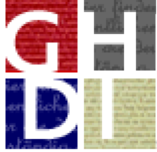

German History in Documents and Images

Volume 6. Weimar Germany, 1918/19–1933
Arnold Brecht on the Final Weeks of the War (Retrospective Account, 1966)

In September 1918, after months and years of propagating Germany's military victories, the Supreme Army Command suddenly demanded the negotiation of an armistice with the Allies and the formation of a new government on the basis of parliamentary principles. Its motivation was two-fold: while the command wanted to ensure that the army remained intact, Erich Ludendorff also calculated that including representatives of the Reichstag majority parties (the Social Democratic Party, the Center Party, and the Left-Liberal Party) in the government would allow him to shift the responsibility for an armistice onto them. Prince Max von Baden was appointed Reich chancellor on October 3, 1918; thereafter, he appointed representatives of the majority parties to his cabinet in order to facilitate a ceasefire on the basis of Wilson's Fourteen Points. A slow democratic transition ensued, stimulated both by the demands of the United States and the democratic inclinations of the major parties. On October 28, 1918, the German constitution was amended to make the country a more robust parliamentary democracy.

At this time [end of September 1918] the action moved into a new phase. Whereas the High Command had originally wanted diplomatic steps towards a peace settlement postponed until the military position was consolidated, they now requested that an offer of peace should go out immediately because of acute danger in the military situation. On October 1st a series of telegrams and telephone conversations issued from general headquarters with the same content: "Troops hold the line today; what might happen tomorrow not foreseeable." The offer of peace "should be sent off at once and not wait until the formation of the new government which might be protracted." "Front line kept intact today and we are in a worthy (*würdigen*) position, but a break-through could follow at any time and then our offer would come at the most unfavorable moment." And later in the evening: "General Ludendorff told me [Baron von Lersner] that our offer must go out immediately from Berlin to Washington. The army cannot wait another 48 hours. ... The General emphasized that the offer must be in the hands of the Entente at the latest by Wednesday evening or Thursday morning and requests your Excellency to take all possible steps." On the same afternoon Hindenburg sent word to Vice Chancellor von Payer that, if it was certain by seven or eight o'clock the same evening that Prince Max would form a government, they could wait until the following morning; if, however, the formation of the new government seemed to remain in any way doubtful, then he advised issuing the peace offer that same evening.

Prince Max of Baden objected that in this form and at the moment of a hard-pressed military position the peace move would clearly have a very unfavorable influence on the German

situation in the negotiations. He reported, October 11: “On the evening of October 1 the position as Chancellor had been offered him along with the demand that he immediately requested Wilson’s mediation; that he had opposed this and had wanted to wait at least one week, in order to consolidate the new government and avoid the impression that we were making our request for mediation merely because of a military collapse.”

On October 2 General Ludendorff asked for a draft of the note and in the afternoon himself had a wording telephoned through, which on the whole coincided with the final text. Prince Max, however, still had misgivings. On October 3 he drew up a written list of preliminary questions, including the following: “Is the High Command aware that the commencement of peace moves while under the pressure of a military situation of no free choice (*Zwangslage*) could lead to the loss of German colonies and German territory, in particular Alsace-Lorraine and areas in the eastern provinces with chiefly Polish population?” On the same day Hindenburg, then present in Berlin, sent the Chancellor once again the written statement: “The High Command reaffirms its demand for the immediate dispatch of an offer of peace.” Under this pressure the note was sent off on the night of 3rd to 4th October. In the course of the 3rd, Hindenburg and Prince Max had also discussed the dispatch of the note orally. (In the appendix to this book a letter from Prince Max to me on this conversation is published for the first time.)

Before the answer arrived the Chancellor reported to his Cabinet on October 6, as the minutes show: “I have resisted note, firstly because I considered the moment too early, secondly because I wanted to appeal to the enemy in general. Now we must consider the consequences calmly. Now ... the situation on the front must be ascertained by experienced officers ... the leaders of the [several] armies must be listened to.” The Cabinet members expressed similar opinions. They obviously suspected that Ludendorff might have misjudged the military situation because of a nervous breakdown. Ludendorff, however, saw in consultations with other generals a sign of distrust and threatened his resignation, from which the Cabinet feared an acceleration of the collapse. A plan for a *levée en masse,* allegedly proposed by Walther Rathenau in *Vossische Zeitung,* was discussed, but dropped because military leaders, especially Ludendorff, did not expect much of it.[1]

Wilson’s answer came on October 5. It demanded a more definite statement that Germany accept the President’s points in the sense that on entering the discussions an agreement had to be reached only on the practical details of their application. Secondly, it demanded Germany’s withdrawal from the areas occupied by her, and, thirdly, raised questions about the controlling authorities in Germany.

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[1] The words *levée en masse* are in fact not used in Rathenau’s article (“A Dark Day,” *Vossische Zeitung,* Nr. 512, October 7, 1918). What he recommended was that, in the case of an unsatisfactory answer from Wilson, troops should be methodically regrouped, soldiers on leave or serving at home be sent to the Western Front, older volunteers should replace soldiers in physically less demanding positions, and General Ludendorff should be replaced. The article contains a remarkably accurate forecast of Wilson’s reply and of the final results. Cf. Walther Rathenau, *Briefe,* vol. 2, nos. 435, 438, 450, 452, 467, 480, 518, and 580 on this article.

In a conference on October 9 Colonel Heye stated again: “It would mean playing a game of chance (*Hasardspiel*) on the part of the High Command if they failed to expedite the peace move. It may be that we could hold out until the spring, but again, a turning point may come any day. Yesterday fate hung by a thread— whether or not a break-through would succeed. Troops have no rest any more. Not possible to calculate whether they will hold or not. Every day new surprises. I do not fear a catastrophe, but would like to save the army, so that we still have it as a means of pressure during the peace negotiations.”

Ludendorff chimed in, taking the point of view that Germany need not accept every demand, that in particular a possible demand for a surrender of German fortresses might be rejected. But his answers to the question as to how much longer it was possible to resist were wavering and uncertain. To the question whether the front could be held another three months, Ludendorff answered no, and to the question of Prince Max: “In case present peace moves fail and both our two remaining allies withdraw, would it be possible for us to continue the war alone?” he gave the heavily conditioned answer: “If there were a pause in the fighting in the west, yes.”

The German reply to Wilson’s answer was issued with the full consent of the High Command. Wilson’s second note of October 15 was considerably more severe. For the first time a distinction was made between peace and armistice; the conditions for the latter were to be left to the judgment and counsel of the military advisers. The note also spoke of unlawful and inhuman practices on the part of the German fighting forces and stated that the realization of peace would depend upon the definiteness and satisfactory nature of the guarantees Germany would be able to give on her internal power structure. The consternation this note caused everywhere in Germany and especially its effect upon the army were manifest. Emotional opposition was stirred, pride reared up, and the High Command wanted to back out. The grave question now arose whether it was at all possible to back out, since the disclosure of the unfavorable situation after four years of official assertions that victory was certain had in the meantime had its effect both at home and abroad.

The relative positions taken by the High Command and the civil government now changed. The High Command asked whether the German people would rally once more in a supreme effort to the last, or whether their moral power of resistance was exhausted. Foreign Secretary Solf saw in this question an attempt to shift responsibility. “Why then is there such a depressed mood? Because military power has collapsed. But now we are told: military power will collapse unless the general morale is upheld. This escape should not be permitted. ...”

On October 17 three conferences followed. In the second the situation was discussed in all its aspects. Ludendorff expressed himself in a more optimistic manner about the possibility of holding out during the coming weeks. But his indefinite and changing statements did not arouse complete confidence in the face of the facts mentioned. [. . .]

To the summing-up question whether the Western Front, if strengthened by the transfer of forces from the east—a possibility which was yet doubtful—would still stand in three months’

time, Ludendorff answered: “I have already told the Chancellor that I consider a break-through possible, but not probable. I feel no inward probability about the break-through. If you ask me on my conscience, I can only answer: I do not fear it.” When reminded of his own earlier statements he answered: “Today too matters are such that we can be broken through and defeated any day. The day before yesterday things went well; things could also turn out badly.”

[. . .]

At the end of the session the logical thread of the Chancellor’s way of thinking became clear. He pointed out that even according to Ludendorff’s most far-reaching hopes—which Prince Max apparently did not share—the war could be continued for only a limited period, that in the meantime the defection of the two remaining allies must be reckoned with and that so the question arose: would matters be better or worse at the end than at present? Ludendorff held that there were no worse conditions.

LUDENDORFF: “I feel that before we accept conditions which are too hard we should say to the enemy: fight to gain them.”

THE CHANCELLOR: “And when he has won the fight for them, will he not present even worse ones?”

LUDENDORFF: “There are no worse ones.”

THE CHANCELLOR: “Oh yes, they may invade Germany and devastate the country.”

LUDENDORFF: “Things have not yet gone that far.”

The last words evaded the Chancellor’s logical point. For the possibility of resistance was uncertain even in the opinion of Ludendorff, and the question was precisely what the political situation would be after further vain resistance. The Chancellor manifestly proceeded from the realistic point of view that the enemy’s conditions could become even worse. True, from Wilson’s last note it was to be expected that the conditions of the armistice would be severe and offensive. Even this note, however, maintained the President’s points for the peace treaty. Should Germany be at all capable of continuing the war for a few more months, then after an unfortunate outcome present terms would be lost. Not only that, but death and misery would have continued to rage fearfully. Belgium and Northern France would be destroyed in battles on the retreat and then the devastation would be brought back home. France and Belgium also trembled at the thought of the destruction further advances would bring with them. Here the German government saw a strong point.

The German answer went out on October 20, this time in disagreement with the High Command, in particular in regard to the discontinuance of submarine warfare. In a conference with German representatives abroad the latter had unanimously declared themselves in favor of yielding to

President Wilson's demands in the question of submarines. Hope was expressed that no American passenger ship would be torpedoed at this time. But right at this moment the news that the "Leinster" had been torpedoed was received, aggravating the hostile mood in the United States.

[. . .]

At about this time Wilson's third note arrived. It ended with passages in which the President once again expressed doubts about the structure of power within Germany. As a result of this note, from the time of my entry into the Chancellery, the issue of the Kaiser's abdication moved into the center of debates.

On October 28 an amendment to the Constitution was promulgated, which had been introduced with the approval of the Kaiser and accepted by both Bundesrat and Reichstag. In only a few lines it radically altered the entire constitutional structure of Germany. The Chancellor was no longer to be selected by the Kaiser alone, but required the confidence of the Reichstag and could be overthrown by it. The same was to apply to the Prussian Minister of War, since the Reich, having no Department of War of its own, conducted its military affairs through the Prussian Minister. This amendment transformed Germany constitutionally from a semi-autocratic monarchy into a parliamentary democracy with a monarch as its nominal head. If this form of constitution had existed before the beginning of the war, then the unification of leadership in military and civil affairs in Germany would have been possible and likely, as happened in the United States, Great Britain, and France. But neither abroad nor in Germany did people recognize the almost revolutionary event of this legal textual amendment. A more visible expression of change had become necessary. Wilson had hinted at this in his last note, and in Germany demands for the abdication of the Kaiser were being widely expressed.

At that time there originated the plan that the Kaiser and the Crown Prince should abdicate voluntarily in favor of Prince Wilhelm, the twelve-year-old son of the Crown Prince, and that a Regent should head the government until the Prince came of age, that is, for six years (eighteen was the age at which a member of the royal house could take over the royal functions according to the domestic law of the Hohenzollerns). During these six years the practice of democracy could become living reality, without the necessity of giving up the form of monarchy to which people were accustomed.

Source of English translation: Arnold Brecht, *The Political Education of Arnold Brecht, An Autobiography 1884-1970*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970, pp. 82-88.

Source of original German text: Arnold Brecht, *Aus nächster Nähe, Lebenserinnerungen 1884-1927*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1966, pp. 154-62.