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**The Making of a World Order**  
Global Historical Perspectives on  
the Paris Peace Conference and  
the Treaty of Versailles

**Edited by Albert Wu  
and Stephen W. Sawyer**

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### 3 The Versailles Treaty and the German Imperial Mindscape

#### The Navy, the Colonial East, and the Impossible Peace in Postwar Germany

*Erik Grimmer-Solem*

Over the past two decades, shifts in historical scholarship have altered perceptions of the most important legacies of the Versailles Treaty. Twenty-five years ago, the historiographical consensus around Fritz Fischer’s arguments about the domestic German origins of the Great War and the continuity of German war aims in the two world wars was still largely intact. As such, German reparations and the related question of German war guilt still animated many discussions of the legacy of the treaty.<sup>1</sup> In the intervening years, the turn toward more global and transnational treatments of Germany, comparative studies of imperialism and navalism, as well as a wave of scholarship reassessing the origins and impact of the First World War have resulted in less German-centered and much more comparative and global narratives of the conflict and its aftermath.<sup>2</sup> These newer approaches are less centered on individual agents, with focus shifting to global entanglements and the important role of the middle classes, the press, and public opinion in shaping German imperialism. Recent scholarship also emphasizes that prewar globalization generated points of conflict and instabilities that were systemic. From this perspective German “World Policy” (*Weltpolitik*) initiated after 1895 can be viewed as a response to perceptions of global opportunities and risks, not just as a manipulative social-imperialist ruse by the Kaiser and conservative elites to suppress social democracy and prevent democratization.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Germany’s overseas imperialism turns out to have had undeniable similarities with the liberal imperialisms of Britain, France, and the United States.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, Germany’s naval ambitions after 1897 have been recast as part of a worldwide shift to battleship navies comparable to similar developments in the United States and Japan.<sup>5</sup> Newer analysis of the actual threat the German navy posed to Britain and its empire before the First World War has deflated this danger, while giving greater emphasis to the realignment of British imperial security strategy in the Edwardian period and Russia’s policy in the Balkans and Near East after the Russo-Japanese War as much more important factors in the rising European tensions on the eve of the First World War.<sup>6</sup>

Other scholarship has reinterpreted the July Crisis and the outbreak of war in 1914 as a systemic crisis arising from the ossification of prewar alliance systems in a deteriorating power balance. While Germany still plays a key role in that story, Austria-Hungary and Russia, and to a lesser extent France, have gained a more

prominent place in explaining that crisis, especially the dysfunctional Austro-Russian brinkmanship seen during the Balkan Wars of 1912–1913 as a path to that disaster.<sup>7</sup> With regard to the Great War itself, many recent works have highlighted the global dimensions of the conflict and paid much closer attention to how it was experienced in Germany, notably the inflated public expectations for a German final victory in 1918 and the expansive annexationist German ambitions and colonial fantasies they fueled in eastern Europe.<sup>8</sup> The privations felt from wartime food shortages induced by the British blockade, rising inequality and crime, polarization from bitter wartime controversies over the war effort and war aims, and not least, the moral deformation and lasting trauma left by those experiences and by the country's sudden defeat in 1918 all play a much more important role today in explaining the inability of Germans to come to terms with their defeat, shoulder their obligations under the Versailles Treaty, or to ever transition fully to peacetime.<sup>9</sup> The upshot of these perspectives is to question the peculiar illiberal German historical path (the *Sonderweg*) led by authoritarian leaders and conservative elites. Instead, greater emphasis is now on the common European features of liberal imperialism and the significant role of the German middle classes and wider German public in the policies devised to address the opportunities and challenges of an era of tumultuous change, fierce competition, and global conflict.<sup>10</sup>

The wider Paris Peace has also been reinterpreted in light of these newer insights, with much scholarship over the last 20 years recasting it in its global and imperial contexts and emphasizing the genuinely novel aspects of that peace effort. While that has involved an overdue rehabilitation of the motivations and intentions of the Allied peacemakers and the technical viability of many of the peace provisions (including German reparations), this work has also come to highlight the contradictions of liberal internationalism and liberal imperialism that were never reconciled at Versailles.<sup>11</sup> The sharp incongruity that arose between the ideals enunciated in Paris and the practices of liberal imperialism, and not least, the gulf between the peace terms and the ability to enforce them legitimately, have emerged as key factors in the breakdown of the Paris Peace and League of Nations in the 1930s.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the continued appeal of empire in the “post-imperial moment” of 1919 was a powerful force for global disorder over time, of which the rise of German Nazism is but one, albeit very important, part of a much bigger story that included the USSR, Turkey, the Near East, Africa, India, Southeast Asia, China, Korea, and Japan.<sup>13</sup> In any case, the lazy conflation of Versailles with the rise of Hitler is untenable in light of this newer scholarship.

The purpose of this essay is to analyze more closely how these newer interpretations alter our perspective of the Paris Peace as it related to Germany. It argues that important transformations of German imperialism in the late Wilhelmine period that have often been overlooked played a much more significant role in how Germans perceived and reacted to the peace. I will focus on the formation of a prewar German imperial mindscape—an imagined geography of opportunity, prosperity, and power—that had its roots in German liberal nationalism, was shaped by the colonial encounter, disseminated widely through navalist and pro-colonial propaganda, and that was ultimately embraced by many middle-class Germans by 1914.

As I will show, this mindscape was radicalized during the war and proved astonishingly durable in peace, casting a long shadow over the Weimar Republic and beyond. It was the persistence and radicalization of this mindscape in war and its fateful intersection with certain provisions of the armistice and peace treaty that deserve our attention, notably the warship and manpower restrictions imposed on the navy and the “internal colonial” territorial losses to Poland. Together these weakened the Weimar Republic at birth and led almost inevitably to German irredentism in eastern Europe.

## I

The German Imperial Navy became the single most important marker of Germany's world power status in the Wilhelmine period. That had been true for the German middle classes since the 1848 revolutions. Since then, the navy had gained a special place in the fulfillment of what they imagined was the German nation's world-historical mission. The navy was one of the few national institutions later defined in the 1871 constitution of the very fragmented and decentralized federal Reich and took on an outsized role in the minds of many German liberals as a unifier of *Deutschtum* (Germandom) both at home and overseas. The German navy drew overwhelmingly from the children of the educated bourgeoisie for its officer cadets, and unlike the Prusso-German army, had no exclusively noble units and was unusually merit-based.<sup>14</sup> The massive expansion of the German navy after 1897 was led by Admiral Alfred Tirpitz and fully supported by a broad cross-section of German bourgeois society. Drawing on then-current naval doctrines developed by Alfred Thayer Mahan, Tirpitz believed a larger navy was needed commensurate to Germany's rapidly expanding global trade. A battleship navy would serve as deterrent to potential aggressors, make Germany a more attractive alliance partner, and pull it into the ranks of other great world powers.<sup>15</sup>

The massive propaganda campaign Tirpitz and his associates in the Navy Office launched to sway the Reichstag for the necessary appropriations was spearheaded by self-motivated bourgeois professors and publicists who managed to saturate Germany with a sustained program of navalist propaganda.<sup>16</sup> After 1900, this role was taken over by the German Navy League, which boasted highly active local branches and would swell to more than 330,000 members by 1913, making it by far the single-largest nationalist pressure group in Imperial Germany. Indeed, in the decade before the First World War, naval propaganda and naval enthusiasm were part of the background noise of Wilhelmine life: the Navy League's magazine *Die Flotte* had a monthly circulation that exceeded its membership and was a ubiquitous sight in hotels, waiting rooms, barbershops, and railway cars, and the league organized fleet-viewing excursions, lecture series, and film screenings. Similarly, fleet reviews became mass spectacles, while naval clothing, games, and toys were very popular with adults and children alike.<sup>17</sup>

The huge material and emotional investment in the navy in the late Wilhelmine era is explained to a significant degree by the deep disappointments with Germany's colonial empire in Africa, which in addition to posing net financial liabilities

to the Reich and accounting for only a minuscule portion of its trade, became sites of scandal, uprisings, and costly colonial wars in the 1890s and first decade of the twentieth century. Similarly, the resumé of *Weltpolitik* launched in 1895 for additional colonies and spheres of interest in the Americas, Africa, the Near East, East Asia, and the Pacific had proven deeply disappointing by 1910, amounting to a few flyspecks of land in the South Pacific, a small, isolated leasehold on the Shandong peninsula, and an incomplete railway in the Ottoman Empire. As a deterrent or as an inducement to draw in new alliance partners, the German High Seas Fleet had likewise failed, tightening the alliance between France and Russia and sparking a dreadnought arms race with Britain that put impossible strains on Germany's fragile federal finances and reinforced its European strategic isolation. Militarily the German navy could not threaten the British Isles, much less the British Empire, having a wartime range confined to the North and Baltic Seas. German battleships were also numerically inferior, slower, and under-gunned compared with those of the Royal Navy. Ironically, the dreadnought arms race with Britain gave Germany's battleship navy a new lease on life just as its political, strategic, and military purposes were being eclipsed. In lieu of the sought-for "equal world standing" that an expanded colonial empire or Germany's presence in new spheres of interest might deliver, the dreadnought navy became a surrogate, one that could be deployed for the public in the great power "theatre" of the annual fleet reviews at Kiel and Spithead. It became a steel and rivet manifestation of the unmet political expectations of a great many Germans by the eve of the First World War and thus overburdened with significance.<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps not surprisingly, the German surface navy would prove to be a major disappointment in the First World War. After a disastrous skirmish with British battlecruisers around Heligoland in late August and then annihilation of the German cruisers of the East Asian Squadron near the Falkland Islands by the Royal Navy in December 1914, the German High Seas Fleet was largely confined to harbor in Wilhelmshaven and Kiel, even as the noose of the British naval blockade tightened in the North Sea. German capital ships were vulnerable to British torpedoes and submarines, and direct confrontation with the Grand Fleet was out of the question on account of the High Seas Fleet's numerical inferiority, weaker armament, and slower speed. Instead, it was kept in reserve to protect the German coast and as a bargaining chip in future peace negotiations. That strategy was, if anything, later reinforced by the inconclusive Battle of Jutland in 1916, the only direct engagement of the High Seas and Grand Fleets during the war.<sup>19</sup>

The German fleet's relative inaction in the Great War was deeply corrosive to wartime morale among its officers and sailors, and it was a source of considerable Reichstag criticism.<sup>20</sup> The only naval weapon that had any sustained offensive capability under these conditions was the submarine. The navy's relative inaction in the conflict, the crippling British blockade, and some successes with U-boats worked to radicalize opinion within the Admiralty, Navy Office, and within a circle of scholarly experts to support launching unrestricted submarine warfare against merchant ships to starve Britain into withdrawing from the war and thus ending the blockade. This was disseminated widely to the German public in wartime

propaganda, a public that by 1915 was increasingly eager to break the British blockade that had led to growing food and raw material shortages.<sup>21</sup> The moral deformation of German society that occurred under these wartime conditions and this propaganda barrage is illustrated by the widespread public jubilation on the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915.<sup>22</sup>

Tirpitz himself became an uncompromising proponent of unrestricted submarine warfare, even as the risk of drawing the United States into the conflict grew, leading ultimately to his dismissal by the Kaiser in March 1916. A master of propaganda perfected in the long campaigns for the two navy laws of 1898 and 1900 and annual Reichstag naval appropriations, and with a fiercely devoted following among younger naval officers, in retirement Tirpitz directed his vitriol against the government of Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg for weak and feckless leadership that pandered to the center-left Reichstag majority. This message resonated within the German nationalist right and coalesced into a powerful anti-Bethmann *fronde* that helped to topple Bethmann Hollweg in the summer of 1917.<sup>23</sup>

In conjunction with unrestricted submarine warfare, the German navy developed expansive annexationist war aims focused on subordinating Belgium and France and controlling or permanently seizing Antwerp and the Flemish coast. These war aims meshed closely with those of Rhenish-Westphalian heavy industry led by Hugo Stinnes that had been worked out by an influential Bonn economist Hermann Schumacher, who himself had since 1898 been very active in the navy's pro-fleet propaganda. Schumacher had traveled extensively throughout North America, East Asia, and the Dutch East Indies before the war and had an unrivaled understanding of what the global stakes were for Germany in the war. These war aims were quite explicitly a gambit to check British naval hegemony for the pursuit of a much more expansive postwar German *Weltpolitik*. As a base of naval operation for these aspirations, retaining or otherwise controlling the Flanders coast was critical.<sup>24</sup>

When the center-left Reichstag majority passed its July 1917 peace resolution abrogating annexations in a bid for a negotiated peace, it was viewed as an abandonment of any hope for a future "World Policy" and sent Tirpitz, Stinnes, and the German nationalist right into a frenzy that culminated in the founding of the populist Fatherland Party in September 1917 by Wolfgang Kapp and Tirpitz. It developed a massive following of some 750,000 members on a platform of Belgian, French, and Baltic Russian annexations through a final victory in the west. It also proposed a wartime dictatorship to achieve that aim, becoming a threat to the Hohenzollern monarchy itself. There is no question that the Fatherland Party gave the German war effort a second wind that allowed the Army Supreme Command to weather a wave of strikes and protests in January 1918 and then launch the massive spring offensive that led directly to Germany's defeat. It is not necessary here to recount the military disasters that unfolded for the Germans in August 1918 as their supply lines failed and the exhausted and demoralized German troops were hit by Spanish flu and powerful Allied counteroffensives. The gamble of this offensive had failed, and the German government was forced to seek an armistice.<sup>25</sup>

The disappointing turn of those armistice negotiations in October 1918, along with the deep shame that naval officers felt about the High Seas Fleet's inaction

in war, induced two senior commanders in the navy, Admirals Franz von Hipper and Reinhard Scheer, to launch an all-out naval assault on the British in the Dover Strait. They were acting on their own without approval from the civilian leadership in Berlin in a bid to affect the armistice negotiations and salvage the navy's honor. To the demoralized, disgruntled, and increasingly radical crews, it looked like a suicide mission. Insubordination led directly to mutinies in Kiel and Wilhelmshaven that then spread throughout Germany and escalated into the November revolution that ultimately toppled the Hohenzollern monarchy.<sup>26</sup> The dual blows of shame from the surface navy's wartime inaction and its role in precipitating revolution were later magnified by the Armistice Convention, which stipulated the internment of the bulk of the German navy in Allied waters pending a final peace settlement. Given their danger to Allied shipping, the internment and later seizure of all German U-boats were entirely justified. But the dramatic restrictions imposed upon the German surface navy—including the outright prohibition of dreadnought-class battleships—and the severe reductions in naval personnel later stipulated by the Versailles Treaty were a deadly blow to one of the central pillars of Germany's imperial identity.<sup>27</sup> Only with the prewar and wartime historical context of the German navy do these provisions begin to stand out in their full significance.

Given the importance of the German battleship navy as a "world" power status marker and the careers of thousands of hyper-patriotic young German naval officers raised in the nationalist propaganda hothouse of Wilhelmine Germany, the naval provisions of the Armistice Convention and Versailles Treaty appear profoundly misguided, especially in light of the negligible role that dreadnoughts had played in determining the outcome of the Great War and their growing obsolescence due to their vulnerability to mines, submarines, and aircraft.<sup>28</sup> This aspect of the Armistice and Treaty has not been subject to much critical analysis by historians, perhaps because doing so would puncture longstanding Royal Navy myths and require some analysis of the paranoid psychology of the German naval threat as it had shaped British public opinion and then anchored itself into the official mind in the Edwardian era. This had been fed by years of sensationalist writings about German invasion plans that had fueled regular navy panics.<sup>29</sup>

With the inordinate place that these vessels had in the German imperial mindscape, the Imperial Navy's key role in whipping up wartime populist radicalism, and the loss of career prospects with the naval provisions of the armistice and peace settlement, former navy officers would play an outsized role in the fate of the new republic. Indeed, ex-naval officers would become some of its most implacable and dangerous foes. As will be discussed more subsequently, navy *Freikorps* units took center stage in the German civil war in 1919 and the Kapp-Lüttwitz Putsch in 1920, and they later organized a terrorist group that launched multiple successful political assassinations in 1921–1922 that would profoundly weaken the new republic.

## II

Apart from the navy, the other neuralgic point in Germany's imperial identity was its status as a colonial power. In addition to the meager economic yield and

administrative and defensive liabilities of its colonies in Africa, China, and the Pacific, the failure of any of these colonies to serve as a significant destination for German settlers was a perennial gripe within the nationalist pro-colonial camp. The few German settlers who had been accommodated in arid German Southwest Africa (just over 9,000 by 1910) were cold comfort to many Germans, who looked with envy at the vast scale of European settlement in Algeria and Australia, and especially the United States, Canada, and Russia. Hopes for semi-autonomous German settler territories in Brazil or Anatolia came to nothing, while the promise of a temperate-zone colony awakened during the Second Morocco Crisis (1911) was likewise bitterly disappointed. "Internal colonization" of Germans to the Polish-speaking Prussian provinces of West Prussia and Poznan had been formally initiated in the mid-1880s and given a boost of funding during Bernhard von Bülow's chancellorship (1900–1909). Yet even this had not achieved much against Polish demographic expansion and the coordinated resistance of the Poles—it was certainly far less than many students of "internal colonization" observing similar such initiatives in the British Isles, Scandinavia, and Russia had witnessed by the eve of the First World War.<sup>30</sup>

The colonial wars fought in German Southwest and East Africa in 1904–1907 were brutal and increasingly racialized German identity. The heated Reichstag election campaign of 1907, which was fought over supplemental Reichstag appropriations to pay for these wars and the reform of colonial policy, witnessed mass dissemination of pro-colonial propaganda by various parties and nationalist bodies. This trafficked in racial tropes emerging from the colonial encounter and saw the novel permutation of a new form of imperial nationalism that established settler colonialism and the navy as its two foundational pillars. The impact of this propaganda extended to school and university instruction and became an important component of German youth identity in these years captured in German satirical magazines like *Simplizissimus*, which poked fun at Germany's fiercely patriotic children and youth.<sup>31</sup>

While the claim that Germany actively planned and then launched a world war in 1914 cannot be maintained, once it broke out the war was embraced as an opportunity by those who had been active in propagating "World Policy" to reshape the European and world order in ways that would sweep aside the prewar hurdles to establishing Germany as an equal colonial power. That was in evidence in the flurry of war aims memoranda that were submitted by various German parties and pressure groups and in which university professors like Hermann Schumacher played a leading role. By contrast, the official war aims of the government worked out by advisors to Chancellor Bethmann Hollweg and Kaiser Wilhelm looked timid and defensive.<sup>32</sup>

It was not until the de facto loss of Germany's overseas colonial empire early in the war, growing food and raw material shortages induced by the British blockade, and the conquest of Russian territory in Poland, Belarus, and the Baltic Russian governorates that Germans began to incorporate these eastern lands into a new colonial imaginary analogous to the contiguous "frontier empires" of the American and Canadian West. The conquest of Russian Lithuania, Courland, Livonia, and

Bialystok-Grodno initiated a new colonial venture under the military government of Ober Ost, which mobilized a vast administrative apparatus to maximally exploit these territories and their inhabitants for wartime food and raw material production. Among other things, this involved significant investment in rail infrastructure and largescale efforts to indoctrinate and discipline the native population into “German” forms of work. As Vejas Liulivecius has shown, given the vast scale of the German occupation and administration, this affected a profound shift in wider German perceptions of the east as a *tabula rasa*, an empty colonial space or *Raum* whose “wild” people and lands could be tamed for productive purposes, settled by Germans, and thus serve as the longed-for temperate-zone settler colony. As Germany’s overseas empire had by 1915 effectively been seized, in a very real sense the German colonial gaze shifted to Ober Ost, becoming German colonialism’s second act.<sup>33</sup>

Among the experts sent to Ober Ost to analyze its colonial potential was perhaps Germany’s leading authority on “internal colonization,” the Berlin economist Max Sering, who like Hermann Schumacher had been very active as a naval and pro-colonial propagandist and whose in-depth knowledge of American and Canadian westward settlement from his own extensive prewar travels in North America explicitly informed his expectations for German colonization in the occupied east. The defeat of Bolshevik Russia in 1917 and the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918 expanded these colonization plans to include an array of new German satellite states in western Russia, whose agricultural bounty it was hoped would relieve the acute hunger that was being felt in Germany and thus enable a final push for a victorious peace in the west. Significant propaganda was disseminated about these new colonial lands to the German public as part of the heated German war aims debate in 1917–1918, thus also assuring that these new eastern colonial ambitions gained wide currency.<sup>34</sup>

Germany’s sudden and (for most Germans anyway) unexpected defeat in the late summer of 1918 dashed all of these hopes, but in light of the fluid situation in Bolshevik Russia, the Armistice Convention stipulated that German occupation of Russian territories would only end “as soon as the Allies shall think the moment suitable, having regard to the internal situation of these territories.”<sup>35</sup> That is, the German military remained in the Baltic lands to maintain order. However, by late December a major uprising in Prussian Poznan began under the leadership of the Polish Military Organization that had by mid-January 1919 seized most of the province. The German government was at the time in no position to recover Poznan on account of the civil war that was then raging following the January 1919 Spartacist Uprising. The cession of Poznan along with West Prussia, Danzig, parts of southwestern East Prussia, and Upper Silesia was later formally sanctioned by Articles 87–93 of the Versailles Treaty. The loss of these predominantly agricultural and formerly Prussian colonial lands—along with the loss of Alsace-Lorraine—led not only to streams of German refugees but also to worsening food, fuel, and raw material shortages. These were exacerbated by the coal and rolling stock delivery provisions of the Armistice Convention and the continuation of the Allied blockade and its extension to the Baltic Sea. This came along with the formal loss of Germany’s

entire overseas colonial empire, later divvied up as League of Nations Mandates under Articles 118–132 of the Versailles Treaty.<sup>36</sup>

Germany’s new diminished and “post-colonial” status was, along with the naval provisions of the treaty, a devastating setback to the country’s long quest for equal standing among the great world powers. A smaller, narrower, de-globalized, and immensely poorer Germany emerged from these setbacks but without a full internalization by its citizens of the facts of its defeat. No major battles of the war had been fought on German soil, and the sudden request for an armistice came only months after a staggering German victory over Russia and quick on the heels of an offensive that had been billed as on the cusp of victory in army propaganda as late as August 1918. It was the vacuum of adequate explanations for this sudden defeat in a war “over there” and the circumstance of an armistice signed just as revolution unfolded in Germany that fed the “stab-in-the-back” myth more than anything else. Many simply refused to acknowledge Germany’s legitimate defeat.<sup>37</sup>

The wartime colonial ambition of Ober Ost was allowed to continue into 1919 by the regular German troops occupying Latvia and other parts of the Baltic under the armistice, joined by some 20,000 to 40,000 German *Freikorps* units promised settler land in Latvia for their services in helping to beat back the Bolsheviks. The ongoing struggle in the east, which continued well after regular German troops began to be evacuated under Allied pressure in the spring of 1919, was waged as much against the new democratic governments of Latvia and Estonia as with the Russian White armies against the Bolsheviks and was attended by incredible brutality that resulted in largescale plunder and atrocities. The *Freikorps* volunteers imagined a new, redeemed Germany of frontier possibilities arising from that struggle, a struggle that was compared explicitly to frontier wars in the American West and colonial Africa. Unquestionably a whole generation of men, including men too young to have fought in the war, were habituated to nihilistic forms of violence through that experience, as well as to rabid new forms of anti-Bolshevism.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile in Germany, urgent efforts were underway in 1919 to ramp up food production and to encourage farm settlement in German agricultural regions by returning soldiers and German refugees streaming in from Poland. The Reich Settlement Law of August 1919 was its immediate legal expression, a law worked out by none other than Max Sering. The thinking behind this scheme was informed by prewar internal colonization policy in West Prussia and Poznan but also by the notion that Germany had ceded these territories to Poland because they had been too sparsely settled by Germans, that is, by the *failure* of prewar German internal colonization.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the birth of the new German republic was accompanied by an acute sense of narrowed horizons and worry over food and fuel shortages and population pressures that all put a premium on *Raum* (space). It was also attended by the realization that the Entente had prevailed because of the lifeline of its colonies, and conversely, that Germany had lost a war due to its overreliance on overseas trade to feed itself and the failures of its prewar colonization efforts in strategically useless and vulnerable territory in Africa, China, and the Pacific. That mistake, many Germans told themselves, would not be made again. Germans returning from war in the east in 1918–1919 and from German overseas colonies would direct these



anxieties into colonial nostalgia and new colonial fantasies of the east as a solution to postwar Germany's problems and path to eventual rebirth as a great "world" power. As will be discussed more subsequently, the sizable readership of novels and memoirs trafficking in the themes of lost colonies, urgently needed *Raum*, and the colonial mythscape of the "East" reveals that this was hardly a preoccupation only of the Weimar nationalist fringe but enjoyed a much wider resonance.

### III

The *Freikorps* units called up by the desperate German government in the winter and spring of 1919 to crush the Spartacist Uprising in Berlin and similar radical socialist regimes that soon mushroomed in Braunschweig, Bremen, Hamburg, Munich, and elsewhere included naval brigades comprised of ex-naval officers and naval NCOs. Among the most effective, storied, and later infamous of these was unquestionably the 2nd Naval Brigade Wilhelmshaven, formed in March 1919 and led by Captain Hermann Ehrhardt, a decorated veteran of the colonial war in Southwest Africa and commander of torpedo boats who had seen distinguished action in both the North and Baltic Seas during the war. Ehrhardt was born in 1881 the son of a pastor in Diersburg in Baden near the French frontier and entered the Imperial Navy as a cadet in 1898 at the peak of the propaganda campaign that led to the passage of the first navy law. He reached the rank of captain in 1909, by which time Germany had the second-largest naval fleet in the world. The ignominious end of the war and role of mutinous sailors in the outbreak of the revolution were shattering experiences for Ehrhardt and many other young naval officers. As chief of a torpedo boat flotilla, he was charged with the humiliating task of escorting the U-boats back to Germany from Flanders and then leading his torpedo boats on a "funeral march" to Scapa Flow for internment under the armistice agreement, joining the massive 50-kilometer-long convoy of German battleships, cruisers, and destroyers to Scotland. These ships would never again see German harbors—they were ultimately scuttled on June 21, 1919 in a bold act of German defiance when the terms of the Versailles Treaty were announced.<sup>40</sup>

On returning to Wilhelmshaven from Scapa Flow in late December 1918, Ehrhardt witnessed a communist coup in Wilhelmshaven and led a militia of naval officers and sailors that managed to topple the communists in late January 1919.<sup>41</sup> He and his men later heeded the call of the new provisional defense minister Gustav Noske and the naval station chief in Wilhelmshaven for navy men to form a new naval brigade to defend Germany against these forces of communist radicalism. These appeals in February 1919—published in SPD papers, no less—made explicit references to recovering the navy's lost honor and reputation from the war, securing their future as career officers and sailors, and offering the prospect of a new, reborn people's navy through their distinguished service in these brigades. The appeals invoked the menace of Bolshevik hoards entering an undefended Germany from the east.<sup>42</sup>

The core of what became the 2nd Naval Brigade Wilhelmshaven had already formed autonomously around the charismatic Captain Ehrhardt. The new brigade

was defined from the beginning by its autonomy and its implacable hatred of communist radicals and contempt for the new republican government, which had signed the Armistice and thereby betrayed the navy and the country. A microcosm of sorts of the right-wing radicalism of navy leaders like Admiral Tirpitz and the loss of civilian control over the navy under Admirals Scheer and Hipper, Captain Ehrhardt and his men were driven by ferocious indignation that fetishized patriotic action to redeem the navy's honor and restore their imperial fatherland. Marching under the Imperial Navy's battle ensign, the men of this unit were in effect already on the road to coup d'état at the founding of the "Ehrhardt Brigade" in March 1919.<sup>43</sup>

As probably the most motivated, well-trained, and disciplined of all *Freikorps* units, the Naval Brigade Wilhelmshaven's ultimate significance lies in the important part it played in toppling the Bavarian Soviet Republic in April and May 1919 and in precipitating the Kapp Putsch in March 1920. In Munich, the brigade acted largely on its own and distinguished itself in street fighting that secured the city, though together with other *Freikorps* troops deployed in that operation they also engaged in plunder, mistreatment of prisoners, and summary execution of hundreds of people in the white terror that followed.<sup>44</sup> The scuttling of the High Seas Fleet in Scapa Flow by interned German navy personnel in June 1919 was greeted by Ehrhardt and his brigade as a cleansing act sweeping away the filth of revolution that had besmirched the navy since November 1918. When the Weimar government accepted the terms of the Versailles Treaty shortly thereafter on June 28, 1919, it radicalized Ehrhardt and his brigade even more and pushed them further down the path toward a coup. For the time being, their anger was directed toward the struggle against the Poles in Upper Silesia in September 1919, where the brigade was deployed in border protection and where it would be reinforced by dissolved *Freikorps* units returning from the Baltic.<sup>45</sup>

In the winter of 1919–1920, the brigade was redeployed by the government to a military camp in Döberitz near Berlin in preparation for its dissolution in compliance with the naval force reductions of the Versailles Treaty enforced by the Interallied Military Control Commission. This was itself welcomed by the Weimar government due to the growing danger that radicalized, autonomous *Freikorps* units were posing. For Ehrhardt and his brigade and the military commander of greater Berlin, General Walther von Lüttwitz, the threat of dissolution motivated them to finally launch a coup. The brigade, which had grown in ranks, weapons, and equipment and been put through very intensive training in Döberitz, had become so powerful and feared that when news of its march on Berlin reached the government early on March 13, it opted to flee to Dresden. Flying the imperial battle ensign and with white swastikas painted on some of their helmets, the Ehrhardt Brigade was greeted by Berlin crowds and occupied the government quarter without any police or military resistance, installing General Lüttwitz as defense minister and Wolfgang Kapp (co-founder of the wartime Fatherland Party) as chancellor.<sup>46</sup>

The Kapp Putsch fizzled out quickly due to the incompetence of its civilian leaders and the passive resistance of the ministerial bureaucracy and Reichsbank officials in Berlin. Interestingly, after Kapp and Lüttwitz resigned and the old government was restored on March 17, Ehrhardt and his brigade were immediately

amnestied for their role in the putsch by General Hans von Seeckt, based on the useful fiction that they had been misled and misused by Kapp and Lüttwitz. The Ehrhardt Brigade was then promptly redeployed by the government to suppress communist insurrection in Berlin sparked by the general strike, resulting in some 20 dead and 30 wounded. The general strike—called by SPD members of the government and the trade unions on March 13 and later joined by the German Communist Party as a measure to resist the Kapp Putsch—sparked a renewed wave of communist radicalism throughout Germany that led to the notorious month-long Ruhr Uprising. As in Berlin, the government had to resort to the assistance of *Freikorps* units to suppress this revolt, including the 3rd Naval Brigade Kiel (Loewenfeld Brigade) and many other units that had supported the Kapp Putsch.<sup>47</sup> In April 1920 the uprising was crushed, and the *Freikorps* were formally disbanded.

Apart from showcasing the profound weakness of the Weimar government, deeply eroding electoral support for parties of the SPD-Center-DDP Weimar coalition, and permanently dividing the German left, the Kapp Putsch had other fateful consequences for the long-term viability of the Weimar Republic. In Bavaria, where violent suppression of a communist government was within recent memory, the putsch and general strike led to the resignation of SPD prime minister Johannes Hoffmann's coalition cabinet on March 14, 1920 and the election of a right-wing government with emergency powers led by Gustav von Kahr. Under Kahr, Bavaria became safe haven for the radical right from all over Germany—Kahr and many other Bavarians of his persuasion had not forgotten the "liberation" of Bavaria by the Ehrhardt Brigade and other *Freikorps* units in 1919. After the dissolution of Ehrhardt's brigade in September 1920, he and his followers organized operations in Munich that became "Organisation Consul," a secret society that prepared for another coup and engaged in terrorist political assassinations throughout Germany while enjoying the protection of the Bavarian police.<sup>48</sup>

#### IV

In light of the one-sided decolonization of the vanquished under the Paris Peace, most of the German public and every Weimar government—from Philipp Scheidemann to Heinrich Brüning—was preoccupied with territorial revision along the Polish frontier. This was an aim that the Germans shared with the Bolshevik leadership of Russia, which had tried but failed to recover Tsarist Polish lands in the Polish-Soviet War of 1920–1921. Other casualties of the war and Versailles Treaty were the loss of the bulk of Germany's global trade, investments, and merchant marine. In much of Europe, German exports were also subject to boycott in the first years of the peace. Normalized German-Soviet relations and trade were thus one of the only avenues open to the new republic to employ and feed Germany's population immediately after the war. This culminated in the Rapallo Treaty of 1922. Other agreements made in conjunction with that treaty allowed defiance of the Versailles settlement regarding German disarmament by enabling secret military research, manufacture, and training in prohibited weapons in the USSR. This secret

defiance of the Versailles Treaty enabled Germany to rearm quickly in the 1930s and ultimately field some of the world's most modern weapons and tactics when it invaded Poland in 1939.<sup>49</sup> In any case, German defiance of the military terms of the Versailles Treaty was a Weimar policy and not (as is still commonly believed) first the result of Hitler's rise to power and his appeasement by France and Britain.

We remember Gustav Stresemann today for his work negotiating the Locarno Treaties in 1925, guaranteeing the postwar borders of Belgium and France and thus normalizing relations with these former enemies. These agreements also committed Germany to peaceful diplomacy and paved the way for its entry into the League of Nations in 1926. What is less known is that Stresemann had been a fanatical supporter of unrestricted submarine warfare and a maximal annexationist peace during the war. He had opposed the Reichstag's 1917 Peace Resolution and supported the Fatherland Party right up to Germany's defeat.<sup>50</sup> Stresemann, like most Germans, never considered the western borders of Poland final. Despite peaceful outward appearances, until his death in 1929 he worked tirelessly to revise that aspect of the treaty and steadfastly refused an "eastern Locarno" that would have recognized the territorial integrity of Poland.<sup>51</sup> Sandwiched between irredentist Germany and Russia, who were cooperating closely to modernize their militaries, Poland was bound to be territorially diminished by its neighbors, with or without Hitler.

Stresemann's view on Poland was the moderate and official position on the postwar territorial status quo to the east. The nationalist right went well beyond that, of course. Populated by many former veterans who had been part of the occupation or administration of Ober Ost and by *Freikorps* men who had fought Poles on the German-Polish borderlands and Latvians, Estonians, and Bolsheviks in the Baltic, they were not shy about declaring the entire Versailles settlement a sham. It had robbed Germany of its rightful conquests to the east, lands they believed that Germany needed for its teeming millions pent up within the stiflingly narrow confines of a diminished Reich. Instead, the forces of chaos and filth had triumphed, epitomized by Bolshevik Russia, which in their overheated, paranoid, and often anti-Semitic imaginations was increasingly fused into the villainous complex "Jewish-Bolshevism." The idea that Jews were the primary group that led and benefited from Bolshevism was a favorite propaganda claim of the White armies in Russia and had originated there. Baltic *Freikorps* units and Baltic German refugees became important conduits of this noxious idea to Germany in 1919.<sup>52</sup>

A major cottage industry of the Weimar Republic was the many novels and other writings devoted to *Raum* and the *Ostland* that reflected and nourished these thoughts. Wartime writings like Walter Flex's memoir *Der Wanderer Zwischen beiden Welten: Ein Kriegerlebnis* (The Wanderer between the Two Worlds: A War Experience [1916]), published one year before Flex was himself killed in action in Estonia, was already a bestseller during the war and became a cult book of the German political right in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, its postwar popularity was rivaled only by Remarque's *All Quiet of the Western Front*. The memoir alternated between narrative and poetry that interwove the natural beauty of the Baltic countryside with the life and death of an idealistic young officer and his dear friend in

battle. The young man had lived his ideals and selflessly sacrificed himself for the Fatherland. The Latvian *Ostland* where he had bled and was now buried had become a transcendent, eternally youthful Germany.

Consider also Hans Grimm's 1926 political novel *Volk Ohne Raum* (People Without Space), which went into multiple editions and sold a quarter of a million copies by 1931. It drew from Grimm's own experiences as a journalist and then businessman in South Africa in the years before the First World War. In one scene, the protagonist Cornelius Freibott, a returned German African settler, is confronted with the narrow-minded and feckless locals of his German hometown, a place whose limited horizons and opportunities he had fled before the war. The mindset of subordination and dependence he sees there he attributes to a failure to expand German territory abroad, concluding that Germany's current problems spring from the recent loss of colonial territory and the now restricted opportunity for healthy national development.<sup>53</sup>

Others were not content with redemptive literary fantasies of the *Ostland* and colonial nostalgia but put their thoughts to action. The successor organization of the Ehrhardt Brigade, Organisation Consul, was founded by Hermann Ehrhardt in Munich in 1921, employing many former brigade members and organizing them into secret paramilitary bands that had affiliates all over Germany. Consul men were prepared to kill leading politicians to provoke and terrorize the left. That culminated in a series of assassinations carried out by its members in 1921–1922.

The first of these was launched against Matthias Erzberger, sponsor of the Reichstag's July 1917 Peace Resolution, signatory of the Armistice of November 1918, and member of the first Weimar government as finance minister and vice-chancellor, a man for whom Ehrhardt reserved special hatred. Two former members of the Ehrhardt Brigade, Heinrich Schulz and Heinrich Tillessen, following instructions from Heinrich von Killinger in Organisation Consul in Munich, tracked Erzberger down and killed him with multiple gunshots while on a walk in the Black Forest on August 26, 1921. Both killers were able to flee to Hungary via Bavaria with the aid of the organization and never faced justice. Ehrhardt, too, escaped to Hungary, later returning to Bavaria, where he was protected by Kahr. One year later on June 24, 1922, three members of Consul, the ex-naval officer Erwin Kern, Hermann Fischer, and Ernst Werner Techow, succeeded in killing German Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau while he was on his way to work in a chauffeured car, blasting him with submachinegun fire and a hand grenade from an open vehicle. The two killers, Kern and Fischer, were eventually tracked down by police to Saaleck Castle, where Kern was fatally shot and Fischer committed suicide, immediately becoming martyrs for the far right. Rathenau was hated not only for his Jewishness and for his policy of fulfilling the terms of the Versailles Treaty but also for signing of the Rapallo Treaty just a few months prior in April 1922.

Some three weeks before the assassination of Rathenau, Kern, Hans Husert, and Karl Oehlschläger attempted to kill former German chancellor Philipp Scheidemann in a cyanide attack. Scheidemann had declared a republic in November 1918

and was its first chancellor. By 1922 more than 350 right-wing political murders had been committed in Germany by Consul and many other groups and individuals, decimating the leadership of the center and center-left parties and doing lasting damage to the republic. A trial of 26 Consul members in Leipzig in 1924 that included Hermann Ehrhardt led to the conviction of 18 on various charges, but all received very light sentences from sympathetic judges.<sup>54</sup>

This impunity was magnified by the literary success of the self-exculpatory memoirs and novels later published by Ehrhardt and the former Baltic *Freikorps* veteran and fellow Consul terrorist Ernst von Salomon.<sup>55</sup> While Ehrhardt and von Salomon had a strained relationship with Hitler and his followers on account of their own monarchism and other disagreements, it should not come as a surprise that many other ex-navy men would eventually bolster the ranks of the Nazi Party. Indeed, the training of the paramilitary *Sturmabteilung* (SA) owes itself to their work and expertise, while many other former Ehrhardt men were later absorbed into the SS.<sup>56</sup>

## V

The underlying fragility of the Paris Peace was rooted in the incongruity between a beaten (but not fully defeated), decolonized, disarmed, and territorially diminished Germany, on the one hand, and the not fully victorious but much expanded French and British Empires. Large sections of the German public never reconciled themselves to that new order. That was due to the tenacious hold of an imperial mindscape forged well before the war and originating in liberal nationalist ideals that had over time been shaped by globalization, the colonial encounter, navalism, and the wartime experience. Germans were polarized and morally deformed by the war, in denial and embittered about their defeat, at war with themselves over the war's outcomes, and inwardly at war with the world as soon as the terms of the peace were made public. Naval disarmament and the territorial losses to Poland were especially powerful catalysts for this violent rejection because they assaulted key features of that mindscape. Middle-class agents and the wider German public played a far more direct and active role in this process than was accounted for in the older *Sonderweg* historiography, which tended to link German imperialism with illiberal, atavistic impulses and manipulation by conservative elites. By highlighting the popular, modern, and liberal features of German imperialism and its embrace by the middle classes, we can better account for its remarkable durability even as it met setbacks before 1914, was deformed by war, and was ultimately reshaped by the Paris Peace. This reveals a deeper German kinship with British, French, and American forms of liberal imperialism, whose violence was a basic feature of entitlement to expanding geographies of opportunity, prosperity, and power. Thwarted German national ambitions to such a geography and its naval trappings redirected that violence inward and to new colonial spaces in the east.

## Notes

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- 16 *Ibid.*, 197–212.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 447–449. In greater detail, Rüter, *The Great Naval Game*, 50–83; Sebastian Diziol, “*Deutsche, werdet Mitglieder des Vaterlandes!*”: *Der Deutsche Flottenverein 1898–1934*, 2 Volumes (Kiel: Solivagus Praeteritum, 2015).
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- 27 Section E Naval Conditions (Articles XX–XXXIII) of the Armistice of 11 November 1918 required the internment of 6 battle cruisers, 10 battleships, 8 light cruisers, and 50 destroyers. The Versailles Treaty’s Naval Clauses (Part 5, Section II, Articles 181–197) restricted the German navy to 6 pre-dreadnought battleships (*Deutschland* or *Lothringen* type), 6 light cruisers, 12 destroyers, 12 torpedo boats and a personnel of 15,000 men. Dreadnoughts and submarines were expressly prohibited. All vessels in internment with the Allies were to be surrendered.
- 28 Eric Grove, “The Battleship *Dreadnought*: Technological, Economic and Strategic Contexts,” in *The Dreadnought and the Edwardian Age*, eds. Robert J. Blyth, Andrew Lambert, and Jan Rüger (Farnham, Surrey and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 165–181; Paul Kennedy, “HMS *Dreadnought* and the Tides of History,” in *ibid.*, 213–237.
- 29 See here Frans Coetzee, *For Party and Country: Nationalism and the Dilemmas of Popular Conservatism in Edwardian England* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); David G. Morgan-Owen, *The Fear of Invasion: Strategy, Politics, and British War Planning, 1880–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).
- 30 Grimmer-Solem, *Learning Empire*, 426–435.
- 31 *Ibid.*, 340–360; “Patriotischer Nachwuchs,” *Simplicissimus*, 1 April 1907, 2.
- 32 Grimmer-Solem, *Learning Empire*, 541–545.
- 33 Vejas Gabriel Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 54–172.
- 34 Grimmer-Solem, *Learning Empire*, 558–567.
- 35 Armistice with Germany, 11 November 1918, Section B, Article XII.
- 36 Richard Bessel, *Germany After the First World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 95–97; Jochen Böhrer, *The Civil War in Central Europe: The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 59–145; Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*, 171–197; Marcia Klotz, “The Weimar Republic: A Post-Colonial State in a Still-Colonial World,” in *Germany’s Colonial Pasts*, eds. Eric Ames, Marcia Klotz, and Laura Wildenthal (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 135–147.
- 37 Krumeich, *Die unbewältigte Niederlage*, 106–160.
- 38 Liulevicius, *War Land*, 227–243; Gerwarth, *The Vanquished*, 68–76.
- 39 Robert L. Nelson, “The Archive for Inner Colonization, the German East, and World War I,” in *Germans, Poland, and Colonial Expansion to the East: 1850 Through the Present*, ed. Robert L. Nelson (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 65–93, here 85–86.
- 40 Friedrich Freska, *Kapitän Ehrhardt: Abenteuer und Schicksale* (Berlin: August Scherl, 1924), 7–77; Herwig, *The German Naval Officer Corps*, 265–269; Gabriele Krüger, *Die Brigade Ehrhardt* (Hamburg: Leibnitz Verlag, 1971), 25–26; Hagen Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik 1918–1920* (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt, 1969), 256–257. See also more recently John Koster, *Hermann Ehrhardt: The Man Hitler Wasn’t* (Portland: Idle Winter Press, 2018).
- 41 Freska, *Kapitän Ehrhardt*, 86–88; Krüger, *Die Brigade Ehrhardt*, 14–17.
- 42 Krüger, *Die Brigade Ehrhardt*, 15–23.
- 43 Freska, *Kapitän Ehrhardt*, 89–98; Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik*, 257.
- 44 Krüger, *Die Brigade Ehrhardt*, 30–31; Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik*, 98–99. Cf. Freska, *Kapitän Ehrhardt*, 124–129.
- 45 Freska, *Kapitän Ehrhardt*, 133–158; Krüger, *Die Brigade Ehrhardt*, 33–34.
- 46 See here Erwin Könnemann and Gerhard Schulze, eds., *Der Kapp-Lüttwitz-Ludendorff Putsch: Dokumente* (Munich: Olzog, 2002).

- 47 Krüger, *Die Brigade Ehrhardt*, 49–62; Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik*, 260–318. Cf. Freska, *Kapitän Ehrhardt*, 159–201.
- 48 Krüger, *Die Brigade Ehrhardt*, 65–87, 100–105.
- 49 Ian Ona Johnson, *Faustian Bargain: The Soviet German Partnership and the Origins of the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).
- 50 Jonathan Wright, *Gustav Stresemann: Weimar’s Greatest Statesman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 67–81, 100–105; Heinz Hagenlücke, *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei: Die nationale Rechte am Ende des Kaiserreichs* (Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1997), 73.
- 51 Wright, *Gustav Stresemann*, 268–269, 312–314, 323, 335–337, 342, 344–345, 358–362, 400, 403, 409–411, 437–438, 472. See also Manfred Berg, *Gustav Stresemann und die Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika: Wirtschaftliche Verflechtung und Revisionspolitik* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1990), 380–417; Thomas Göthel, *Demokratie und Volkstum: Die Politik gegenüber den nationalen Minderheiten in der Weimarer Republik* (Cologne: Sh-Verlag, 2002).
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## Part II

# Peripheries of Peace?