

# 1919 – 2019 REFLECTIONS ON 100 YEARS OF GERMAN HISTORY

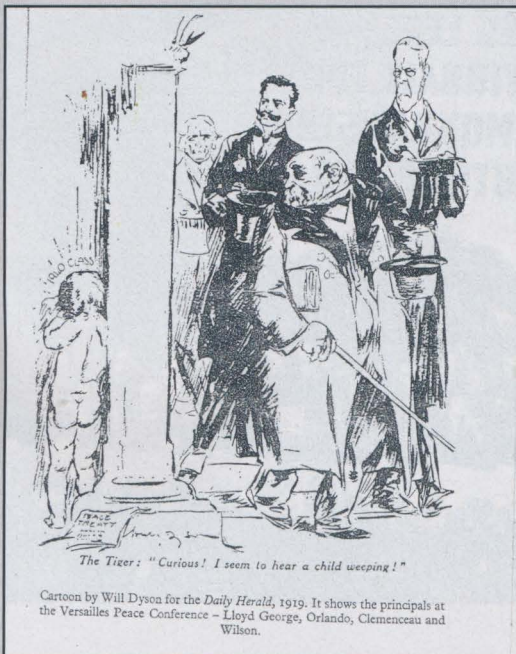
BY ROBERT A. SELIG

**"We have to remember the past so the bad things will not be repeated, but it is also a mistake to live in the past." Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder**

A century ago, on 28 June 1919, the fifth anniversary of the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand at Sarajevo in 1914, Foreign Minister Hermann Müller and Colonial Minister Johannes Bell representing a defeated Germany signed the Treaty of Versailles with the Allied and Associated Powers (except the United States) ending the First World War. The "War to End all Wars," the war that in the words of American President Woodrow Wilson had been fought to "Make the World Safe for Democracy," had finally ended. Otto von Bismarck's creation of 1871 was gone. Its successor, the Weimar Republic, became Germany's first attempt at democracy. It failed at the latest in 1933. Within twenty years of the end of World War I, on 1 September 1939, German troops invaded Poland, igniting the Second World War. Ten years later, two German states emerged from the devastation that war had wrought, the West German state with the promulgation of the Basic Law on 23 May 1949, the East German state under Soviet tutelage on 7 October 1949.

The second attempt at a democratic state under the guidance of the victorious powers France, Great Britain and the United States, succeeded in the western zones of occupation. Forward another 40 years, and the fall of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 created the unified German state as it exists today, albeit considerably much smaller than it had been before 28 June 1919. As disparate, and unrelated, as these six dates between 1919 and 2019 may seem, they nevertheless form a continuous line of historical markers in the chronology of European and world history. But not necessarily for the Germans. For them, the history of contemporary Germany and Europe begins in 1933 at the earliest, often even later in 1945, but certainly not 1919.

Over the past five years, France, Great Britain, and to a certain degree even the United States, commemorated the events of the First World War, *La Grande Guerre*, the Great War, on the battlefields of western Europe. For the peoples of these countries, the years between 1914 and 1919 represent a crucial *cesura*, a profound break with the old and the beginning of a new era in European history. But for the Germans the Great War represent a period in their history they have been trying to forget ever since the war ended in 1919. When West German historian Fritz Fischer published his *Griff nach der Weltmacht* in 1961 ("Reaching for World Power Status," published in English as *Germany's Aims in the First World War*



GERMAN SOLDIERS TEAR DOWN THE BORDER BARRIER WITH POLAND IN 1939 AND SO BEGINS THE SECOND WORLD WAR. COURTESY WIKIPEDIA.



in 1967), assigning responsibility for the outbreak of war in 1914 on Germany, he unleashed a storm of controversy that lasted for decades. By the 1980s most Germans had accepted the fact that their country, while maybe not solely responsible for the outbreak of the war, had certainly been in the best position to prevent it. Yet when he was invited to attend the 80th anniversary of the armistice on 11 November 1998, Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder declined the offer: "We have to remember the past so the bad things will not be repeated, but it is also a mistake to live in the past." Ten years later on the 90th anniversary, Chancellor Angela Merkel became the first German head of government to participate in a French Armistice Day ceremony when she joined French President Nicholas Sarkozy at the foot of the Arc de Triomphe, where they laid a wreath and rekindled the flame at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. What took them so long?

When the German High Command asked for an armistice in November 1918, it did so in the knowledge that the Empire had lost the war. Intentionally kept in the dark about the situation on the western front by its government, the admission of defeat came as a shock to the German people. How could that be? Between August 1914 and November 1918, some 1,774,000 Germans had been killed, another 4,216,000 wounded. Had they suffered and died in vain? 38.3% of all German soldiers had been wounded during the war, and 16.1% of all draftees had given their lives for *Kaiser und Reich*, for Emperor and Empire. Among her enemies, particularly France, the numbers were even more staggering. Some 1,375,800 Frenchmen had been killed, another 4,266,000 wounded, 690,000 among them remained permanently disabled. Fully half of all French soldiers, 50.7%, were wounded during the war, a full 25% of men between the ages of 18 and 30 years and more than 400,000 civilians had died. Across the English Channel, Britain, and her Commonwealth, lamented the death of 908,000 of her citizens, while some 2,100,000 had been wounded. 23.5% of all British soldiers who had served in Europe and around the world had been wounded, and 10.2% had died.

Vast swaths of the French and Belgian countryside had been devastated, whole villages had disappeared never to be rebuilt.

Even in 2019, tens of thousands of acres are still littered with unexploded ordnance, off-limits to humans, yet each and every year, dozens are killed because they disturbed, picked up, or tried to defuse unexploded shells, often filled with one of the deadly chemicals that first made their appearance at Ypres in April 1915. Experts estimate that at the current rate it may take another 200 years to dispose of what's left in and on the killing fields of Belgium and France. Faced with devastation on an unprecedented scale, deeply conscious of the fact that much of the war had been fought on her soil, that victory had only been achieved due to Russian, and ultimately American support, neither of which was likely in a future confrontation, and that demographically, France had suffered disproportionately, the western powers were in no mood to be forgiving when the terms for peace with Germany were drawn up in Versailles in the Spring of 1919.

Security was first and foremost on the minds of the victors, particularly France, whose population, even with the return of Alsace-Lorraine and its roughly 1.9 million inhabitants, had fallen from 39.6 million in 1914 to below 39 million in 1919, just about where it had stood in 1901. During the same time period, the population of Germany had dropped from 68.9 million in 1914 to 62.8 million in 1919, in large part due to territorial losses. French leaders feared, rightly, that even in the reduced borders of 1919, Germany would soon make up these losses. Between 1871 and 1911, the population of France had grown by only 8.6% while Germany's grew by 60%, with millions more immigrating to the United States. Marshall Ferdinand Foch, Supreme Allied Commander during the First World War, once remarked, only half jokingly, that the only way for France to permanently improve security on her Eastern border was to castrate 20 million Germans.

Germany, convinced that it had been wrongly blamed in the Treaty of Versailles for starting the war in 1914, immediately began her fight to undo the results of the Armistice of 1918 and the subsequent Treaty of Peace. United in their opposition to the "humiliation" of Versailles, especially the so-called "war guilt" clause, Germans rejected all attempts to make the "War to End all Wars" the "War that had Ended all Wars." The venom with which Germans of all political par-



KONRAD ADENAUER SIGNED THE "GRUNDGESETZ," THE CONSTITUTION OF THE FEDERAL REPUBLIC OF GERMANY ON 23 MAY 1949. COURTESY WIKIPEDIA.

THE FOUNDING OF THE GERMAN DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC, 7 OCTOBER 1949. COURTESY WIKIPEDIA.





ties reacted to Article 231 of the treaty genuinely surprised the allies. It read: "Germany accepts the responsibility of Germany and her allies 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." Drafted by American diplomats Norman Davis and John Foster Dulles, it had two purposes: 1) lay the legal foundation for German reparations payments, and 2) limit these payments to civilian damages. The victors did not demand that Germany reimburse them for the cost of the war, which the Allies knew went beyond the means of Germany. Reparations were meant to pay for re-construction, first and foremost in Belgium which Germany had invaded in 1914 in breach of her own international treaty obligations. And in a note of 2 August 1914 to the Belgian government had even offered "to pay an indemnity for any damage that may have been caused by German troops," albeit under the condition that Belgium not resist German forces entering the kingdom. But that distinction was drowned out in the howl of indignation that swept across Germany once that article was made public. It united Germans in the conviction that the "new" Germany rising from the ashes of the war could not be, must not be, the Weimar Republic, a state presumably imposed upon them by vengeful victors on the left bank of the Rhine.

The Armistice on 11 November 1918 brought peace to France, Britain, and the U.S., but not to Germany. Rather it brought an end to the empire and the kingdoms and duchies within it. And it brought revolution, street-fighting, political murders, and more hunger since the allies refused to lift the blockade of Germany ports until the signing of a peace treaty. The end of the Empire, however, also provided opportunities to create a Germany radically different from the one that had gone under in the malstrom of the war. There was much hope, excitement and plentiful plans, yet the struggle between the visions of the (Far) Left and the (Far) Right for post-war Germany and Europe destroyed the Weimar Republic. Socialists and communists looked east, to Russia and the Bolshevik Revolution for their inspiration, their blueprint for an egalitarian utopia based on the ideas expressed

in Karl Marx's writings. All the while their enemies on the Right turned the dream of a class-less, internationalist society into the very rope to hang them with by inventing the "Stab in the Back" conspiracy. Jews and Communists, by definition internationalists, either because they did not have one or were hostile to the concept of a Fatherland ("Workers of all Nations Unite!"), had betrayed a German army victorious in the field, stabbed it in the back. An explanation to explain the defeat and revolution of November 1918 which was as simple as it was murderous. There is, there can be, only one penalty for traitors. The fight against the Treaty of Versailles continued with the wanton impoverishment of the middle classes through hyper-inflationary in 1923 to show that Germany could not pay the reparations.

None of this was of course true. Germany had been defeated indeed, but in spite of territorial losses the Empire itself was not broken up, and the pre-war ruling elites continued to hold and exert political, military and economic power. Furthermore, with Russia occupied with itself and the Habsburg Empire gone, Germany, even though she had lost the war, paradoxically had emerged as the dominant power in Central and Eastern Europe. France was painfully aware that in a war of revenge Germany would not have to worry about a two-front war on her borders. France, possibly again with the assistance of Britain, would have to bear the brunt of any war of revenge, whose outcome under those conditions seemed predictable. Compared with the conditions the Empire had placed on Russia in the Peace of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918, and her own plans for a defeated France, the terms imposed upon her at Versailles were by far not as harsh as they were, and sometimes still are, portrayed. But there was little that could be done to persuade the Germans to accept Versailles, and any conciliatory voices expressed in pacifist efforts such as the Kellogg-Briand Pact of 24 July 1929, out-lawing war as a means of international policy were drowned out by voices demanding revenge. With the appointment of Adolf Hitler as chancellor on 30 January 1933, these voices could claim victory.

As the treaty was about to be signed in the Hall of Mirrors at Versailles, the very place where Bismarck had proclaimed the German Empire in 1871, a weary Marshall Foch had ex-



PEOPLE WALK FREELY ATOP THE BERLIN WALL IN FRONT OF THE BRANDENBURG GATE ON NOV. 10, 1989, ONE DAY AFTER THE BORDER BETWEEN EAST AND WEST BERLIN WAS OPENED. COURTESY JOHN WATERMAN/FOX PHOTOS/GETTY IMAGES.



ANGELA MERKEL AND FRENCH PRESIDENT EMANUEL MACRON LAYING A WREATH IN PARIS, 11 NOVEMBER 2018. COURTESY WIKIPEDIA.



pressed his fears for the future by proclaiming that "This is not peace. It is an armistice for 20 years." He was right. Too harsh for the Germans to accept, and not harsh enough to keep Germany permanently down, Foch's dire prophecy became reality on 1 September 1939. Less than a year after British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain is said to have exclaimed in relief that there would be "Peace in our time!" now that Hitler had signed the Munich Agreement in September 1938, another war devastated Europe and the world, a war whose roots, most historians agree, are deeply embedded in the way in which Germans interpreted the conditions laid upon them at Versailles at the end of the Great War. On 1 September 1939, to paraphrase British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey, once again, "The lamps are going out all over Europe". His statement to a friend on 3 September 1914, the eve of the United Kingdom's entry into the war, also proved prophetic when he continued that "we shall not see them lit again in our life-time." When Grey died on 7 September 1933, Hitler was already Chancellor, the next war only six years away.

On 8/9 May 1945, the *Tausendjährige Reich*, Hitler's "Empire of 1,000 Years" collapsed after but twelve years in unconditional surrender to the Allied Powers. This was the break with the past that could have, should have, but did not, happen in 1918. Unlike 1918, there could be no doubt that Germany had lost the war. All they had to do was look around themselves in the bombed-out cities. Unlike 1919, there would be no peace treaty, if nothing else because there was no Germany to make peace with, at least not until 1949. Unlike 1918, the ruling elites would not be able to avoid blame for their murderous policies that had plunged Europe into another war and killed millions of innocents in concentration camps. They would be, and were, held responsible at the War Criminals trial in Nuremberg and, if found, for decades thereafter. The American, British and French Zones of Occupation were demilitarized: there would be no German armed forces until 1956 and no war hero like Paul von Hindenburg around which the

opposition to the new German state of 1948 could coalesce. There were no reparations demands right-wing propaganda could use against the victors. Instead there was the Marshall Plan to help the Germans in the Federal Republic get back on their feet. And when the opportunity arose in 1989 to re-unite the two Germanies that had come into being in 1948, the approval of all four victorious powers of 1945 mirrored their, and the world's, conviction that even a united and enlarged Germany would not pose a threat to world peace. Where does that leave World War I, Armistice Day, War Guilt and the Treaty of Versailles? There apparently still is no place for it in the collective memory of the German people.

In 2019 too, the horrific legacy of the Holocaust and the mass destruction of World War II simply overshadows everything else in Germany. The end of World War I is viewed through the prism of Hitler and the Holocaust, as if Hitler had been unavoidable, pre-destined almost, as if there had been no alternatives that could have been pursued in 1918. That makes 1918 one point along a line leading to Hitler and 1945. "Germany is a country that draws practically its entire national narrative out of the defeat of 1945"—and not the defeat of 1918, said Daniel Schoenpflug, a historian at Berlin's Free University's Friedrich-Meinecke-Institute. And, so it seems, will continue to do so. On 11 November 2018, Chancellor Merkel once again took part in a commemorative event in France while German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier participated in a ceremony with Queen Elizabeth II in Westminster Abbey. In Germany, life continued as usual. Ignoring Armistice Day, the German *Bundestag* held a combined commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the proclamation of the German Republic on 09 November 1918, the 80th anniversary of the Night of Broken Glass of 9 November 1938, and the 29th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall that same day in 1989. There were no national commemorations for Armistice Day, and none are planned for the anniversary of the Treaty of Versailles on 28 June 2019. **GL**

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