

# When Germany Dictates a Peace

Examples of Dominating Greed in Victory Which Culminated at Brest-Litovsk

By J. B. Firth

Still the vain and necessarily inconclusive controversy goes on, though in diminishing volume, over what should be the terms of the next Peace — if the Allies win the war.

I observe, however, that those who wish to enter at once into negotiations for a patched-up peace which would leave Hitlerism unbroken, Austria, Czecho-Slovakia and Poland unredeemed and an unrepentant Reich in possession of nine-tenths of its ill-gotten gains, studiously avoid telling us what Germany's conception of a "just" peace would be.

They assume that she would approach the problem of a negotiated peace in a reasonable frame of mind. On what evidence? I know of none. But the evidence to the contrary is overwhelming.

Germany's record as a treaty-maker is a matter of history. It is a very bad record. Bismarck only offered to play "the honest broker" when he was broking lands and territories which he did not covet. But look at the treaties which Prussia and Germany made within living memory. They can be tabulated very concisely:

1864—Treaty of Vienna by which Denmark was dismembered.

1866—Treaty of Prague after the Prusso-Austrian war. This was followed by minor treaties with the South German States which had taken the side of Austria. Hanover, Hesse-Cassel, Nassau, Frankfurt were annexed by Prussia. The Saxon Army was placed under the control of the Prussian King. The German Confederation was dissolved and the North German Confederation established under the leadership of Prussia and with Austria excluded.

1871... Treaty of Frankfurt which ended the Franco-Prussian war. Alsace and Lorraine were torn from France and an indemnity of five milliards (£200,000,000) was exacted.

All these three treaties were Bismarck's own treaties, as the wars had been Bismarck's own wars. The terms of the first and third were universally condemned by the public opinion of Europe as being excessively harsh.

### Bismarck as "Moderate"

All these treaties, be it observed, were "dictated" treaties — a point of importance in view of German indignation at the "dictated" Treaty of Versailles. Both Prussia and Germany bluntly refused to submit their treaties to any European Congress for revision. The losers must pay, they said, what the victors demanded. Neutrals were sharply told not to meddle in other nations' quarrels.

In comparison with the others the Treaty of Prague could almost be termed mild. From defeated Austria Prussia demanded no territory and no indemnity. To whom was this exceptional generosity due? Not to the King of Prussia; he was furious at Austria being let off so cheaply, though at first he had been

totally opposed to the war. No, it was the Man of Blood and Iron himself who showed this chivalrous forbearance, or, shall we say, conceived this stroke of clever statecraft.

Why? Because, after destroying at Sadova Austria's old pretensions to the hegemony of the German States as being lawful inheritor of the dignities of the Holy Roman Empire, Bismarck was bent upon securing the neutrality of Austria in his coming war with Louis Napoleon for the hegemony of Europe. He meant that war to come soon, and he did not want an Austria, eager for revenge, on his flank.

Bismarck's moderation, therefore, was as calculated as his brutality towards Denmark two years before. "Violence and conquest," wrote Lord Russell, "were the bases upon which alone the Partitioning Powers (i.e., Prussia and Austria) founded their agreement." When they fell out, Prussia at once seized the entire spoil, the chief jewel of which was Kiel Harbour. Already the idea of a German Fleet had made a strong appeal to German sentiment and with it the idea of a Kiel Canal from the Baltic to the North Sea.

Let us turn now to the better known story of the French negotiations for an Armistice after the French Empire had fallen at Sedan, while Bazaine was still shut up in Metz on the point of capitulation, and the German armies were camped within range of the walls of Paris.

On the French side counsel was distracted and confused. On the German side there was a cold resolve to squeeze the last penny out of an enemy still dangerous in its despair and still formidable, if it should find a strong rallying centre and a capable leader. Bismarck was anxious to cash in on his victories and get out of France while the going was good. The German Generals, who resented his presence at their Councils of War, were eager, as Blucher had been in 1815, to bleed France white.

During his first interview with Bismarck M. Thiers was told that the price Germany required for an armistice was Alsace-Lorraine and an indemnity of four milliards, \$160,000,000. This was promptly rejected as impossible. Nevertheless, when three months later Thiers entered the presence chamber for the second time he was greeted with the observation that the amount of the indemnity had been raised from four milliards to six. And Belfort, the proud fortress which had gallantly withstood all attacks and assaults, must be surrendered as well as Metz.

### France on the Rack

Bismarck was fertile in excuses. It was not he who had raised the terms, he said, but les militaires, who had the ear of the King. "In Germany," he added, "they accuse me of losing the battles that Count Moltke has won. Do not ask me for impossibilities!" Bismarck wished it to be inferred that if the final word had rested with him he would have left the French in possession of Metz!

After renewed reference to Berlin on the subject of the indemnity, the final word came through that not a franc less than five milliards could be considered. And until this \$200,000,000 was paid to the last sou German soldiers would be quartered on French soil at French expense.

Finally, the question of Belfort was reached. Bismarck's contention was that all Alsace must be transferred to Germany, and Belfort was in Alsace. For two hours Thiers entreated and expostulated. Here is his own story:

"No," I cried. "I will never surrender both Metz and Belfort. You mean to ruin France in her finances, and ruin her on her frontiers! Well, take her, administer the country, levy the taxes. We shall retire, and you will have to govern her in the eyes of the whole of Europe, if Europe permits." I was desperate. Count Bismarck, taking my hands, said to me: "Believe me. I have done all I could; but as for leaving you part of Alsace, it is quite impossible." "I sign this very instant," I rejoined, "if you give me Belfort. If not, nothing; nothing but the last extremities, whatever they may be."

### Pouching the Prizes

Bismarck then agreed to make one more effort to induce the King and Moltke to relent. He wrote and despatched two letters, and they waited. After a long interval Bismarck left the room, and on his return stood with his hand on the key of the door:

"I have an alternative to propose to you," he said. "Which will you have: Belfort or the abandonment

of our entry into Paris?" I do not hesitate for a moment and with a look to Jules Favre, who divines my feeling and shares it: "Belfort! Belfort!" I cried. The entry of the Germans into Paris must be a cruel blow to our pride, a danger to us who held the reins of government, but — our country before everything.

It was a very well-acted scene, and if Bismarck had not rehearsed it over again in later years and mocked in the recital to Busch the tears and grey hairs of Jules Favre he would have acquired more merit with posterity. Let us call it, therefore, a well-acted scene!

Provisionally for the Allies the dictation of the peace terms after the Great War lay not with the Germans but with the Allies. Yet the world knows with sufficient accuracy what the Germans' terms would have been, because they were repeatedly invited to indicate the sort of terms on which they were ready to consider a negotiated peace. They always framed their replies on the assumption that they were in a winning position and that they were to pouch the prizes of war.

Never once from first to last did the Germans give a straightforward undertaking to restore the full sovereign independence of Belgium, though this was always the first question on which the Allies sought assurances. Always they returned evasive replies, the fact being that they could not agree among themselves. The Pan-Germans demanded sweeping annexations in the West as well as in the East, and the all-powerful Ludendorff belonged to their school of thought.

### Parcelling Out Belgium

Hindenburg, on the other hand, was more moderate. In 1915 he said that "Germany should take no more than she could digest without damage to her Germanism." In the West he would have been content with Liege "to round off her frontiers," i.e., to facilitate the next invasion: in the East he opposed those who wished to grab as much of Poland as they could without alienating Austria, for she also was reckoning on large annexations.

Ludendorff, on the other hand, in 1915 wanted Antwerp and large

tracts of Russian Poland. When Germany's war prospects brightened in 1916-17 his demands increased, and as Bethmann-Hollweg and his embarrassed successors in the Chancellery always referred this question to General Headquarters, the final word lay with him.

A year later at Spa on July 2, just a month before the Germans' Black Day of August 8, Ludendorff was still demanding that "Belgium must remain under German influence in order to prevent a hostile invasion from ever advancing through it again." Belgium, too, must be divided into two States, Flanders and Walloon, united solely through the person of the ruler.

These are not the inventions of partisans anxious to bolster up the case of the Allies: they are taken from the official German publications. If the Germans had won the war Ludendorff would have dictated the peace in the same temper as that in which he dictated, through Gen. Hoffman, the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

### Humbling of Russia

That was one of the most astounding peace negotiations in all history. With a sublimely insolent disregard of the facts of the military position, Trotsky had offered an armistice on the basis of "No annexations; no indemnities."

Hoffmann thereupon blandly explained that Germany did not want to annex, but she would require the voluntary cession of Poland, Lithuania and Courland. "Joffe, one of the Russian delegates, was dumfounded," wrote Hoffmann, "and Pokrovsky said that the forcible annexation of 18 governments amounted to a dictated peace." The delegates, therefore, dispersed to Berlin, Vienna and Petersburg and for three months there was no resumption of armistice or peace talks. In the meantime, the German forces simply marched on unopposed from place to place, setting up a puppet government in the Ukraine and scouring thousands of square miles for forced supplies of wheat and coal.

More than three months elapsed before Trotsky returned to the conference room at Brest and there, after uttering cloudy and windy appeals which, according to legend, caused Hoffmann to bang the table with his fist in angry impatience, he signed the most humiliating surrender of modern times. Not that

it mattered much, because the collapse of Turkey, Bulgaria and Austria a few months later led also to the collapse of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk and the downfall of Ludendorff and of the German Empire.

Posterity will waste no sympathy on Trotsky and his Bolsheviks. They richly deserved the Prussian jack-booting which they received. But as a sample of German peacemaking the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk stood unmatched for cynical and brutal rapacity till the appearance on the European scene of Adolf Hitler.

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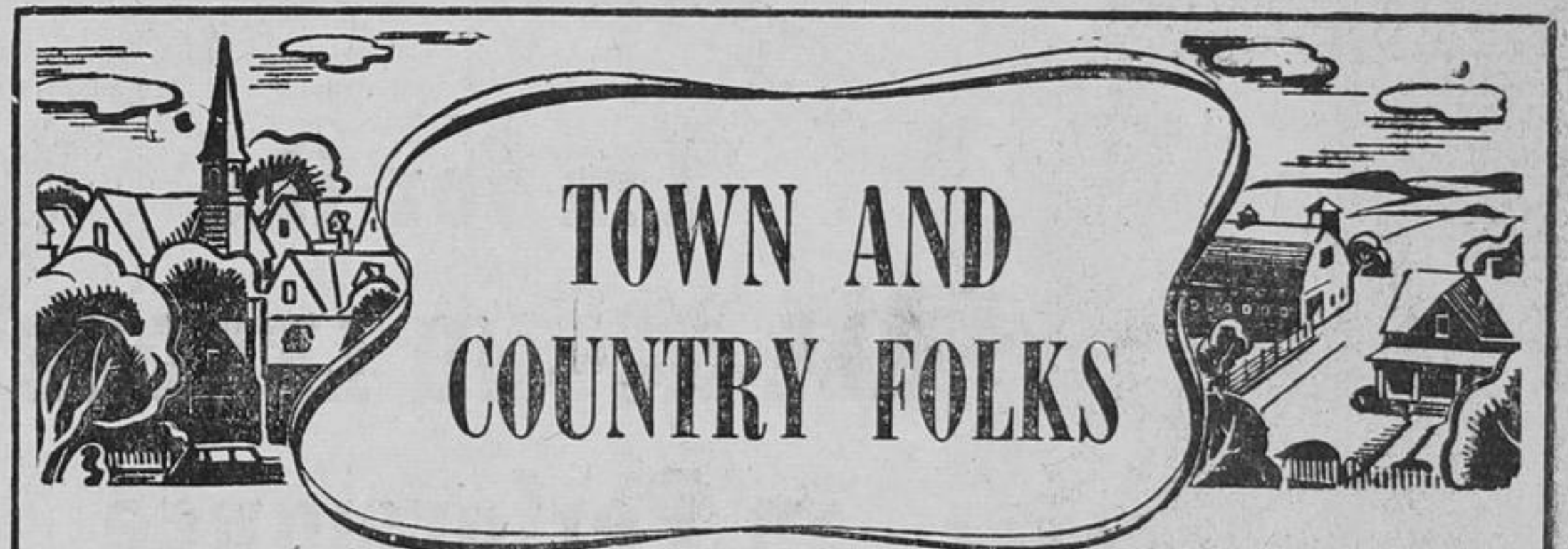
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