

Germany Emerges from World War I

As World War I neared an end in the fall of 1918, Germany stood face to face with defeat. Its people were hungry and disillusioned. The emperor, Kaiser Wilhelm II, agreed to make Germany's government more democratic, but the changes were not enough for the leaders of Germany's enemies. U.S. President Woodrow Wilson, in particular, refused to sign an armistice as long as the emperor remained in power.

Meanwhile, revolution was in the air. Inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia the year before, German leftists staged street demonstrations and plotted to seize power. In late October, German sailors mutinied. Many soldiers put on red armbands and declared themselves in favor of revolution. With chaos threatening and Allied soldiers advancing on Germany, the emperor gave up his throne and went into exile. Germany, became a republic, governed by a coalition of moderate and leftist parties. Two days later, on November 11, an armistice ended the war and the guns fell silent.

We get glimpses of the chaotic aftermath of the war in Berlin, the German capital, in the following passages. They are from the diary of a German nobleman, Count Harry Kessler. Active in one of Germany's centrist, or moderate, political parties, Kessler sympathized with some of the revolutionaries' goals and was strongly critical of the departed emperor. His writings show the profound shock of the defeat on the German people and describe the political chaos that followed the war. Not until 1924 did Germany enter a period of stability. This period would be cut short by the rise to power of Adolph Hitler and the Nazis in 1933.

Saturday, 9 November 1918

The Emperor has abdicated (given up his power). Revolution has won the day in Berlin. This morning, as I left home, I saw a soldier preaching to a crowd...

At ten o'clock p.m. I went with two others to the Reichstag (the building in which the German parliament met)...In front of the main entrance, and in an arc of light provided by the headlights of several army vehicles, stood a crowd waiting for news...

Inside groups of soldiers and sailors stood and lay about on the enormous red carpet and among the pillars of the lobby. Rifles had been stacked. Here and there some individual was stretched full length and asleep on a bench. It was like a film of the Russian Revolution...

We...climbed two or three floors to a committee room where a woman, apparently the wife of a Reichstag member, was issuing identification papers. I received...a card according to which, as "bearer of this credential," I am authorized "to maintain order and security in the streets of the city"...I have become, so to speak, a policeman in the Red Guard. I was also given an identity card certifying on the part of the Workers' and Soldiers' Council that I am "trustworthy and free to pass..."

I...walked in the direction of the palace, from which the sound of isolated shots still came...patrols all around; they challenged and let me through...A sentry told me that "young rascals" are still hidden in the palace and the stables. There are secret passages through which they disappear and reappear. A coupe of officers and a few loyalist soldiers were still firing from a house...At an intersection I saw small mobs...which reassembled as often as the soldiers broke them up. A sergeant said they were waiting for the chance to loot; they must be cleared out. Slowly I made my way home.

It was close to one o'clock when I got home. So closes this first day of revolution which has witnessed in a few hours the downfall of the Hohenzollerns (royal family), the breakup of the German

Army, and the end of the old order of society in Germany. Once of the most memorable and dreadful days in German history...

Monday, 11 November 1918

Today the dreadfully armistice terms have been signed. Langwerth (a German diplomat) says that anything else was out of the question: our Front has cracked completely. The Emperor has fled to Holland.

Tuesday, 12 November 1918

...In the city everything is peaceful today and the factories are working again...Noteworthy is that during the days of revolution, the streetcars...ran regularly. Nor did the electricity, water, or telephone services break down for a moment. The revolution never created more than a swirl in the ordinary life of the city which flowed calmly along on its customary course. Moreover, though there was so much shooting, there were remarkable few dead or wounded. The colossal, world-shaking upheaval has scurried across Berlin's day-to-day life much like an incident in a crime film...

Thursday, 14 November 1918

...At one o'clock as I was walking down Unter den Linden, the palace guard approached...carrying revolutionary flags...A second tune they played sounded like a funeral march and cut me to the quick. I thought of lost Alsace (Region on the French-German border that Germany took from France in 1871 and lost in World War I) and the French left bank of the Rhine. How are our feelings about that ever to be salvaged? However fine the League of Nations may prove to be, this is a wound it can but keep open...

Sunday, 16 February 1919

Today's newspapers publish the Entente's (alliance led by Britain and France against Germany) League of Nations plan. A bundle of barren legal paragraphs animated by the old spirit and barely disguising the imperialist intention of a number of states to enslave and make their defeated enemies poor. What should our reaction be? Rejection would only be possible on the basis of a better plan which dealt with the whole question from a broader and more profound aspect, from a human and not merely judicial legal angle, and provided a convincing solution. A mistake that leaps to the eye is that the plan has originated with states...that are by nature rivals...

Easter Sunday, 20 April 1919

...Yesterday's arrival of the Entente's impertinent summons (demanding immediate German acceptance of the Treaty of Versailles on a take-it-or-leave-it basis) and our contemptuous answer have created so critical a situation that the government must make some positive counter-proposals immediately.

Sunday, 22 June 1919

The head of German's government has resigned. The new Bauer Cabinet proposes to sign the peace treaty under protest and with reservations. These relate to acknowledgment of Germany's sole war-guilt and the handing over for trial of the Emperor as well as other so-called criminals.

The German navy...has scuttled its ships.

This evening I have been indescribably depressed, as though the entire sap of life has dried up inside me.

Monday, 23 January 1919

This morning students and sailors removed the French flags we are supposed to surrender from the Arsenal and burned them in front of the statue of Frederick the Great.

This afternoon, since the Entente has declined to accept our signature under the reservation, the military leaders have announced their resistance to the Government, the Center Party has withdrawn its agreement to signature, and the Government has decided to resign. This evening the ultimatum a demand by the Entente that Germany sign at once expires. The tension is terrific. Very oppressive weather. Counter-revolution, war, insurrection threaten us like a nearing thunderstorm...

Saturday, 10 January 1920

Today the Peace Treaty was ratified at Paris; the war is over. A terrible era begins for Europe, like the gathering of clouds before a storm, and it will end in an explosion probably still more terrible than that of the World War. In Germany there are all the signs of a continuing growth of nationalism.

Review Questions

1. Why did the German emperor give up his throne?
2. Why did Harry Kessler call the first day of the revolution "one of the most memorable and dreadful days in German history"?
3. Why was Kessler critical of the plan for the League of Nations?
4. What was meant by "sign the peace treaty under protest and with reservations"?
5. What was Kessler's prediction about the effect of the peace treaty on Germany and its people?