rejected all substantial Polish territorial claims, while reiterating their allegiance to Wilson's program, including his thirteenth point.⁴² It remained to be seen what effect these tactics would have on the Allies.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 332-338.

CHAPTER IV

THE ALLIED REACTION

While the Allies waited for the German counterproposals, many British and American delegates began to question the wisdom of the treaty. Though Herbert Hoover, director of the American Food Administration, and Secretary of State Robert Lansing were dissatisfied with the treaty, the severest and most persistent criticism came from the British Empire delegation. As early as May 14, the most determined of these critics, General Smuts of South Africa, wrote to Wilson, asking him to "make the final treaty a more moderate and reasonable document" Smuts made numerous appeals to the President urging revision of various sections of the treaty, including the eastern boundaries of Germany. Thus, German protests had better prospects of success than the Germans themselves realized.¹

The initial reaction to the German counterproposals of May 29 was slowed by the necessity of translating the document into French and English. The Germans had been so pressed for time that only Brockdorff-Rantzau's covering letter had been translated, leaving the remainder of the note in German.

¹Seth P. Tillman, Anglo-American Relations at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 (Princeton, 1961), pp. 345-348.

Nevertheless, a quick survey of the German note was sufficient to alert Clemenceau to the danger of attempted revision. On May 30, he informed Colonel House of his intention to oppose any substantial concessions to the Germans, and House agreed he would win if he did so. Though House believed the treaty was too harsh, he echoed Wilson's opinion that it was too late to alter it. In contacting House, Clemenceau was probably trying to strengthen his hand against the man who was certain to favor revision, David Lloyd George.²

As the French statesman feared, the movement for treaty revision soon got under way. On Saturday, May 31, the British Ministers and Dominion Premiers assembled in Paris at Lloyd George's request. There were four important meetings during the weekend, beginning with a meeting of the British Empire delegation. On Saturday evening there was a private meeting of the British cabinet, followed on Sunday by two long meetings of the government and the peace delegation.

In the discussions, General Smuts again led the attack against the eastern frontiers, accusing the Allies of "trying to reverse the verdict of history." Poland, he said, was a failure and would always remain a failure; therefore, the eastern boundaries must be changed, perhaps by means of plebiscites. Most British experts agreed with Smuts on the necessity of revising the eastern frontiers and on holding

²Seymour, IV, 474; Luckau, p. 87.

plebiscites in certain areas, but, as Lloyd George stated, there was no need for plebiscites in every area of German complaint. Predominantly German districts which had been awarded to Poland simply because of a railroad could be restored to Germany without a popular vote. There was general agreement, however, that a plebiscite should be held in Upper Silesia. The German protests against the loss of Danzig and the corridor did not impress the British. Since the Germans had urged that a road across German territory should satisfy the Poles, the British considered the same provisions good enough for the Germans. Moreover, the major part of the commerce between East Prussia and West Prussia was by sea, not by rail.³

As a result of the British meetings, Lloyd George addressed the Council of Four on Monday afternoon, June 2. He began by describing the discussions of the British officials, their discontent with various sections of the treaty, and emphasizing British unanimity. He warned that if certain changes were not made in the treaty and the German government refused to sign it, the British armed forces could not advance against Germany. The Prime Minister carefully phrased this sentence, as he did the entire statement, as being the opinion of his British colleagues. The most critical provision of the treaty, Lloyd George said, was the cession of Upper Silesia to Poland. Once again, his colleagues in the government would

³Lloyd George, I, 462-465; Council of Four, June 2, 1919, Mantoux, II, 265-268.

not support a march to Berlin unless this part of the treaty were amended because they felt it would be unjust to give the area to Poland without a plebiscite. It had not been a part of Poland for centuries, and if it were to become so now, it should be only with the consent of the population. In Lloyd George's opinion, the vote would be favorable to Poland, and the province would still be annexed to Poland. Thus the real value of the plebiscite would be in preventing Upper Silesia from becoming another Alsace-Lorraine. If the population voted for union with Poland, the Germans could have no complaint and no cause for revenge.

Lloyd George's tactics worked quite well. He had stunned his Allies with the threat that, at the critical moment when the Germans refused to sign the treaty, the British army would not move. It was understandable that Wilson and Clemenceau were shocked. To the old Frenchman, Lloyd George's statement presented very grave problems. It seemed to him that the British believed "the easiest way to finish the war was by making concessions." But Clemenceau knew the Germans better, and he believed the Allies could not deal with them by making concessions; they would only demand more and more. Clemenceau reminded his colleagues that they were not establishing Poland merely to right a great historical wrong. Poland must serve as a barrier state between Germany and Russia, and for that purpose, she must be strong enough to resist German pressure. If Poland fell under German domination,

the war had been lost, and the advance of 1914 could begin again. Both Clemenceau and Wilson needed time to consult their advisers, and further discussions were postponed.⁴

On the following morning, Wilson met with the American commissioners and experts to discuss the German counterproposals. When the President asked about the eastern frontiers, Robert H. Lord, Harvard professor and Polish expert, responded with a vigorous defense of the treaty. He felt that the Germans had made a rather weak case because most of the points they had criticized were small areas of German population which had been included in Poland in order to give the new state compact frontiers.

The German claim that the people of Upper Silesia desired to remain a part of Germany was, in Lord's opinion, simply untrue. He asserted that Upper Silesia was "as near to being indisputably Polish territory as any part of Eastern Europe." In any free expression of the will of the people, the province would vote for union with Poland. But before any plebiscite could be held, all German forces would have to be withdrawn and replaced by Allied troops. Even then, a free and fair plebiscite could not be held because the agricultural part of the province and the major industries in the industrialized section were controlled by a few powerful German families. Since they would be able to pervert any plebiscite, and because the area was obviously Polish, no plebiscite should be held.

⁴Council of Four, June 2, 1919, FRUS, VI, 139-142. ibid., Mantoux, II, 265-268.

Lord also asserted that Poland had an historic right to Upper Silesia, though he found it difficult to maintain this claim. Colonel House suggested that the area had never been part of Poland; Wilson added, "Creating a state out of Polish population in some places like Upper Silesia which never constituted part of ancient Poland, isn't that right, Dr. Lord?" Though he denied the accuracy of the President's statement, Lord was forced to acknowledge that Upper Silesia had not been part of Poland for over 400 years.

The professor admitted that the province was of great economic importance to Germany because it provided 23 per cent of her coal, but this same amount of coal would constitute three fourths of Poland's coal supply. This statement provoked a discussion of what areas had been supplied by Silesian coal before the war. Under sharp questioning by Secretary of State Robert Lansing, Lord finally admitted that the acquisition of Upper Silesia would give Poland far more coal than that same geographic area had possessed before the war.

After the lengthy discussion of Upper Silesia, Wilson stated his ideas on revising the treaty. He admitted that the treaty was severe, but he believed Germany "should learn once and for all what an unjust war means in itself." Yet, if the Allies had included Germans unnecessarily in Poland, they should change the frontiers, though he agreed it would be difficult to obtain a fair vote in Upper Silesia. The President was opposed to making changes in the treaty merely

for the purpose of getting it signed. "I put it this way," he said, "we ought to examine our consciences to see where we can make modification that correspond with the principles that we are putting forth." Though most of the American experts, with the exception of Lord, were dissatisfied with the Upper Silesia settlement and probably favored a plebiscite, Wilson refused to press for these or any other changes. The President was not so afraid of the German failure to sign the treaty as he was that the Allies might become divided. If the Allies were split by an issue like Upper Silesia, it would be the most "fatal thing that could happen."⁵

When the Council of Four met that afternoon, Wilson suggested Upper Silesia as the first topic of discussion. After devising guarantees for the rights of private property in that province and discussing other minor boundary changes, the Council took up the question of a plebiscite. The President, adopting Lord's tactics and his logic, stated that he was not opposed to self-determination for the people of Upper Silesia, if a truly free vote could be held. Unfortunately, the people of that area were dominated by a few German capitalists who had a great deal to lose if Upper Silesia went to Poland and would do their best to control the vote. Wilson said the Germans really had no right to demand a plebiscite because all that the thirteenth point promised was that the

⁵Meeting of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace, June 3, 1919, FRUS, XI, 205-210, 218-222; Seymour, IV, 474-476.

populations of territory ceded to Poland would be indisputably Polish. Since the ethnological facts concerning Upper Silesia were clear to everyone, there was no need for a plebiscite. Furthermore, "in the case of both Alsace-Lorraine and of Poland, there were specific Articles in the Fourteen Points, to meet the special conditions, and the settlement was based on those rather than on general principles."

Lloyd George proposed that German troops and German officials be removed from the province before the plebiscite and that the Allied troops be sent in to guarantee a free vote. There was no cause to fear German domination because in 1907, a majority of the representatives from Upper Silesia were Polish and in 1912, the number was equally divided between German and Polish representatives. These figures indicated that a free vote could be held in the province, and there was no reason to deny to these people the right of self-determination. Since the province was certain to vote for Poland, Lloyd George believed the principal effect of the plebiscite would be to make it easier for the Germans to sign the treaty and leave them no cause to complain.

Clemenceau stated that a plebiscite in Upper Silesia would be useless because, as Lloyd George admitted, the area was unquestionably Polish. If German troops were replaced by Allied forces, the Germans would claim undue Allied influence favoring the Poles, and Lloyd George's express goal of placating the enemy would have failed. Furthermore, the Germans,

knowing that the results of a free vote would be unfavorable to them, would vigorously oppose a plebiscite.

The Prime Minister replied that if the Germans would resist a plebiscite, their resistance to outright cession of the territory would be much greater. Lloyd George continued to base his arguments upon the President's own principles until Wilson finally, reluctantly agreed that a plebiscite be held under the direction of an international commission. The Council of Four agreed to Wilson's proposal and established a Committee on the Eastern Frontiers of Germany to handle the matter. General Le Rond of France headed this committee, which also included Lord for the United States, Headlam-Morley for Great Britain, and the Marquis della Torretta for Italy. The Committee was instructed to draft amendments to the treaty to provide for certain minor changes in the frontier favorable to Germany, to provide for a plebiscite in Upper Silesia, and to provide for guaranteed German access to coal in that area in case the vote favored Poland.⁶

Although Wilson and Clemenceau had actually agreed in principle to the British demands, the Silesian question remained open to discussion. On June 5, the Council asked Paderewski to give his views on the proposed plebiscite in Upper Silesia. The Polish patriot gave a candid and rather

⁶Council of Four, June 3, 1919, FRUS, VI, 147-159; Draft Reference to the Expert Committee on the Eastern Frontiers, June 4, 1919, ibid., p. 186; Council of Four, June 3, 1919, Mantoux, II, 275-283.

accurate account of the probable results of the plebiscite. He pointed out that Upper Silesia consisted of two sections. In a plebiscite, the industrialized eastern section, where the people were conscious of their Polish nationality, would vote for Poland. In the predominantly agricultural western section, the people were dominated by the German Catholic clergy and would probably favor Germany. Paderewski admitted that if Upper Silesia voted as a unit, it would probably vote to remain German, but he assumed that the Allies intended to conduct the vote by communes as in the other plebiscite areas. In that case, the Oder River would probably be the frontier.

At this point in the discussion, Paderewski changed his tactics. He declared that if Poland did not get Upper Silesia he would have to resign because the Poles would lose faith in him and in the Allied statesmen. When the Polish leader declared that Poland must have the territory which had been granted to her, Lloyd George reminded him that nothing had been promised Poland. Proposals, which were by no means definitive, had been made to Germany. The Poles should remember that their independence had been won at the expense of millions of dead Allied soldiers. They were becoming more imperialistic than France or England. Paderewski realized his mistake and tried to qualify his remarks, but the damage had been done. His appearance before the Council of Four probably aided Lloyd George in his fight for the plebiscite.⁷

⁷Council of Four, June 5, 1919, FRUS, VI, 191-201; Lloyd George, II, 645-647.

After the initial victory on June 3, the British Prime Minister continued to encounter resistance. The critical day in his fight for self-determination in Upper Silesia was Wednesday, June 11, 1919. When the Council of Four assembled that afternoon, Wilson and Clemenceau were still reluctant to accept the plebiscite. It seemed to the President that the Allies were eager to conciliate Germany at the expense of the Poles, but they were unwilling to make any sacrifice themselves, as in the case of reparations. Lloyd George denied this and said he only wanted to avoid placing people under Polish sovereignty against their will. He reminded his colleagues that he could not order "British soldiers to fight simply because a Plebiscite had been refused" He stated that soldiers of other countries would not fight either, and Clemenceau agreed that this was one of the principal reasons why he had consented to a plebiscite. Wilson asked Lloyd George if British troops would fight if a plebiscite were offered and Germany still refused to sign; the Prime Minister assured him they would.⁸

Immediately after the meeting, the Council heard the report of the Committee on the Eastern Frontiers of Germany. General Le Rond reported that the committee had little trouble with the minor territorial changes or with the economic questions, but Silesia had posed quite a problem. The Committee

⁸Council of Four, June 11, 1919, 4 p. m., FRUS, VI, 303-306.

was unanimously agreed that the people of Upper Silesia were not really free, and a fair plebiscite would be difficult to attain. They had drawn up plans for a plebiscite only under the specific orders of the Council of Four. Le Rond pointed out that something of a plebiscite had already been held before the war when five of eight Reichstag seats in the area had gone to the National Polish Party. Clemenceau questioned the significance of these elections, and Lloyd George derided the importance of Polish nationalism in Upper Silesia, comparing it unfavorably to the Irish. After a lecture on Polish political parties by Lord, the Commission withdrew, and the Council moved to Wilson's library to continue their discussions.⁹

Upon Wilson's suggestion, the Council accepted the plebiscite as drawn up by the Committee, to take place in Upper Silesia within one or two years. Lloyd George wanted the necessary occupation troops to be Americans, though other Allied troops could participate if necessary. Upon the Prime Minister's suggestion, the Council resolved that the expenses of the plebiscite would be paid by Upper Silesia.¹⁰

The Council accepted the provision postponing the plebiscite in Upper Silesia for at least a year because Lord and other pro-Polish experts testified that this delay would weaken the land owners' control in German-dominated areas.

⁹Council of Four, June 11, 1919, 5 p. m., *ibid.*, pp. 311-314.

¹⁰Council of Four, June 11, 1919, 5:45 p. m., *ibid.*, pp. 316-318.

However, when the Council called in Polish representatives on June 14, Paderewski, though disappointed that the plebiscite should be held at all, urged that there be no delay. Because of the chaotic conditions in the area, he hoped the plebiscite would be held within three to six months. After Paderewski withdrew from the meeting, the Council decided that the plebiscite would be held between six and eighteen months after a commission had been established in the area.¹¹

Another problem concerning Upper Silesia was brought up in the Council for Four on June 14. Lloyd George proposed that those areas which were part of Germany at the beginning of the war, such as Upper Silesia and Danzig, should pay their share of the reparations, even if they were no longer part of Germany. Not only was the sum involved quite large, since these two areas were very rich, but the province of Silesia could shirk its share of German reparations by voting for union with Poland. Since the wealthy land owners, German or not, would work for a pro-Polish vote under these conditions, Lloyd George said, "this was loading the dice against Germany."

The Prime Minister's idea received considerable support from Clemenceau, but Wilson opposed the entire proposal. The President said the Poles had suffered greatly during the war and did not deserve this new burden. In addition, the changes in the treaty necessary to implement Lloyd George's

¹¹Council of Four, June 11, 1919, 5:45 p. m., ibid., pp. 450-452.

proposal would take a great deal of time, and it was urgent that peace be concluded within a week. Wilson also objected to Lloyd George's phrase about "loading the dice against Germany." The President had not been required, according to the thirteenth point, to agree to a plebiscite in Upper Silesia. He had done so only because of Lloyd George's insistence, and he could not see that he was "loading the dice against Germany."

Although Clemenceau agreed in principle with Lloyd George, under the circumstances he could not support the Prime Minister's plan. Lloyd George conceded defeat with the greatest reluctance because "this might cost scores of millions of pounds to the British Empire, and hundreds of millions to France"12

The final task of the Council of Four in dealing with Poland was the drafting of a covering letter to accompany the revised draft of the treaty. On June 12, the Council instructed the Committee on the Eastern Frontiers of Germany to draft the proposed letter. The draft submitted by the Committee on the same day justified the Polish settlement on the basis of Wilson's thirteenth point. The Danzig settlement, for instance, was defended as the only possible way of providing Poland with "free and secure access to the sea." The Allies reminded the Germans that they had agreed to a plebiscite in Upper

¹² Council of Four, June 14, 1919, *ibid.*, pp. 454-455.

Silesia, although the 1910 German census showed 1,250,000 Poles to 650,000 Germans in that province.¹³

This rather mild letter was accepted by the Council of Four, subject to certain changes and additions. The Council proposed to strengthen the letter by a pointed reference to the "notorious crimes" committed against the Poles in the past, by placing more emphasis upon the preponderance of sea traffic over rail traffic between East and West Prussia, and by adding a paragraph on Upper Silesia. These changes were submitted and approved on June 14.¹⁴

In the final draft of the covering letter sent to the Germans two days later, the Allies stated:

The German counterproposals entirely conflict with the agreed basis of peace. They provide that great majorities of indisputably Polish populations 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 sea-borne. They cannot, therefore, be accepted by the Allied and Associated Powers.

This was the answer which the Germans received after seventeen days of anxious waiting. Their basic counterproposals were absolutely rejected, and they were given five days in which to accept or reject the treaty. The Allied letter warned

¹³Council of Four, June 12, 1919, ibid., pp. 324, 330, 335-336.

¹⁴Council of Four, June 13, 1919, ibid., p. 397; Council of Four, June 14, 1919, ibid., pp. 418-422.

that rejection would mean the termination of the armistice; the Allies would take "such steps as they think needful to enforce their Terms."¹⁵ The Germans must now decide, as Brockdorff-Rantzau said, whether they preferred suicide to murder.

¹⁵ Clemenceau to Brockdorff-Rantzau, June 16, 1919, ibid., XIII, 49-54.

CHAPTER V

THE FINAL DECISION

Long before the Allies had agreed on the concessions to be granted to Germany, the German government had begun to consider the question of accepting or rejecting the treaty. Immediately after the presentation of the German counterproposals on May 29, Erzberger began a vigorous campaign for treaty acceptance. He informed Scheidemann that he would resign if the cabinet decided against ratification. The two men agreed privately that Erzberger would draw up a memorandum on the acceptance of the treaty, which would be discussed confidentially by Ebert and the cabinet. Erzberger anticipated an ultimatum from the Allies, and he believed the cabinet should discuss the matter thoroughly before they were placed under the pressure of a time limit.

The Erzberger memorandum, discussed by the cabinet on June 3 and 4, consisted of two parts: the result of signing the treaty and the result of rejecting it. Erzberger admitted that the German people would assume heavy burdens by signing the treaty, but these would be offset by the termination of the blockade and by the revival of commerce and industry. In the East, Poland would be "forced to terminate its aggressive designs. The unity of Germany will be preserved."

However, opposition to the treaty would also center in the East, where an attempted military coup might even occur.

On the other hand, Erzberger believed that rejection of the treaty would be disastrous. The Allies would denounce the armistice, followed three days later by a renewal of the war. The blockade would be tightened, and Allied armies would invade Germany, aiming specifically at the separation of North and South Germany. The Allies would encourage separatist movements, and "Germany would again become a crazy patchwork quilt" The individual German states would sign separate treaties, and Germany would be destroyed. In the East, the Poles would invade Germany, and the border population would flee into central Germany, thus increasing the internal chaos. Bolsheviks would seize this opportunity, and civil war would begin again in the large cities. Erzberger's basic argument was that regardless of the sacrifices, by signing the treaty the unity of the Reich would be preserved; if the treaty were rejected, Germany as a nation would cease to exist.¹

At first, Erzberger stood almost alone in favoring acceptance of the treaty, but he was soon joined by three Social Democrats, including Minister of Defense Gustav Noske. Other members of the cabinet opposed Erzberger, especially the Democrats, who warned that acceptance of the treaty would cause civil war in the East. They believed the treaty was not only

¹Erzberger, pp. 370-373; Scheidemann, II, 314-315; Klaus Epstein, pp. 315-317.

dishonorable but could not be signed since the cabinet had labeled it "unacceptable" in May. Erzberger replied that signing under duress could not be dishonorable. As for the May decision, it had been a mere tactical expedient; it was understood at the time that the final decision would be made later.²

As a result of the cabinet discussions of June 3 and 4, the major political parties could no longer speak as units; each was now divided on the issue of signing or not signing. Beginning on June 13, Erzberger met daily with his Center Party colleagues to try to win their support. The members were generally agreed that military resistance was out of the question, and eventually conceded that the treaty could be accepted if the Allies would delete articles 227 and 231, which the Germans considered dishonorable.³

On June 16, while the discussions were going on in Weimar, the German delegation at Versailles received the Allied reply

²Erzberger, pp. 373-375; Klaus Epstein, p. 318.

³Article 227 called for the trial of the former German Emperor before an Allied tribunal for his "offense against international morality and the sanctity of treaties." Article 231 required Germany and her allies to accept the responsibility "for causing all the loss and damage to which the Allied and Associated Governments and their nationals have been subjected as a consequence of the war imposed upon them by the aggression of Germany and her allies." This article was intended by the Allies as merely the basis for their reparations claims, but it was interpreted by the Germans as labeling Germany as an international criminal, alone responsible for starting the war., FRUS, XIII, 371, 413-415; Erzberger, p. 375; Epstein, pp. 318-319.

to the German counterproposals. One provision of this note required the Germans to inform the Allies of their acceptance or rejection within five days. However, Walter Simons, the Commissioner General of the German delegation, secured a forty-eight-hour extension, making June 23 the last day for the German answer. Leaving behind a skeleton force, the German delegation departed for Weimar on the evening of June 16, accompanied by the boos and shouts of a rock-throwing French mob.⁴

During the long, tiresome train ride to Weimar, the delegation examined the Allied note and the revised treaty and drew up a memorandum setting forth their opinion. They noted that minor changes in the eastern frontiers had been conceded, as well as more secure railroad traffic between East and West Prussia, but these changes were insignificant. The plebiscite in Upper Silesia was the only really important change, and the effect of this concession was lessened by other provisions. For example, Poland would be favored by the Allied occupation of the area and by the provision that the people of Upper Silesia could free themselves from their share of German reparations by voting for Poland. On the whole, the treaty still deviated from Wilson's program; the delegates still considered it intolerable and recommended that it be rejected. They knew that the Allies would use force against them, but they were

⁴Luckau, p. 90; Nowak, pp. 262-263.

"convinced that the progressively peaceful development of the world will soon create an impartial court in which we shall find justice."⁵

The German delegation arrived in Weimar at 7 a. m., on June 18, 1919, and went directly to the former Grand Ducal Palace where the cabinet awaited them. Ebert congratulated Brockdorff-Rantzau on his work at Versailles and assured him that he also would not accept the treaty. When the cabinet and the delegation met to discuss the peace terms, Brockdorff-Rantzau presented the delegation memorandum and read a detailed speech which he had prepared aboard the train. The delegation, he said, was unanimously agreed that the peace terms could not be accepted. The most onerous part of the treaty was the separation of German people from their nation without their consent, as in the Saar territory, East Prussia, and Upper Silesia. Although Brockdorff-Rantzau recognized the plebiscite in Upper Silesia as a real concession and an attempt at conciliation, provided it were administered fairly, he still believed that the area should never have been considered for cession to Poland. It had not been a part of that nation for 700 years and was by no means indisputably Polish according to Wilson's thirteenth point. Considering not only the eastern question but also the other aspects of the treaty, he concluded

⁵Report of the German peace delegation on the Allied reply, June 16, 1919, Luckau, pp. 483-488.

that the concessions were not extensive enough to justify German acceptance. Even if the government signed the treaty, they would not be able to prevent civil war in the East and spontaneous movements to preserve the eastern territories.⁶

The Democrats remained opposed to the treaty and suggested four points to be sent as counter-demands to the Allied ultimatum:

1. Danzig, West Prussia and the rail network should be placed under the League of Nations.
2. Revision of the peace should follow after two years.
3. If no agreement on the maximum amount of the reparations has come about within four months, the sum should be determined by a non-partisan authority.
4. Germany should become a member of the League of Nations by January 1, 1920.

Erzberger considered such proposals hopeless, and they were apparently not seriously considered by anyone except the Democrats.⁷

The cabinet meeting on the morning of June 18 was only the first in a series of complicated party caucuses, informal discussions, cabinet meetings, and conferences between civilian and military leaders. In these discussions, the Polish question became submerged in the general considerations of accepting the treaty.

One of the most critical cabinet meetings began on the afternoon of June 18 and continued, with a short break for dinner, until 3 a. m. on the following day. Ebert, who

⁶Nowak, pp. 263-265; Brandenburg, 397185-397197.

⁷Erzberger, p. 376.

presided over the discussions, opened the meeting with a rather evasive speech. He said that the government could refuse to sign the treaty if the home front remained unbroken. However, the divisions in the cabinet were widely known, and the government would have to accept the consequences of that fact. Although the meaning of this statement was not clear, thereafter the cabinet no longer seemed willing to consider absolute rejection of the treaty. After Ebert's speech, other ministers discussed the treaty for several hours. Finally, in the early morning hours of Thursday, June 19, a vote was taken. Seven members of the cabinet, including Erzberger, and four Social Democrats voted in favor of signing the treaty. Against signing were Brockdorff-Rantzau, three Democrats, and three Social Democrats. A stalemate had been reached.⁸

On the afternoon of Thursday, June 19, another critical cabinet meeting took place, in which the representatives of the individual German states were interviewed. In spite of strong statements by Dernburg and Brockdorff-Rantzau against accepting the treaty, most of the representatives, with the exception of Prussia and a few minor states, favored signing the treaty. Though they would not themselves sign separate armistices with the Allies, the South German representatives warned that the desire for peace was so strong that an Allied invasion would

⁸Luckau believed that the vote was eight to six against acceptance. Luckau, p. 108; Brandenburg, 397197-397198; Erzberger, pp. 376-377; Scheidemann, II, 316.

cause the overthrow of their governments and the establishment of governments which would deal with the Allied powers. The representative of Baden asserted that 85 to 90 per cent of the people favored signing the treaty, and the Hessian representative believed the percentage to be even higher.⁹

About seventy people attended this meeting, including a number of high-ranking army officers, who had assembled at Weimar on June 17, 18, and 19 with the intention of instituting a military revolt against the acceptance of the treaty. Because of the discouraging news from the representatives of the individual German states, a group of these officers met late in the afternoon of June 19 with the officials of the threatened eastern provinces. The officers proposed to lead a rebellion against the government, and they expected most of their support to come from eastern Germany. However, the representatives of these provinces stated that the plan could not succeed because the people would not support it. This lack of support, combined with the strong opposition of Quartermaster General Wilhelm Groener to any such revolt, dampened the revolutionary ardor of the army officers, though they still threatened to rebel unless the war guilt clauses were deleted from the treaty.¹⁰

⁹Brockdorff-Rantzau gives the time of this meeting as Friday afternoon, June 20; however, Erzberger and Groener-Geyer described what is apparently the same meeting as occurring on Thursday afternoon. Erzberger, p. 377; Brandenburg, 397202-397203; Dorothea Groener-Geyer, General Groener, Soldat und Staatsmann (Frankfurt Am Main, 1955), p. 156.

¹⁰Gordon A. Craig, The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945 (London, 1955), pp. 370-371.

The three coalition parties also met on Thursday to vote on acceptance of the treaty. The Democrats voted unanimously against acceptance; the Social Democrats voted seventy-five to thirty-five in favor of signing; and a majority of the Center Party voted for acceptance of the treaty, except for Articles 227-231. The cabinet assembled later Thursday evening for one last attempt at agreement. After a short discussion of the party caucuses, Scheidemann ended the meeting and went to report the fall of the government to Ebert.¹¹

Throughout Thursday night, Erzberger and others worked to restore the coalition. By early Friday morning, they had devised a plan whereby two or three Democrats would remain in the cabinet, but as individuals rather than representatives of their party. However, this agreement was shattered when a Democratic party caucus resolved that no member of that party could participate in the new Government.¹²

On Friday morning, June 20, Ebert again summoned the members of the defunct cabinet. Erzberger suggested that a telegram be sent to the Allies informing them of the resignation of the cabinet and that a majority of the National Assembly favored acceptance of the treaty, except for the provisions concerning war guilt and the surrender of war

¹¹Erzberger, pp. 377-378; Alma Luckau, "Unconditional Acceptance of the Treaty of Versailles by the German Government, June 22-28, 1919," The Journal of Modern History, XVII (September, 1945), 216-217.

¹²Erzberger, p. 378.

criminals. Brockdorff-Rantzau thought this proposal had little chance of success "because our enemy had based their whole shameless action on the guilt question." Upon Ebert's request, Brockdorff-Rantzau agreed to continue performing the administrative duties of the foreign office until the following Monday if necessary, though he rejected any responsibility for any political decisions. He even agreed to help draw up Erzberger's proposed telegram, in order to prevent any technical oversights.¹³

Later Friday, difficulty arose over who was to sign the telegram to the Allies. Brockdorff-Rantzau absolutely refused, as did Scheidemann, Dernburg, and others. This difficulty probably hastened the negotiations on the formation of a new cabinet which had been going on for sometime. When the new government was finally formed, it consisted of seven Social Democrats and four Center Party members. Gustav Bauer, the former Minister of Labor, became Minister President, and Matthias Erzberger became Minister of Finance. The new Minister of Foreign Affairs was Herman Muller.¹⁴

Throughout this period, Erzberger, by his own account, had been in contact with French and Italian diplomats, who led him to believe that the Allies would delete the so-called "honor clauses" [Articles 227-231] from the treaty. Erzberger persuaded his colleagues that this information was true, and

¹³Brandenburg, 397216-397217.

¹⁴Ibid., 397217-397220; Erzberger, pp. 378-379.

Sunday afternoon, June 22, the new government asked the National Assembly to support acceptance of the treaty without Articles 227 and 231. The National Assembly voted 237 to 138 in favor of acceptance with the specified reservations.¹⁵

In the telegram sent to the Allies, the Germans reiterated some of their old complaints about the treaty before declaring:

The Government of the German Republic is ready to sign the Treaty of Peace without, however, recognizing thereby that the German people was the author of the War, and without undertaking any responsibility for delivering persons in accordance with Articles 227 and 231 of the Treaty of Peace.¹⁶

When this note was read to the Council of Four in Paris shortly after 7 p. m. on Sunday, June 22, there was no discussion of accepting the German reservations. Wilson drafted the reply which stated that the Germans had brought up nothing new, so no changes would be made in the text. Erzberger was informed later by Allied diplomats that the scuttling of the German fleet at Scapa Flow had been a major factor in encouraging Allied intransigence. Although this incident was mentioned in the same Council meeting, there was no indication that the Allies even considered the German request.¹⁷

At 9 p. m., the Allied answer arrived in Berlin and provoked consternation in the cabinet. The Social Democrats

¹⁵Ibid., p. 380.

¹⁶German note of June 22, 1919, FRUS, VI, 609-611.

¹⁷Council of Four, June 22, 1919, ibid., pp. 605-606; Erzberger, p. 380.

believed a majority of their party would still favor unconditional acceptance, but the Center Party ministers, after a conference with other party leaders, stated that they could not accept the "points of honor." The cabinet meeting finally broke up at 3 a. m. Noske, who was on his way to Berlin, was recalled by telegram. He informed the cabinet at 8 a. m. on June 23, that the worst was to be expected whatever the government did. If they signed the treaty, the army was too weak to maintain order; if they rejected it, rebellion among the army officers was to be expected. During the morning Noske talked with a number of army officers who had urged him to set up a military dictatorship. At a Center Party caucus at 11 a. m., he pointed out the dangers of signing the treaty with the "points of honor" and allegedly urged that the treaty be rejected.¹⁸

The Center Party caucus voted sixty-four to fourteen in favor of rejecting the treaty. Unsuccessful attempts were made to form a new cabinet, either from all leftist parties or all rightist parties. During these discussions, Ebert asked Groener by telephone if the army could defend the country should the treaty be rejected. Groener replied some time later, after consultation with Hindenburg, that the military situation was hopeless. He must advise, not as an officer but as a German, that the treaty be signed. He believed that a military

¹⁸Luckau, "Unconditional Acceptance," p. 218; Craig, p. 371.

coup could be avoided if Noske would publicly appeal to the loyalty of the army.

Noske followed Groener's advice and secured a pledge from the officers that they would support the government if it signed the treaty. With the threat of a military coup removed, the political parties could then agree on the tactics to be used. It was decided, after long and complicated discussions, that the parties would simply declare that the power to sign the treaty, even with the "points of honor," had been granted on Saturday by the National Assembly. Upon the demand of some of the ministers, most of the rightist parties agreed to issue declarations that they did not doubt the patriotic motives of the parties supporting acceptance of the treaty. Finally, at 3:15 p. m. on June 23, 1919, the National Assembly authorized the cabinet to sign the treaty unconditionally.¹⁹

Shortly before the expiration of the Allied ultimatum, the German telegram was presented in Paris. The German government stated:

Yielding to the overwhelming force, but without on that account abandoning its view in regard to the unheard of injustice of the conditions of peace, the Government of the German Republic therefore declares that it is ready to accept

¹⁹Luckau, "Unconditional Acceptance," pp. 218-220; Erzberger, pp. 380-383.

and sign the conditions of peace imposed by the Allied and Associated Governments.²⁰

In an anticlimactic ceremony on June 28, the German representatives signed the peace treaty, thus restoring a semblance of peace and order to Europe.

²⁰German note accepting the treaty, June 23, 1919, FRUS, VI, 644.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

Considering the advantages which the Poles enjoyed in 1919, the final German-Polish boundary was surprisingly favorable to Germany. The Poles were represented at the peace conference and were able to defend their claims before the Council of Four, while the Germans did not have this advantage. The conference was held in Paris, the center of anti-German feeling, and most of the Allied experts generally supported Polish territorial claims. Wilson, relying heavily upon the advice of Robert H. Lord, was favorable to the Poles. Clemenceau generally supported Polish claims because of the traditional French policy of establishing a strong state east of Germany. In spite of these Polish advantages, the final boundary provisions included several significant concessions to Germany. These concessions resulted primarily from the efforts of one man, David Lloyd George.

As the most consistent defender of German interests against Polish territorial claims, the British Prime Minister was the man most responsible for the final German-Polish boundary. He prevented the cession of Danzig to Poland and suggested the final solution to this problem, the creation of a free city. Lloyd George also sought to exclude as many Germans as

possible from the new Polish state by demanding plebiscites in doubtful areas like Marienwerder and Upper Silesia. In order to make these plebiscites fair, the British Prime Minister sought to prevent the exemption from reparations payments of areas voting for cession to Poland, though he failed in this attempt.

Clemenceau, on the other hand, provided strong support for Polish claims to Danzig because he believed the possession of that city was a strategic necessity for a strong Poland. The French statesman gave only token opposition to a plebiscite in Upper Silesia because he was impressed by Lloyd George's warning that British troops would not fight to deny Germany this concession. He also agreed with Lloyd George that Upper Silesia and other plebiscite areas should pay their share of reparations even if they voted for union with Poland, but he was not willing to override Wilson's opposition to this proposal.

Wilson emerges from this study not, as Paul Birdsall described him, the defender of Germany against ". . . the forces of extravagant nationalism" and the loyal supporter of ". . . Lloyd George's efforts to modify that [Polish] settlement in the face of Polish sympathies of the American experts."¹ Neither is John Maynard Keynes' familiar description of the "old Presbyterian" being "bamboozled" by Clemenceau

¹Birdsall, pp. 9, 293.

valid.² In reality, Wilson was the most persistent defender of Polish claims. With the exception of the Danzig question, he consistently took a more determined stand against Germany in behalf of Poland than Clemenceau. Lloyd George overcame Wilson's obstinate opposition to a plebiscite in Upper Silesia only with great difficulty, and he failed to win the President's consent to changes requiring plebiscite areas to pay reparations whether they voted for Poland or Germany.

If the Germans had understood the nature of the division among the Allies, they might have secured even more extensive concessions. However, they not only continued to believe that Wilson was the Allied statesman most sympathetic to Germany, but they were weakened by divisions in their own ranks. Initially, the German government committed itself to Brockdorff-Rantzau's policy of defiance. Throughout his tenure as Minister of Foreign Affairs, Brockdorff-Rantzau pursued a logical, consistent policy, based upon the premise that Germany should reject the peace treaty if its terms were too severe. The German government accepted the foreign minister's program almost unquestioningly because they did not anticipate intolerable Allied demands and believed that rejection of the treaty would not be necessary. Brockdorff-Rantzau knew that an unacceptable treaty was probable, but the cabinet, including Matthias Erzberger, seemed blissfully unaware of the Allied attitude toward Germany.

²John M. Keynes, The Economic Consequences of the Peace (New York, 1920), pp. 54-55.

After presentation of the Allied demands, Brockdorff-Rantzau continued to pursue his policy. By issuing single notes, he hoped to appeal to public opinion in neutral and Allied countries, which would in turn force Wilson and Lloyd George to allow oral negotiations. In face to face discussions with the Allied statesmen, Brockdorff-Rantzau believed he could secure an acceptable treaty. However, the foreign minister's policy was unrealistic. It could only succeed, as Brockdorff-Rantzau realized, if it had the unanimous support of the German people and their government. But the Allied demands had alarmed the cabinet, and Erzberger and other members soon came to the conclusion that a policy of defiance was not appropriate. They realized that Brockdorff-Rantzau's single notes would not reach the public in Allied countries because of wartime censorship which still prevailed. This being the case, there would be no significant concessions, and, according to the foreign minister's program, Germany would be forced to reject the treaty. Erzberger and his friends were convinced that this would destroy Germany, and they began a campaign of weakening the foreign minister's power and subverting his program.

In the growing internal conflict, the German counterproposals were weakened. They became a compromise between Brockdorff-Rantzau's policy of defiance and Erzberger's policy of conciliation by positive counterproposals. The greatest weakness of these proposals was their deviation from Wilson's

thirteenth point. Discussions in the Council of Four reveal that the most telling points in the German counterproposals were those asserting the principle of self-determination and disputing the claim that certain areas were indisputably Polish. The German claim that Upper Silesia was not Polish and that a majority of the people of that province did not desire to become a part of Poland was most effective. The emphasis placed upon the economic importance of the province only weakened the German claim and caused Wilson to doubt the sincerity of the Germans.

In the case of Danzig, the Germans would also have been more successful had they emphasized the principle of self-determination. Instead, they offered as a substitute for the free city of Danzig only general promises of port concessions and free use of waterways and railways, all without international guarantees. The vague German offer was probably a deliberate attempt to avoid the sacrifices necessary to carry out this section of the thirteenth point. At the height of the German debates on their counterproposals, Brockdorff-Rantzau admitted to the German cabinet that certain counterproposals would be deliberately phrased in vague terms. The cabinet's apprehension that the Allies would dismiss such proposals as insincere was justified in the case of Danzig. Even Lloyd George recognized that if the Germans considered rail and waterway concessions sufficient for the Polish access

to the sea, the less important connection between East and West Prussia could certainly be provided by the same means.³

The Germans would probably have achieved the greatest success by adopting Erzberger's imaginative proposal that they accept the eastern frontiers, with the condition that plebiscites be held in all areas to be ceded. Wilson would have found it difficult to resist this appeal to self-determination, just as he was hard-pressed by Lloyd George's appeal to the same principle.

When the plebiscite in Upper Silesia was finally held in May, 1921, a majority of the votes were for Germany. The western agricultural section was given to Germany, and the eastern industrial part was ceded to Poland. Although the results satisfied neither Germany or Poland, the solution was in accord with Wilson's thirteenth point and in agreement with the principle of self-determination.⁴

Although the Germans were much more concerned in 1919 with the economic losses in Upper Silesia than with the loss of Danzig, twenty years later the situation was reversed. In 1939, the Germans demanded the return of Danzig, once again offering Brockdorff-Rantzau's worthless promises of free port facilities guaranteed only by Germany. The Poles still

³John B. Mason, The Danzig Dilemma (Stanford, 1946), pp. 59-60; Minutes of the cabinet meeting, May 17, 1919, AA, 1665, D742231.

⁴Birdsall, p. 194.

refused to surrender their national independence, but Germany no longer had to defer to the principles of Woodrow Wilson and the Diktat at Versailles. The Third Reich had its own method of settling boundary disputes with its neighbors.⁵

⁵The Speeches of Adolf Hitler, April, 1922-August, 1939,
edited by Norman H. Baynes (London, 1942), II, 1630-1631.

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