Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to episode 60 of the VAP. In the last episode, we saw how the LON was crafted and established, being presented in its final form to the plenary conference of nations in Paris, on 28th April 1919. This was an auspicious day indeed, and while HN took the time to record that it ‘poured with rain’, there was no shortage of optimism that this represented a brave new step in the right direction for international relations. The question was though, could this brave new step receive the ratification of WW’s allies and rivals in Congress, and a further question asked whether the League could withstand the initial shocks which the post-war world threatened to inflict in it? Such tests would be encountered in time, but the very next day, an incredibly significant step towards the final peace treaty was reached, when the German delegation finally arrived in Paris. The journey had been long and weighted with anticipation over the treatment they could expect from the allies.

Rumours abounded over how severe or reasonable the allies would be, but the Germans, either way, represented the first face of the former foe to be presented with the portions of the Treaty that had been worked on for the past four months. The question mark of whether the Germans would accept these terms was one thing; the additional question mark of whether the allies would have the final treaty crafted in time for the Germans to view and review it, was quite another. In sum, both questions boiled down to a significant point – that this was a watershed moment in the history of peace-making, so why did it feel so haphazard, so uninspired, and so unsatisfying? It was a good question, amidst a sea of question in the final few days of April 1919. After staying on the outside for so long, these few Germans were about to step into the world which the allies had occupied for more than 100 days. The shock which followed was something to behold, and I will now take you to that scene, as a German delegation makes its way gradually to the room of their conquerors…

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Of all the decisions made during the PPC, pinning down the moment when it was decided to actually the invite the Germans to take part in the proceedings proved one of the more surprisingly difficult tasks on my to do list. In many narratives, the Germans simply go from not being there, to arriving on 29th April, as though part of some automatic timetable which had been agreed months before. In fact, as we know, the Germans had no official representation at Paris throughout January to April, though this was not from wont of trying. The Germans were eager indeed to partake in some kind of conference, which they hoped would give them an opportunity to make their case.

This eagerness was expressed before 1919, during the armistice period. On five separate occasions, the German government attempted to contact the allies in December 1918 to inquire about the beginning of the preliminary peace conference. The expectation was of course, that Germany would be taking part, when in reality, Germany wasn’t invited, and the so-called preliminary conference which did materialise became the final conference, which produced the final treaty. ‘Those whose duty it was to draw up the Peace’, wrote Marshal Foch after the event, ‘set to work with all imaginable slowness…the delay was to cost France dear. The questions of most import to us, reparations and security, became increasingly difficult to settle favourably.’ Yet Foch was instrumental in ensuring that the armistice period was extended indefinitely from the end of February 1919, which virtually guaranteed that the Germans would not be invited to Paris for some time.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The grizzled French marshal made things difficult for Clemenceau, but he was mostly powerless to block the collective allied decision to invite the Germans to Paris in mid-April. April itself had been a trying month for all involved, so it may come as a surprise to see Wilson pushing for an invite for the Germans by the middle of April, on the basis that the treaty was nearly finished. Was the treaty nearly finished? Not exactly, and its pieces were only coming together with considerable effort. Consider for example the sheer range of committees which were housed in Paris; while we only hear from the Greek and CS committees, largely because these were ones that Nicolson sat on, it should go without saying that other delegates found the experience as trying if not moreso than our man on the inside. Some, indeed, were able to benefit from more of an insider’s perspective, and gauge which way other aspects of the treaty was shaping up.

On the evening of April 7 the negotiations on Germany's western border had bogged down, but a compromise in the reparations question seemed to be taking shape. Wilson had recently fallen ill, he had been lampooned in the French press, and he had issued a command for his boat to be prepared to return to America with him on board. Wilson must have made his threat primarily because of the talks on the territorial problems in the west. On the other hand, he felt that the peace treaty was essentially complete once he and his colleagues had reached a compromise on the Saar; and he was therefore ready to invite German delegates to the conference on April 25 even though final agreement on other points (e.g., the occupation of the Rhineland) had not been reached at that time.

As it happened, this planned conference would not gather until the 28th April, whereupon it would approve the covenant of the LON. The Germans would not arrive until 29th April in any case, by which point they would have to wait more than a week for the treaty to be actually completed. The last minutes delays and additions from the various committees were to be expected when there were so many moving parts; I can’t be the only to feel like the call to welcome the Germans to Paris was premature, but it was done in the context of wanting to move the whole process along. By issuing this invite, the allies would be at least compelled to move as quickly as possible, and perhaps Wilson believed that it would jolly the process along, and help smooth over outstanding cracks. He couldn’t have known, even if he suspected, that Italy and Japan in their turn would present challenges, or that by the end of April, VO would be back in Rome.

April, if you hadn't realised it yet, was a strange month. It contained more expressions of division than any other period of the conference, and yet we are left with the image of Wilson determining that the time was right to invite the Germans to take part in what had been created. Did Wilson genuinely believe that what had been created by mid-April 1919 was adequate? It certainly seems as though Wilson’s minions would have benefited from another week or two to craft the treaty; we’ll see, in an OTD on 7th May, precisely how chaotic the situation was in the hours leading up to the presentation of the treaty to the Germans, to the extent that no member of the big three and very few of the delegates besides, had actually read the 400 articles of the TOV in its entirety.[[2]](#footnote-2)

And yet, Wilson, with the blessing of GC and LG, did issue the invite, and the allies prepared from that point to host the Germans in Paris. A special hotel would be prepared for their stay, however long that would be, and whatever complications it might present. After talking around the issue for so long, how would the allies respond when the Germans actually arrived in the French capital? What kind of reception would be they be given? Would they be afforded a gentlemanly courtesy, or would they receive nothing but condemnation and curses in the street? Would they be allowed outside the confines of whatever hotel they did stay at? Would their expectations about the peace conference be fulfilled, and would they, as Wilson’s FPs suggested, play a role in negotiating its final tenets, or would they, as the allies intended now, be dictated to, the terms of the final treaty of peace presented as a fait accompli rather than as something which could be negotiated upon or significantly altered?

All of these questions remained to be answered, and it was hard indeed to imagine Germans arriving in Paris after so many months of planning without them. One individual who would be confronted with the full extent of these was Germany’s FM, who in mid-April 1919 understood that it would be his mission to lead the German delegation to Paris, to find out for himself what the situation was, and what Germany could expect to get from this long peace process. Would it be good news or would it be the worst, most terrible news he had ever received in his career as a statesman? Ulrich von BR was on the case, and for better or for worse, his face, his voice, his presence and his words would serve as the first true response from the vanquished side which the allies would receive in their peace-making efforts.

Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau was a greasy man, with slicked-back hair and a Charlie Chaplin moustache. He looked like the perfect caricature of an Imperial German statesmen; it was as though the allies had imagined the features of one of the Kaiser’s innermost courtly gentlemen, and BR had then popped out. From mid-January until his resignation over the TOV’s terms, he served as WG’s FM. Before and during the war, he had been a capable, if snooty, pair of hands in Germany’s foreign office. BR came from one of Germany’s old landed families and it showed in how he carried himself; the Rantzau’s had served Denmark, Prussia, Bavaria and even France in the past. A Rantzau was rumoured to have fathered Louis XIV, and when he had been asked about this rumour, BR was heard to comment, ‘Oh yes, in my family the Bourbons have been considered bastard Rantzaus for the past three hundred years.’ A twin brother had managed the Kaiser’s estates, and BR had been born on the family’s estate in Schleswig Holstein in 1869, just before Prussia became the German Empire.

While he could be insufferable, cruel and drink too much brandy at times, there was no denying that BR worked with considerable dexterity and skill; he had to, if he was going to navigate the chaotic post-war order of Germany. With Spartacists on the loose, the Freikorps tearing up the Baltic and Bavaria sinking under the waves of revolution throughout April, Germany required a strong hand in foreign policy it was to persevere through such uncertain times. BR provided these hands, and interestingly, even though he did not sign on the dotted line on 28th June, it is his image that is often associated with the treaty, because he led the deputation of Germans to Paris in the last week of April, 1919. It was up to this deputation to receive the allied terms and report back to their government; they would not be required to sign all of a sudden, and some among the deputation expected that some opportunities for bargaining would be provided.

These expectations were quickly dashed though, when the German delegates were shunted to a hotel in Versailles called the Hotel de Reservoirs. It was a good if unremarkable hotel, but anyone with a brainstem in the German delegation understood the real reason why they were lodging in this hotel of all places. It had been here, during the throes of the FPW, that the French had come to negotiate with Bismarck; it was here, in 1871, that the French government was left utterly humiliated. Once again, just as Clemenceau had arranged by beginning the PPC on the date that the German Empire had been proclaimed, here was a use of that symbolism which spoke to the very heart of Franco-German hostility. BR took it on the chin, and accepted it as a necessary part of the peace-making process. He had never been, in spite of his airs and graces, all that much of an imperialist radical. He had urged a compromise peace during the war, and had urged cooperation with the socialists after it. Now, on the expectation that France would play hardball, BR intended to stick like glue to the Americans, and specifically the FPs which WW had communicated in January 1918. It had been on the basis of the fundamental principles within these points, after all, that Germany had made its armistice agreement. Furthermore, she had also established a legitimately democratic republic in place of the old Kaiserreich – whether the allies recognised it as legitimate or not was another story.

Though the allies had made it plain that there would be little to no room for negotiation, BR’s delegation contained many variables in opinion where the allied terms were concerned. The story was the same among the citizenry of the new German Republic, based at Weimar. ‘The people’, recorded an American diplomat based in Berlin:

…had been led to believe that Germany had been unluckily beaten after a fine and clean fight, owing to the ruinous effect of the blockade on home morale, and perhaps some too far reaching plans of her leaders, but that happily, President Wilson could be appealed to, and would arrange a compromise peace satisfactory to Germany.

The expectations were that Germany may have to pay a straightforward indemnity as a penalty, but that she wouldn’t be required to cover the costs of the war through some reparations policy, or that she would lose her colonies and military corps. Expectations, it must be said, were wholly at odds with the reality, even if some better informed Germans had gotten a whiff of the allied intransigence, they had also learned of allied rivalries. French-American quarrels over the Rhine, Anglo-American disputes over reparations, the Italian exit over Fiume, the Japanese threats over the Shantung peninsula – all of these spats were potential opportunities for the Germans, and even while much of the detail of these disagreements were kept secret, it was impossible to hide from Germany the fact that the allies were not a happy family. It is perhaps little surprise that one German scholar later referred to these months as ‘the dreamland of the armistice period’ – cold hard facts about the difficulties which faced German negotiators were ignored or discredited where possible, while rumours continued to run rampant.

At the same time though, we should not imagine that the Germans twiddled their thumbs until the allies saw fit to invite them to Paris. From the moment of the armistice, Germany set up a peace agency which harnessed the research and investigations of hundreds of individuals. Volume after volume of detailed maps, of reasoned arguments and counter-arguments accompanied the German delegates in crates on their train journey. Valuable and well-rounded though the contents of these crates were on paper – literally – in practice they were never used. The negotiations which the Germans did expect to have, and the opportunities to make use of these extensive studies, never materialised. In many cases, the crates were not even opened, and remained virtually untouched for decades. While the Germans were disappointed to discover that they would not be negotiating when they arrived on 29th April, they were frustrated for another reason – the proposed moment for receiving the final peace terms was not yet at hand.

This TOV was not yet ready, and would not be for over a week. Thus, from the moment they arrived in their hotel on 29th April until the opportunity came to receive the treaty on 7th May, the Germans were holed up in their Hotel de Reservoirs. On the expectation that the French were listening into their conversations, the Germans conducted all conversations under the cover of loud music blaring over gramophones which had been brought from Berlin. As they occupied this hotel space, the Germans began to settle into life in Versailles; they were taken on car tours of the city and occasionally, crowds of French onlookers gathered to catch a glimpse of their foe’s best and brightest. Despite a few jeers and thrown stones, by and large, the German delegates were left alone. Some delegates were free to walk in the parks, to double down on their legal French revision, or to soak in the touches of spring in Paris, but by 7th May – the fourth anniversary of the sinking of the Lusitania, as it happened – the terms were presented to the German delegation, and a response was thus required. We will cross that bridge when we come to it next week, but I don’t think it gives anything away to state that BR was at his worst, and presented the most confrontational of spectacles in his rebuke of the allied terms.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Central to the furore which would follow the receipt of the TOV’s terms, and which toppled the government of Chancellor Philip Scheidemann, was the critical disconnect between the Germans and the allies over what to expect. The expectation that Germany would be treated according to the terms of the FPs, and that the final arrangement would be negotiated, however tough this negotiation process proved, was one which was based on solid ground – the American President had said so, so it must be true. Yet, if Wilson had ever genuinely expected to treat Germany in this way, then by the first week of May there was absolutely no question of such a policy going forward. The stark nature of the terms and the suddenness in the way that the reality struck the German people meant that only through repeated threats to resume the war would the TOV actually be signed, but one can only imagine what might have been had the two parties been in regular contact, and had the Germans been informed from the beginning what they would be getting.

The problem with that approach of course, was that the allies didn’t want to compel the Germans to continue the war, and the allies themselves did not know in November 1918, January 1919 or even the first few days of May 1919 what they actually wanted from Germany or the CPs in a final peace. This latter fact is testified to clearly by the incredible point that not one of the big three had ever read the full TOV document all the way through by the time he sat down to hear Germany’s condemnation of it hours after it had been finished. The unfortunate and utterly overworked printers who were tasked with constructing and binding the conclusions of more than fifty committees and more than 200 statesmen found, to the surprise of no one, that the Treaty contradicted itself on many points, that it had excluded many other issues of import and, to top it all off, contained a morass of errors in spelling, punctuation and terminology. The Germans were thus the victim of their optimistic expectations, but they were also victims of the way the allies had done business throughout the PPC. Rather than wait another week to read and dissect the Treaty in its final form, many of those present during the Plenary Conference of 7th May would have been hearing its contents aloud for the very first time.

It was a very rocky start for a Treaty which would become associated with the ultimate betrayal; it would encapsulate the doomed nature of the WR generally, and of the injustice of the PPC towards the Germans specifically. This, so the narrative went, was how angry Germans justified their later misbehaviour and rebellion against democracy and all sense of decency. Whether such justification is apt or not, we are still not in a position to say, but one thing is certain, a watershed moment had been reached by the final few days of April 1919. This moment soon gave way to anxiety and despair on all sides. Any actors who may have hoped for a speedy resolution to the PPC would have their hopes dashed. By dictating their victor’s peace, the allies shattered the hopes and dreams of an already shattered Germany, and they also, arguably, shattered any chance that Germany might look in the mirror and save itself after the GW. The only mirror that mattered, the only mirrors that mattered, were those in the hall of mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, where the ultimate humiliation was visited upon the German people. This infamous saga was still far from finished, but with the arrival of BR’s German delegation in the Hotel de Reservoirs OTD 100 years ago, its first chapter had definitively been written…

1. See Robert C. Binkley, ‘New Light on the Paris Peace Conference’, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (Sep., 1931), pp. 335-361; p. 341. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peace-making*, pp. 297-298. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For an excellent summary of the situation in the week of 29th April to 7th May 1919, see Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, pp. 469-474. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)