

An Early Expression of Max Weber’s Thoughts on Germany’s “War Guilt”

By Peter Mentzel*

Max Weber published numerous newspaper articles on the political situation in Germany during the chaotic days between the November Armistice and his untimely death in June 1920. His article, “Zum Thema der ‚Kriegsschuld‘” (reproduced in the *Gesammelte Politische Schriften*, among other places) published in the edition of the *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 17 January 1919, has not, to the best of my knowledge, been translated in its entirety into English until now. The article is important because it introduces a number of themes to which Weber would return over the course of the next several months, as well as certain issues about which he seems to have lost interest.

Weber wrote this article during a spectacular moment in German history, and an important one in his own life. He had just joined the newly launched liberal German Democratic Party (founded in part by his younger brother Alfred) and in December ran (unsuccessfully) for the new Reichstag. He was in close communication with the Provisional Government in Berlin and was apparently considered both for Minister of the Interior and Ambassador to Berlin (Mommmsen 1984, 301–11). During December 1918 he became a frequent freelance contributor to the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, as well as the candidate for a number of university positions, including at the University of Munich. In March 1919 he decided to accept the position, at least in part, it seems, because he would be closer to his lover, Else Jaffé, who lived in Munich (Schröder and Whimster 2013, 18).

In the midst of the German revolution, Munich and, theoretically at least, the whole of Bavaria, had come under the authority of “the People’s State of Bavaria,” proclaimed by Kurt Eisner in November 1918. Among other projects, Eisner and his secretary, Felix Fechenbach, engaged in a vigorous campaign to publish secret diplomatic documents which, they believed, demonstrated Germany’s culpability for the war. These, and other intellectuals and journalists associated with the Independent Social Democrats (the nucleus of the soon-to-be-proclaimed Communist Party of Germany) are the “literati” with “weak and immature natures” castigated by Weber in the first paragraph of his article.

* Senior Fellow, Liberty Fund Inc., 11301 Meridian Street, Carmel, IN 46032 USA. The author can be reached at pmentzel@libertyfund.org.

It was within this context that Weber contributed this article. One finds in it a number of themes to which he would return over and over again through the course of the following six months. In particular, it represents one of the earliest treatments by Weber of a matter that would dominate much of the subsequent discussion of the Versailles treaty: the matter of War Guilt. Importantly, he published the article *before* the establishment of the Allied “war guilt” commission, and indeed before the official opening of the Paris Peace Conference, which opened the next day. In his welcoming speech as president of the conference, Prime Minister Clemenceau announced that the first question to be discussed was “the responsibility of the authors of the war.” The grandly named “Commission on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War and on Enforcement of Penalties” was duly established several days later on 25 January. The commission delivered its report on 6 May, the day before the German delegation was officially summoned to receive the draft of the treaty. The report declared that “the responsibility [for the war] lies wholly upon the Powers which declared war in pursuance of a policy of aggression. . . The Responsibility rests first on Germany and Austria, secondly on Turkey and Bulgaria.” The next day, the German delegation received the text of the Treaty and read the (in)famous Article 231: “The Allied and Associated Governments affirm and 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.”

Weber’s main point in his 17 January article was his insistence that, although the Imperial German government was indeed guilty of mistakes (some of them very serious) and misjudgments, as well as flagrant, even outrageous, blunders, these in no way amounted to moral guilt and certainly did not imply sole German responsibility for the war. This was a very important point for Weber, and was indeed closely tied to his belief in the importance of an Ethics of Responsibility for any decent statesman. As early as October 1918 in a private letter Weber wrote that “a lost war is not a divine judgement” (a premonition of his statements at the beginning of his January newspaper article) (Mommson 1984, 294). Indeed, much of the article amounts to a scathing attack on the Kaiser’s government, filled, in Weber’s view, with incompetent “stubborn parvenue loud-mouths” (*verstockte parvenü-mäßige Großsprecherer*). Nor does Weber shrink from condemning specific actions of the German government and military: Zimmermann’s outreach to Mexico, the policy of unrestricted submarine warfare, or Germany’s plans to annex Belgium. He even goes so far as to point out the folly and foolishness of certain pre-war policies that he thinks contributed to the outbreak of the war (e. g., Germany’s naval arms race with the British Empire, its support of the Boers, and its mishandling of the Moroccan crisis). Crucially, however, none of these mistakes or miscalculations constituted any kind of moral “failing,” and certainly could not in any way be used to ascribe to Germany the sole guilt for the outbreak of the war.

A second theme that figures prominently in the article, and is also a recurring line of argument in Weber’s subsequent lectures and articles on the subject, is Russian

culpability in starting the war. In this article, Weber makes the argument that of all the combatant countries, Russia was the only one whose strategic goals could only be realized through an offensive war. But he actually goes further than that, arguing that the destruction of "Tsarism" was a triumph for the entire world, not just Germany, and that the German nation should be proud of this accomplishment. This argument was also crucial in the subsequent "Kriegsschulddenschrift," published later in 1919 by a committee made up of Weber, Delbrück, and Mendelsohn-Bartholdy. In wording almost exactly the same as in his January article, the ultimate responsibility for the war lay with Tsarist Russia which "constituted the most terrible system for the enslavement of men and nations that had ever been devised – until the peace treaty that has been presented here" (*ibid.*, 319).

A final theme that comes up in this article to which Weber returned was the possibility of a violent irredentist resistance movement in Germany's eastern provinces in the event that they were handed over to the new Polish state. In this article, these ideas are presented as vague musings, but in subsequent months, Weber came explicitly to advocate such armed resistance, even though it might invite an Allied invasion. As late as November 1919, for example, in a private letter we find almost word-for-word his expressions on this subject in his January newspaper article: "If the Poles should invade Danzig and Thorn, or the Czechs move into Reichenberg, the first task is to establish a German irredenta... Every nationalist must do it, especially the students. Irredenta means: nationalism with revolutionary instruments of force" (*ibid.*, 312).

These three themes are of interest because they represent embryonic forms of arguments that Weber would develop in the months leading up to the signing and ratification of the Treaty. Indeed, the working group established in Weber's very house in February 1919, the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Politik des Rechts* (informally known as the *Heidelberger Vereinigung*), explored a number of issues, including the war guilt question, Weber broached in his January article "in anticipation of German participation in the final peace negotiations" (Turner 2016, 147–8; Mazur 2017, 20). Several members of the *Vereinigung*, including Weber himself, were part of the German delegation in Versailles, and they were instrumental in drafting the official response to the war guilt report in May, in which, once again, many of Weber's earlier arguments were apparent.

Besides the many ways in which this article functions as a kind of "rough draft" of Weber's future writing on the subject of war guilt, there is another interesting aspect of this article to which, to the best of my knowledge, Weber does not return in any of his subsequent political writings. This consists of several paragraphs in which he sketches out four "articles" that would be part of a "League of Nations Statute on a Popular Law of War" (*Kriegsvölkerrechtlichen Völkerbundesstatuts*). The four cases, as outlined in the article, speak for themselves. But they are worth highlighting for a couple of reasons. First, they reveal an interest, or at least willingness to engage intellectually, with President Wilson's plans for some sort of "general association of nations" first

broached as point 14 in his famous 14 Points Speech. The full details of Wilson's vision for the League of Nations would not be known until the formal inauguration of the peace conference, and so could not have been known to Weber as he wrote this article. Yet, he clearly found it an interesting enough idea to try to incorporate it into his arguments against German guilt for starting the war.

Of course, Weber could not, in the context of a newspaper article, completely elaborate on how these four proposed "statutes" would function. Importantly, there was no apparatus of punishment proposed for states which fell afoul of these rules, only that they would be "held in disrepute" (*verfällt dem internationalen Verruf*) (Palonen 2017, 135). This hints at the central place the concept of honor (*Ehre*) held in Weber's political theory (Turner 2016, 170). He expressed this, in the context of the war guilt question, with great force and clarity in his famous "Politics as Vocation" lecture delivered only a few days after the publication of his *Frankfurter Zeitung* article:

Instead of searching like old women for 'the guilty one' after the war – in a situation in which the structure of society produced the war – everyone with a manly and controlled attitude would tell the enemy, 'We lost the war. You have won it. That is now all over. Now let us discuss what conclusions must be drawn according to the objective interests that came into play and what is the main thing in view of the responsibility towards the future which above all burdens the victor.' Anything else is undignified and will become a boomerang. A nation forgives if its interests have been damaged, but no nation forgives if its honor has been offended, especially by bigoted self-righteousness (cited in *ibid.*, 149).

Indeed, the notion that the vanquished in a war pays an indemnity to the victor is a very old one in European politics, and Weber had no problem with this principle. What was unprecedented in European history was the report of the Allied war guilt committee as finally rendered in Article 231, which assigned responsibility for the war. "The indictment by the Allies was thus a novelty. The 'Report of the Allied Commission on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War and on Enforcement of Penalties' sought to determine the 'responsibility of the authors of the war,' the 'facts as to breaches of laws and customs of war'... (clearly implying...responsibility not only for breaches of law but of the peace itself)" (*ibid.*, 160).

To conclude, this short newspaper article links Weber's thinking on the huge issue of German war guilt (itself largely reflective of intellectual opinion of the time) with his writings on the subject both before and after the Versailles Treaty.

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