

The paris peace settlement



The military disaster which befell the Mid-European Confederacy in the autumn of 1918 was the signal for immediate political revolutions within its members. The revolutions, though precipitated in several instances by Socialists, proved to be uniformly mild and more conducive to democratic nationalism than to any basic social change.

In Germany Prince Maximilian, the Chancellor on whom the Emperor William II imposed the unpleasant task of opening peace negotiations with the Allies, sought to allay domestic unrest by promising in October a number of constitutional reforms.

But the more he promised in the way of reform, the louder grew the demands for an overturn of the whole monarchical regime, and to such demands the counsel of the American President, Woodrow Wilson, gave point and cogency.

On October 28 a naval mutiny occurred at Kiel, and on the next day Emperor hurried from Berlin to military headquarters at Spa, imagining that the army would safeguard alike his person and his throne. Within a week almost every city in the German Empire witnessed Socialist rioting and the formation of revolutionary “ workers councils. ” On November 8, amid disorders at Munich, Bavaria was proclaimed a “ democratic and socialist republic,” with Kurt Eisner, a left-wing Socialist, and president.

In vain Chancellor Maximilian begged William II to save the Hohenzollern dynasty by abdicating in favor of his infant grandson. The Emperor, relying on the army, was deaf to the Chancellor, and by the time the high military officers, including Hindenburg, reluctantly informed him that even the army

was seething with sedition and could not be relied upon, there was no longer a friendly Chancellor to advise him.

In the night of November 9-10 William II ingloriously took flight across the frontier into the Netherlands.

The history of the German Empire of the Hohenzollerns was thus almost exclusively the history of two reigns—that of William the First (1871-1888), under whom the Empire had been reared in might, and that of William the Last (1888-1918), under whom it fell with a fearful crash. Already, on November 9, 1918, Prince Maximilian of Baden had felt obliged to turn over the chancellorship to a Socialist, Friedrich Ebert, and presently, under the latter's guidance, a " Council of People's Commissars" was installed at Berlin in imitation of the contemporary revolutionary administration in Russia.

But though Ebert and his fellow Socialists in Germany were willing to borrow nomenclature from the Russian Bolsheviki, they had no serious thought of adopting their policies.

Only a small group of German Socialists—to so-called " Spartacans"—were in full sympathy with the Russian Communists and eager to emulate them in a violent exercise of proletarian dictatorship. The major groups, on the other hand—those that shared in the provisional government—were too anxious for national regeneration to countenance civil war and too devoted to democracy to favor any dictatorship, even of themselves.

The " moderation" of the Socialists was supported by the Catholic Center party, led by Matthias Erzberger, and also by the Progressives and left-wing

National Liberals, newly fused into a Democratic party. It thus transpired that the three political organizations-Progressive, Centrist, and Social Democratic-which had repeatedly united in opposition to illiberal policies of the Hohenzollern Empire, now joined anew to supplant the Empire with a liberal democratic Republic. Against this Republican bloc were arrayed a Royalist "Right" and a Communist "Left."

The "Right" comprised the former Conservative and Free Conservative parties, now reorganized as the Nationalist party and intent upon the restoration of monarchy, and the more moderate group of right-wing National Liberals who, under the leadership of Gustav Stresemann, a wealthy industrialist, assumed the title of "German People's party" and, while preferring monarchy, expressed a willingness to collaborate with Republicans. The "Left" was composed of Liebknecht's Spartacans, who refused to participate with the "bourgeoisie" in the election of a Constituent Assembly and preached popular insurrection.

In January 1919, on the eve of the elections, the Spartacans staged a revolutionary demonstration at Berlin, but their leaders were more adept at talking than at acting, and the attempted insurrection was sternly suppressed. In the following month the assassination of Kurt Eisner, the radical Socialist president of Bavaria, gave rise to fresh disorders, which, however, were firmly dealt with by the central government.

Meanwhile a Constituent Assembly was elected by secret ballot of all Germans over twenty years of age, men and women alike; and on February 6 it met at Weimar. Its overwhelming majority was-composed of

Socialists, Centrists, and Democrats, and these jointly directed its constructive work-its ratification of the peace treaty with the Allies in June 1919, and its adoption of a constitution at the end of July for the future government of the country. Ebert was elected first constitutional President of the Republic, and another Socialist, Scheidemann, was appointed its first Chancellor. By August 1919 it seemed as if the German revolution was successfully accomplished. The Hohenzollern Empire was ended and democratic Republic inaugurated with comparatively little bloodshed and with the backing of a large majority of the popular electorate.

There were many differences of aim and policy among the groups composing the victorious coalition. But for the time being, at any rate, liberal and democratic republicanism functioned in Germany. In the imperial Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary, the revolution of 1918-1919 was not only democratic but disruptive. In vain the Emperor-King Charles I published a conciliatory manifesto on October 16, 1918 promising to reorganize the monarchy on a federal basis so that each of its nationalities would possess democratic autonomy.

By this time it was too late for compromise.

Leaders of the subject nationalities were resolved on achieving a separation from the Habsburg Empire, and the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian armies removed the means which Charles might have employed to enforce obedience. On October 18, a group of Czech patriots, including Thomas Masaryk and Eduard Benes, proclaimed at Paris the deposition of Charles of Habsburg as King of Bohemia and the independence of the “

Czechoslovakian Republic. Ten days later, a self-constituted Czech “ national council” took over the government at Prague, and the next day a similar “ national council” in the Slovak provinces of Hungary voted for a union of the Slovaks with the Czechs in a new “ Czechoslovakia. ” A national assembly was speedily convened at Prague. In November it ratified what had been done and chose Masaryk as President of the Republic, with Benes as foreign minister, and eventually in February 1920, after protracted debates, it adopted a democratic constitution. The southern slavs of Austria-Hungary revolted simultaneously with the Czechs and Slovaks in the north.

On October 29, 1918, the Croatian Diet proclaimed the deposition of Charles of Habsburg and the separation of the “ kingdom of Croatia and Dalmatia” from Hungary. Authority was then transferred to a revolutionary Yugoslav Congress, to which representatives were admitted from Bosnia-Herzegovina and likewise her 23, in accordance with the earlier Declaration of Corfu, the Congress voted to incorporate all the Yugoslav territories of Austria-Hungary with the independent state of Serbia in a “ Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Of the new kingdom-really a Greater Serbia-King Peter of Serbia assumed the kingship in December, with his son Alexander as Regent and with a ministry headed by the veteran Serbian politician, Nicholas Pasic. Against the Yugoslav union, Austria-Hungary was powerless. Only King Nicholas of Montenegro attempted to oppose it. But his little country was quickly occupied by Serbian troops and subjected to the new regime.

The Poles of Austrian Galicia likewise seceded from the Habsburg Empire and joined the poles of Prussia and Russia in establishing a national state.

In this they were unexpectedly aided by the military reverses of all their “oppressors,” not only Austria and Germany but also Russia. In the early stages of the World War, Polish patriots had been divided on the question of tactics. One group, represented by the celebrated musician Ignace Paderewski, hoped for an Allied victory, imagining that the defeat of Austria and Germany would force them to surrender their respective Polish provinces and that victorious France and Britain would persuade their Russian ally to grant autonomy if not complete independence to reunited Poland.

Another and larger group, taking their cue from a soldier and “radical,” Joseph Pilsudski, were not so sanguine of Allied victory or of Russian altruism or Franco-British benevolence. Mindful that Austria had treated its Polish subjects better than Russia, they thought that their immediate task was to assist the Central Powers in conquering Russian Poland and uniting it with Austrian Poland. Consequently, while Paderewski was issuing pro-Allied propaganda and currying favor with French and British statesmen, general Pilsudski had organized a Polish legion and fought on the side of the Central Powers.

Fortunately for the Polish nation, the conflicting efforts of Pilsudski and Paderewski were both crowned with success.

Pilsudski had the satisfaction of witnessing the Russian military debacle of 1915-1916 and securing from the Austrian and German Emperors a joint pledge, on November 5, 1916, that they would create an “independent”

kingdom of Poland, “ a national state with an hereditary monarch and a constitutional government,” in “ intimate relations” with their own realms.

Whereupon, a “ regency” was set up at Warsaw, and by the treaty of Brest-litovsk, in March 1918, Russia formally renounced all claim to Poland. By this time, however, Pilsudski was becoming disillusioned about the magnanimity of the Central Powers. For it was quite clear that in their hour of triumph over Russia they had no intention of bestowing real independence on Russian Poland or of joining their Polish provinces to it.

So pilsudski turned against the Germans and was duly imprisoned by them, while Paderewski had the satisfaction of knowing that at last his own pro-Allied efforts would command the united support of the whole Polish people. During 1918 Austrian Galicia, as well as Prussian Posen, was rife with Polish sedition, and Polish volunteers joined the Allied armies in increasing numbers.

With the triumph of the allies and the pledges of Woodrow Wilson, Poland’s deliverance was at hand.