**Today is 7th May 2019, and OTD in history 100 years ago occurred the following events…**

Of all the scenes which graced the PPC, that one which saw the Germans confronted with the terms of the peace treaty for the first time have to be up there with the most weighted and dramatic. HN was uncharacteristically subdued about the significance of the moment: ‘Peace Treaty presented to Germans at Trianon Palace Hotel’ was all that his diary revealed about the moment, which suggests that he wasn’t present at the time.[[1]](#footnote-1) In case we needed a refresher, the historian Thomas A. Bailey summarised the steps leading up to this significant moment in the afternoon of 7th May 1919, writing:

The German delegates had arrived [on 29th April], but still there was no treaty. The explanation is that during the closing days of April the Fiume and Shantung crises came to a head, and for a while it seemed as though there would be nothing to present to the Germans. Agreement was finally reached, and the various parts of the Treaty on which the numerous committees had been working were thrown together and sent to the printer. The first printed copies were not available until the early morning of May 7, 1919 – the day of the presentation of the pact to the German delegates. It is an almost incredible fact that probably no single one of the Allied statesmen had read the Treaty as a whole until the day it was handed to the Germans.[[2]](#footnote-2)

This was a significant day indeed, and it had been due for some time, and delayed many times as well. House noted in his diary in the evening of 7th May that:

It is strange that the presentation of the Treaty to the Germans should occur on the anniversary of the sinking of the Lusitania. This was not by design but by chance, for we hoped to present it last week and again on Monday or Tuesday of this week.

Notwithstanding the difficulties in reaching this point, it was hard to deny that with the presentation of this treaty to the Germans, a watershed moment would have passed. Theoretically at least, the allies would now be on the home stretch of peace-making, but first they had to get to Versailles. House recorded that:

I started for Versailles shortly after two o'clock. I drove very rapidly and made what is usually a forty to forty-five minute trip in a half hour. Clemenceau and a few others were already there. Balfour soon followed with the other members of the British Delegation. Orlando and Sonnino came in shortly after and I suggested to Balfour that we walk down the hall to meet them. This seemed to please the Italians very much.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Of course, it had been stated before but the point deserves reiterating, Clemenceau had not accidentally selected Versailles as the location for either this formal presentation of the peace treaty, or as the location for the final signature of the peace treaty. Symbolism in the Franco-German relationship had punctuated the PPC several times already, so it was hardly much surprise when the palace of Louis XIV, and the location for the proclamation of the German Empire was chosen as the place where WG would be humbled, and the allied triumph proclaimed. Debate had raged among the German delegation over what kind of tone they should use. BR was told on 6th May that the following day he would be presented with the treaty’s terms, and he since learned from sketches and reports that he would be sitting at a table in the centre of the room, as the eyes of all present in the plenary conference looked down at him.

BR actually brought two different speeches with him to the plenary conference on the afternoon of 7th May, one was non-committal and short, the other longer and more defiant, but by no means explosive. By this stage, the Germans had not learned of the terms of the Treaty, even though they had grasped onto rumours. The appearance of BR before the plenary conference would be the first opportunity he would have to speak in the name of his country, and the scene promised to be thick with significance and anxiety. Certainly, poor BR shook all the way to the Trianon Palace at Versailles. The room which BR walked into was positively jammed; a German journalist later recorded that ‘only Indians and Australian aborigines were absent among the races of the earth’, and the comment seemed appropriate when one considered the manner and range of peoples present. Were they really all here to judge BR and the country he represented? Not really, because such judgement had already been passed, and it lay in the treaty which would soon be symbolically handed over to the Germans.

By 3PM, everyone was seated and ready in the great hall, except the Polish premier and pianist, Paderewski, House recalled, ‘who, as usual, came in late. He evidently cannot get it out of his head that he is not giving one of his great concerts in which the audience is always supposed to be seated before he enters.’[[4]](#footnote-4) As TR entered the room, a witness described that he looked ‘ill, drawn and nervous’, which was hardly a surprise. It was all down to BR to represent his country to the allies, and he had still not decided what tone he was going to take with them. He would surely have felt like a lamb given to slaughter, but he did his utmost to maintain his composure as a statesman and minister of government. In an unusual echo of the old world, those present rose to their feet as BR entered the room, and both BR and GC bowed to each other before the session began. When the session did actually begin, BR had already started with a bang before he had uttered a word, because he remained seated the entire time. Various interpretations have come through to explain why he did so; a simple reason is that the man continued to shake before, throughout and after the ordeal, and he may have feared for his reputation if such shaking had been detected. A possibility is that he determined to sit in an effort to stick it to the assembled allies, but whatever his reasoning, the move added significant weight to the negative impression he made.

Clemenceau, as president of the gathering, was the only figure to speak – so the allies expected at this point, since there was no guarantee BR would speak after his representatives symbolically received the treaty. The French premier gave no hint of emotion, other than coldness, and he harboured none of the nerves which racked BR, which could serve as a further explain why the German FM determined to sit. Due to the importance of this speech, which was delivered OTD 100 years ago, I believe it is important to bring it you in its entirety. Like everything else which comes from the minutes of these meetings, I must give a shout out to the FRUS papers, which are freely available online. Let’s detail what the French premier said:

Gentlemen, this can be neither the time nor the place for superfluous words. You see before you the accredited Representatives of the Allied and Associated Powers, both small and great, which have waged without intermission for more than four years the pitiless war which was imposed on them. The hour has struck for the weighty settlement of our accounts. You asked us for peace. We are disposed to grant it to you. This volume, which the Secretary-General of the Conference will shortly hand to you, will tell you the conditions which we have fixed. Every facility which you may require for examining its text will be granted to you, including of course the usages of courtesy commonly practised among all civilized peoples. In order to acquaint you with another aspect of my thought, I am compelled to add that this Second Peace of Versailles, which is about to become the subject of our discussion, has been too dearly bought by the peoples represented here for us not to be unanimously resolved to secure by every means in our power all the legitimate satisfactions which are our due. I will now make the Plenipotentiaries aware of the procedure in regard to discussions which has been adopted. If, thereupon, anyone desires to offer any remarks, he will, of course, be permitted to speak. There will be no oral discussions, and their observations must be furnished in writing. The German Plenipotentiaries have a period of fifteen days within which to hand in their written observations, both in French and English, on the Treaty as a whole, the headings of which are as follows [Clemenceau then essentially read out the contents page of the TOV, before resuming his speech] Before this period of fifteen days expires the German Delegates will be entitled to send their replies or to put questions in regard to these matters. The Supreme Council, after examining the observations which may be furnished within the period laid down, will send a written reply to the German Delegation, stating the period within which it must hand in its final reply on all questions. I will add that, when the Plenipotentiaries of the German Empire have given us a written reply, let us say within two, three, four, or five days, we shall of course not await the expiration of the fifteen days’ delay before acquainting them in turn with our answer. In order to lose no time, the discussion will be started as soon as possible in the form which I have described. If anyone has remarks to make in this connection, we shall be at his disposal, as soon as this speech has been translated.

This speech was then translated first into English and then into German, and the recently completed and printed text of the Conditions of Peace was handed to the principal German Plenipotentiary by the Secretary-General of the Peace Conference. Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau whom we met in episode 60, then read out in German the following statement. At BR’s request, his statement was translated, sentence by sentence, first into French and then into English. This exhaustive process cannot have endeared him to his audience, but it was the content of his speech that represented the true dynamite. It was a rebuke of such allied terms as had never been anticipated – the arrogance, condescension and ignorance of their position, the allies would feel, was clearly on display here. The German FM had decided to go with the longer, more defiant speech, and all while seated before this room full of delegates. The allies were only made aware of BR’s intention to make a speech when Clemenceau asked the room if anyone wished to speak; the other well-behaved delegates remained silent, but BR put up his hand. Perhaps out of a sheer sense of morbid curiosity, Clemenceau allowed BR to speak, but if he was feeling generous, he quickly became enraged. Any latent sympathy which Germany might have had was effectively erased by BR here, and as we did with Clemenceau’s opening speech before him, the weight of the moment compels me to read out what BR said, OTD 100 years ago, in full. BR said:

Gentlemen, we are deeply impressed with the lofty character of the task which has brought us together with you, namely, to give the world a speedy and enduring peace. We cherish no illusions as to the extent of our defeat—the degree of our impotence. We know that the might of German arms is broken. We know the force of the hatred which confronts us here, and we have heard the passionate demand that the victors should both make us pay as vanquished and punish us as guilty. We are required to admit that we alone are war-guilty; such an admission on my lips would be a lie. We are far from seeking to exonerate Germany from all responsibility for the fact that this world war broke out and was waged as it was. The attitude of the former German Government at the Hague Peace Conferences, their actions and omissions in the tragic twelve days of July, may have contributed to the calamity, but we emphatically combat the idea that Germany, whose people were convinced that they were waging a defensive war, should alone be laden with the guilt. None of us will wish to assert that the calamity dates only from the fateful moment when the Heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary fell a victim to the assassin’s hand. During the last fifty years the imperialism of all European States has chronically poisoned the international situation. The policy of retaliation and that of expansion as well as disregard of the rights of peoples to self-determination, contributed to the disease of Europe, which reached its crisis in the world war. The Russian mobilization deprived statesmen of the possibility of affecting a cure and placed the decision in the hands of the military authorities. Public opinion in all the countries of our adversaries is echoing with the crimes which Germany is alleged to have committed during the war. Here, again, we are ready to acknowledge wrong which has been done. We have not come here to belittle the responsibility of the men who conducted the war politically and economically, and to disown breaches of international law which have been actually committed. We repeat the declaration which was made in the German Reichstag at the beginning of the war: wrong has been done to Belgium and we wish to redress it. Moreover, as regards the methods of conducting the war, Germany was not alone at fault. Every European nation knows of deeds and persons on whose memory their best citizens are reluctant to dwell. I do not wish to answer reproaches with reproaches, but if it is from us that penance is demanded, then the Armistice must not be forgotten. Six weeks passed before we obtained it, and six months before we learnt your conditions of Peace. Crimes in war may not be excusable, but they are committed in the struggle for victory, in anxiety to preserve national existence, in a heat of passion which blunts the conscience of nations. The hundreds of thousands of non-combatants who have perished since the 11th November through the blockade were killed with cold deliberation, after victory had been won and assured to our adversaries. Think of that, when you speak of guilt and atonement. The measure of the guilt of all participants can only be determined by an impartial inquiry by a neutral Commission, before which all the principal actors in the tragedy should have their say, and to which all records should be disclosed. We have demanded such an inquiry and we repeat the demand. Though we stand alone at this Conference, without Allies, and confronted by our numerous adversaries, yet we are not defenceless. You yourselves have brought us an ally: Justice, which was guaranteed to us by the agreement relating to the bases of Peace. Between the 5th October and 5th November, 1918, the Allied and Associated Governments abandoned the idea of a peace of violence and inscribed the words ‘Peace of Justice’ on their banner. On the 5th October, 1918, the German Government put forward the principles of the President of the United States of America as a basis of Peace, and was informed on the 5th November by Mr. Lansing, Secretary of State, that the Allied and Associated Powers had accepted this basis with two specific reservations. President Wilson’s principles therefore became binding upon both belligerent parties – upon you as well as upon us, and also upon our former allies. These principles taken individually demand of us grievous national and economic sacrifices; but the sacred and fundamental rights of all nations are protected by this agreement. The conscience of the world is behind it; no nation will be permitted to violate it with impunity. On this basis you will find us prepared to examine the Peace Preliminaries which you lay before us, with the fixed purpose of sharing with you the common task of rebuilding that which has been destroyed, of righting the wrongs that have been done, first and foremost the wrong done to Belgium, and of pointing mankind to new goals of political and social progress. In view of the bewildering number of the problems which beset the fulfilment of our common purpose, we ought to refer the principal questions individually at the earliest possible moment to special Commissions of experts, for discussion on the basis of the draft presented by you. In this connection it will be our chief task to build up anew the shattered human energy of the nations concerned, by international protection of the life, health, and liberty of the working classes. I consider our next aim to be the restoration of the territory of Belgium and Northern France, which were occupied by us and devastated by the war. We solemnly accepted the obligation to do this, and are determined to carry it out to such extent as may be agreed upon between us. To do this we are thrown back on the cooperation of our former adversaries. We cannot complete the task without the technical and financial participation of the victors; you can only carry it through with our aid. It must be the desire of impoverished Europe that reconstruction should be carried out as successfully and economically as possible. This desire, however, can only be fulfilled by means of a clear and business-like understanding in regard to the best methods. The worst method would be to continue to have the work done by German prisoners of war. Such labour is certainly cheap. It would, however, cost the world dear, if hate and despair were aroused in the German people at the thought of their captive sons, brothers, and fathers continuing to languish in their former bondage after the Peace Preliminaries. We can attain to no enduring Peace without the immediate settlement of this question, which has dragged on far too long already. Our experts on both sides will have to study how the German people can best meet its obligation of financial reparation without breaking down under the heavy load. Such a collapse would deprive those entitled to compensation of the advantages to which they have a claim, and would entail irreparable confusion in European economic existence as a whole. Both victors and vanquished must be on their guard against this threatening danger and its incalculable consequences. There is only one way of warding it off: unreserved recognition of the economic and social solidarity of peoples, of a free and comprehensive League of Nations. Gentlemen, the lofty conception that the most terrible calamity in the history of the world should bring about the greatest advance in human progress has been formulated and will be realized. If the goal is to be attained, if the slain in this war are not to have died in vain, then the portals of the League of Nations must be thrown open to all peoples of good will. The German nation is earnestly prepared to accommodate itself to its hard lot, provided the foundations agreed upon for peace remain unshaken. A Peace which cannot be defended in the name of justice before the whole world would continually call forth fresh resistance. No one could sign it with a clear conscience, for it would be impossible of fulfilment. No one could undertake the guarantee of fulfilment which its signature would imply. We will examine the document submitted to us with all good will, and in the hope that the final result of our meeting can be subscribed by us all.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The whole act had left an appalling impression on those present; even though one could argue that BR hadn't been terribly provocative or controversial, his refusal to lie down and take Clemenceau’s barbs meant that he was guaranteed to come under fire, and come under fire he certainly did. LG reportedly broke a pen in half while listening to him; it was likely his presentation as much as his content that did the damage to non-German speakers, since his speech was, don’t forget, translated line by line as he said it. This dragged out the whole process, and made BR appear even more demanding and arrogant. Again, it must be emphasised that even the act of sitting down would have really stuck in the craw of the allies. ‘This is the most tactless speech I ever heard’, WW said afterwards, ‘The Germans are really a stupid people. They always do the wrong thing.’ ‘It was deplorable that we let him talk’, added LG, in agreement. Lord Balfour was among the minority who did not take the scene so personally – ‘I make it a rule never to stare at people when they are in obvious distress’, declared the British FS to HN shortly afterwards, but he was certainly in the minority in that respect. Those present had stared, and almost inevitably had taken offense. Indeed, it seems likely that any stance other than complete capitulation would have offended allied opinion.

If the allies were offended by BR’s brazen performance, then they were fortunate to be out of earshot from the shaken German FM when the actual terms of the TOV were learned of, as the German delegates spent the next 24 pouring over every last detail of the treaty and their fury grew and grew. When one enraged German delegate erupted the next morning by exclaiming over the telephone to Berlin ‘The Saar basin…Poland, Silesia…123 milliards to pay and for all that we are supposed to say “thank you very much”’ he shouted so loudly that the French secret service were unable to make out his words. When the Germans gathered together at midnight for a quick meal, they were still buzzing over the contents of the Treaty; ‘all our colonies’, ‘Germany to be left out of the League’, ‘almost the whole Merchant Fleet’, ‘if that’s what Wilson calls *open diplomacy*’. As they sat, a troubled German stumbled into the room ‘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 believed in Wilson until today.’

Gustav Noske, Germany’s minister for defence, and a key player in the suppression of the Spartacist revolt, was more confrontational; ‘Well, I’ll give you some open diplomacy. You Americans go home and bury yourself with your Wilson’, he barked at an American journalist in Weimar. With the publication of these terms, Wilson’s image was transformed in Germany from the potential saviour of the country, who had helped broker its exit from the war with a fair deal, to traitor, an opportunist, and a hypocrite. The resentment remained fierce well after 1919; when WW died in 1924, the German embassy in Washington even refused to lower its flag.[[6]](#footnote-6)

For the next fortnight, Germany and Germans would be electrified by the news of their final peace treaty, but should they really have been so surprised? Germany’s foreign office, in imagining the worst aspects of the peace, had actually mentally prepared itself for a desperate scenario involving total occupation of the Rhineland and reparations of 60 billion marks. Remember, at this point, the Germans were required to sign a ‘blank cheque’ for reparations, though 20 billion was also required to pay for the provisions and staffing by the allied powers. The reaction seems explained by the fact that while they had prepared for the worst, the Germans had hoped for the best. ‘The Germans have nothing left but hope’, remarked an American observer in April 1919, continuing:

But having only that I think they have clung to it – the Hope that the Americans would do something, the hope that the final terms would not be so severe as the Armistice indicated and so on. Subconsciously, I think the Germans have been more optimistic than they realise…when they see the terms in cold print, there will be intense bitterness, hate and desperation.

Within a few days, an additional outrage was being expressed on one article in particular – article 231, which was to become, as we know, the war guilt clause. When young lawyer John Foster Dulles had helped craft that article, the understanding was that its purpose was to establish the legal basis for Germany’s payment of reparations into the future. Rather than focus on the ‘damage’ aspect of the article though, the Germans zeroed in on the ‘full responsibility’ aspect. The allies had already been given a hint that such a clause would run into difficulties – in his speech, delivered OTD 100 years ago, BR had declared that ‘We are required to admit that we alone are war-guilty; such an admission on my lips would be a lie. We are far from seeking to exonerate Germany from all responsibility for the fact that this world war broke out and was waged as it was’, and BR added that while Wilhelm’s government may have ‘contributed to the calamity’, but ‘we emphatically combat the idea that Germany, whose people were convinced that they were waging a defensive war, should alone be laden with the guilt.’ These expressions had been based on a speech which he had prepared, before he had even seen the actual terms, and it confirms that rumours about blaming Germany were swirling around, even if not all Germans could bring themselves to believe them.

It is important again to emphasise the point that the Germans took this ball of war guilt and ran with it. While it may appear like a needlessly technical detail, it’s important to underline the fact that the allies did not want to blame Germany for the outbreak of the war; they wanted to blame her for causing all the damage to the allies, so as to support calls for reparations. To add to this, we must bear in mind that Austria and Hungary’s peace treaties contained similar articles on responsibility for damage, but neither Vienna nor Budapest’s governments got so worked up about the issue. Perhaps if article 231 had been the only unpalatable element of the Treaty, it would have caused less of a fuss, but upon reading it after digesting so many other scandalous terms, German experts interpreted it as merely one more nail in the coffin of justice. This was the view of Zara Steiner, whose epic tome *The Lights That Failed* examined the interwar years in the context of the gathering storm of the SWW. Steiner concluded:

The chaos in the process of peacemaking could hardly have failed to affect its substance. In the end, the last-minute rush of work overwhelmed the co-ordinating committee created to check through the whole draft treaty, a document of over 200 pages with 440 articles, which consequently failed to eliminate the inevitable inconsistencies. The Council of Four never reviewed the draft treaty in its entirety. Members of the victor delegations saw the text only a few hours before it was given to the Germans, and it was only then that the harshness of its terms was recognized. The Germans ended up being presented on 7 May with a draft treaty to which they were given fifteen days to make a written response. Any change of substance, it was feared, could unravel the whole treaty. The peacemakers' difficulties were far from over.[[7]](#footnote-7)

As was so often the case with the PPC, one watershed moment, one optimistic new step towards resolution, became within a short period, yet another chapter in the saga of squabbling, anxiety and counterattack. They had waited nearly five months to do it, OTD 100 years ago, the terms of what would be known as the TOV had finally been communicated to the Germans, but the final phase of the peace-making process was only beginning.

1. Nicolson, *Peace-making 1919*, p. 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Thomas A. Bailey, *Wilson and the Peacemakers: Combining Woodrow Wilson and the Lost Peace and Woodrow Wilson and the Great Betrayal* (New York: Macmillan, 1947), p. 286. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Extracts from Edward Mandell House Papers, Series II, Diaries, Volume 7, pp. 192-193. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, p. 194. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This day’s tumultuous events are provided in full by FRUS, THE PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE, 1919, VOLUME III; Peace Congress (Versailles), Protocol No. 1, Plenary Session of May 7, 1919 under the heading: The Presentation of the Conditions of Peace to the German Delegates. Throughout the extract, page numbers were inserted, but have been removed for ease of access. Please note that the speeches can be accessed in their entirety from the appropriate website: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1919Parisv03/d11 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, pp. 473-475. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zara Steiner, *The Lights That Failed: European International History, 1919-1933* (Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 19. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)