

The War Changes Germany and the World

Chapter 1: The domestic development

When the German troops went to war at the beginning of August 1914, Emperor Wilhelm II promised the men to be back home for Christmas. But in reality, the soldiers were faced with a gruelling trench warfare and suffered enormous losses. The battle often referred to as a "Promenade to Paris" eventually turned out to be awfully horrible.

Many people lost one or even more family members already in the first war months.

And because the men were at the front, the wives had not only to look after their families but were additionally forced to take over work in the factories and shops.

Living conditions at home were extremely hard, particularly for women. The Entente powers – France, England, and Russia – furthermore imposed an economic blockade and prevented the import of food and raw materials to Germany.

In January 1915, food ration cards were introduced, at first only for bread and flour, later for all important edibles.

This shortage of food caused more and more misery, the people were starving, and lots of them died of hunger. As a result, the mood in the German population began to change.

More and more people now disapproved of the war and started to rebel against it. The so-called domestic truce agreed on by the parties at the beginning of the war started to fall apart.

In January 1915, the first anti-war activities started. A flyer with the title "Our main enemy is on home soil!" caused quite a stir. It had been composed by Karl Liebknecht, then member of parliament of the SPD, the Social Democratic Party of Germany.

On the 1st of May 1916, Liebknecht appealed for an anti-war rally in Berlin: "Down with the war – down with the government!" This resulted in his arrest.

Meanwhile, the SPD parliamentary party in the Reichstag was divided in proponents and opponents of the war. In 1917, various left groups formed the Independent Social Democratic Party – shortly called USPD – as a political rallying point and party for all opponents of the war. But the majority of the SPD – shortly MSPD – under party leader Friedrich Ebert supported the Emperor's war loans and war course.

Chapter 2: The Russian October Revolution and the consequences

The war casualties inflicted on Russia were particularly severe, and both army and civilian population suffered from an extremely bad supply situation and from hunger.

Vast parts of the Russian population yearned for an immediate peace. On the 15th of March 1917 – according to our calendar –, the Russian Tsar Nikolaus II had to sign an abdication document. This was a result of the strikes and rebellions which had taken place in St Petersburg – then called Petrograd. Several days later, the Tsar was arrested.

From now on the provisional Duma government ruled over Russia supported by workers' representatives.

But because this new government did not abandon the war course of the deposed Tsar, the Bolsheviks with Wladimir Lenin as their leader took over power in the so-called October Revolution in 1917. Lenin was supported by the communist party of Russia.

Lenin then became the new Russian head of government and suggested an immediate armistice to all warring parties.

This proposal had a significant and global effect because Lenin's peace message was met with unanimous approval by the population of all parties.

Few days later, the negotiations with the German government started, and within 24 hours the battle on the German-Russian front was over. But Lenin's Soviet Republic continued to point the way to the future hope that the people of other countries would follow their idea of a socialist ... economic and social order and undo the capitalist system throughout the world.

Lenin disappropriated the Russian landowners and factory-owners, and handed their possessions over to the peasant population and the workers. So at first many people supported Lenin's ideas.

It was a signal perceivable far beyond the Russian borders.

Chapter 3: Rebellions and the November Revolution in Germany

In Germany, the first mass protests started in January 1918, when approximately 1 million workers went on strike. But these strikes were crushed by governmental troops.

But then in autumn 1918, the military defeat of Germany and its allies became apparent.

The Supreme Army Command, since 1916 virtually a military government with Erich Ludendorff and Paul von Hindenburg as leading figures, handed Germany's destiny back to the civilians.

The German government under Max von Baden negotiated over an armistice with the Allies.

All the same, the navy command decided to send the German Fleet into the North Sea to fight a futile battle, just for the sake of "honour".

The sailors in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel mutinied against this fatal mission.

This rebellion spread among the workers, too, not only in Kiel and Wilhelmshaven but in other cities as well. Hundreds of thousands took part in a rebellion in Berlin.

In the early afternoon of the 9th November 1918, Philipp Scheidemann, a social democratic member of parliament, brought the German Empire and the monarchy to an end. In front of the Reichstag in Berlin and in the presence of a huge crowd, he proclaimed the German Republic.

Hereupon, the German Emperor Wilhelm II abdicated and went into exile to Holland.

Temporarily, the so-called workers' and soldiers' councils took over power in the country.

On the 11th November 1918, two days after the proclamation of the Republic, the armistice dictated by the victorious Allies was signed in a saloon car in a forest near the French city of Compiègne.

So the disastrous First World War with its heavy losses was finally brought to an end.

In January 1919, the Social Democrats won the first free and equal elections for the German National Assembly. Friedrich Ebert became President and Philipp Scheidemann Prime Minister of the young Weimar Republic.

Chapter 4: The reorganization of Europe

Without any doubt, the European monarchies belonged to the political losers of World War I. They lost their power completely or to a large extent.

The German Empire, Austria-Hungary, and the Russian Tsardom collapsed.

The former German Emperor and King of Prussia, Wilhelm II, lived in the Dutch exile until his death in the year 1941.

Karl I, last emperor of Austria, who had also been King of Hungary under the name Karl IV, died in exile on the Portuguese Isle of Madeira in 1922. And the last Russian Tsar, Nikolaus II, was at first banished to the Urals after the October Revolution.

After the collapse of the tsardom, Finland and the Baltic States of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia broke away from Russia.

Austria-Hungary was dissolved into the Republics of Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia.

Poland which had been divided among Russia, Austria, and Prussia several times since the end of the 18th century, became independent.

On the Balkans, Serbia and Montenegro joined forces with Croatia, Slovenia, and Bosnia which had belonged to Austria-Hungary until then, forming the Kingdom of Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia.

In 1929, the country was renamed into Yugoslavia.

Germany had to cede territories to France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, and Poland.

The German colonies were either put under the control of the League of Nations or divided among the victorious powers.

These cessions of territory had been laid down in the "Paris Vorortverträge", signed by the unsuccessful war powers of Turkey, Bulgaria, Hungary, Austria, and Germany in various outskirts of Paris.

The treaties were a result of the Paris Peace Conference in 1919.

With the Versailles Treaty, the German Empire had to acknowledge its sole war guilt.

The Treaty also specified the so-called reparations that had to be paid to the victorious powers for all damages stemming from the war.

The German Empire had to disarm and its military power was heavily restricted.

With the Versailles Treaty, the German Empire also signed the charter of the so-called League of Nations.

Chapter 5: The wish for a lasting peace – The League of Nations

The horrors of the first total war – with millions of dead people, destruction and damage – had left a deep mark on all parties. So the idea of an international league with the aim to prevent wars and to settle conflicts peacefully in the future was eagerly picked up: The idea of the so-called League of Nations.

The League of Nations is a forerunner of the Organization of the United Nations – shortly UNO – which is active today.

But the League of Nations was unable to accomplish its goals. It is assumed that this was – amongst other things – due to the fact that important nations as the USA did not or only temporarily join the community of states.

Having accepted the West borders in the conference of Locarno, Germany was admitted as an official member in 1926, and joined the League of Nations with its meeting place and domicile in the Swiss city of Geneva.

After Hitler was appointed Reich Chancellor, the national socialist regime resigned from the League of Nations in 1933.

The community of states was not able to prevent the criminal Second World War and the genocide committed on the Jews.

Chapter 6: Summary

The Social Democratic Party of Germany – shortly SPD – was divided in opponents and proponents war.

- The followers of the Independent SPD – the USPD – wanted to immediately end the war.
- The majority of the Social Democratic Party – the MSPD – supported the war policy of the Empire.

In the so-called October Revolution in Russia in 1917,

- Tsar Nikolaus II was brought down and banished,
- and the Communist Party with the revolutionary and Bolshevik Vladimir Lenin took over the power in Russia.

In November 1918

- the German Emperor Wilhelm II abdicated,
- and the social democrat Philipp Scheidemann proclaimed the republic.

The results of the First World War for Germany were

- cessions of territory to France, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Denmark, and Poland,
- and high reparations to the victorious powers, according to the Versailles Treaty.

The newly established community of states – the League of Nations – was unable

- to achieve an keep up a lasting peace.
- The League was, however, the forerunner of today's Organization of the United Nations – the UNO.