

ZBIGNIEW MAZUR
Poznań

MAX WEBER AND GERMANY'S DEFEAT OF 1918

Max Weber (1864–1920) was of the generation whose members rarely condemned war as such and widely approved of armed combat as a test of personal prowess and community organisation. Like many of his contemporaries, Weber considered war to be an admissible and sometimes even desired solution to international conflicts. He viewed politics in Darwinian categories of ruthless competition and fight to win power within a state and to dominate other states. Thus politics “would mean the pursuit for a portion of power, or for influencing the division of power whether it be between states, or between groups of people which the state encompasses.”¹ His identification of politics with the struggle for power left space for acute international conflicts, including armed conflicts, especially if highly emotional nationalism was unchallenged. For Weber, the nation was the supreme value. In 1916 he wrote: “Politik habe ich immer nur unter dem nationalen Gesichtspunkte angesehen, nicht nur die auswärtige, sondern alle Politik überhaupt“ [I have always regarded politics from a national point of view – not only foreign policy, but all policy].² That viewpoint was reflected in the overreaching and ambitious vision of German national interests and forceful arguments against defensively protecting the united state status in order to offensively build Germany's status of a great world power practicing a decisive world policy (1895 lecture *The Nation State and Economic Policy*). In the history of German political thought, Weber has been classified as a proponent of liberal imperialism together with Hans Delbrück, Paul Rohrbach and Friedrich Naumann. He blamed Bismarck for his “conservative” policy with no vision to create a “greater Germany” (1915)³. That policy only delayed the struggle for Germany's power status and for the recognition of Germany as equal to other world powers, and the battle to resist the division of the world between “Anglo-Saxon convention” and “Russian bureaucracy”. “Max Weber,

¹ M. Weber, *The Spirit of Work and Vocation Second Lecture: Politics as Vocation*, 1919, Verlag Duncker & Humboldt, translated and edited by D. Waters, B. Elbers, T. Waters 2014, https://www.academia.edu/26954620/Politics_as_Vocation.pdf, p. 10.

² M. Weber, *Deutschland unter den europäischen Weltmächten*, 1916, <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/-8126/6>.

³ M. Weber, *Bismarcks Außenpolitik und die Gegenwart*, Frankfurter Zeitung 25. Dezember 1915, <http://gutenberg.spiegel.de/buch/-8126/3>.

at least, accepted the possibility of war. He was convinced that the nation might have to take decisive military action if the situation demanded it.”⁴

The armed conflict of 1914 was thus not a great surprise for Weber. He, like most German academics, greeted it with passionate enthusiasm. The vast majority of German academics felt obliged to support the war by promoting it. The general consensus was that the war was due to French, Russian and British policies aimed at encircling Germany. It was expected that victory would be quick and easy following a short and victorious military campaign similar to those in Denmark (1864), Austria (1866) and France (1870). Hardly any academic was immune to the war fever. Among those infected were philosophers like Rudolf Eucken and Paul Natrop, sociologist Georg Simmel, economist Werner Sombart, and historians including Eduard Meyer, Hans Delbrück, Hermann Oncken, Karl Lamprecht and Friedrich Meinecke.⁵ German national pride grew with enthusiasm after the first victories over Belgian and French armies. The military effort was supported by all political parties, including social democrats beguiled by the propagated threat of reactionary Russian tsarism. Also Weber was fascinated with the “great and wonderful war” and took pride in Germany being a “great cultural nation” which passed its test with flying colours at that historic moment. Weber was a megalomaniac. In his private letters he argued that Germans did deserve to be called a “great cultural nation”: “People who live in a civilised milieu and are nevertheless able to rise to the horrors of war (no achievement for a black man from Senegal!)”. He argued that in the difficult war situation most Germans acted honourably and that was “real humanity”.⁶ He regretted that due to his advanced age he could not join combat forces at the front, and instead took up an uninspiring administrative post, in which he produced a highly detailed report on the management of infirmaries.⁷

He differed from enthusiastic nationalists in one respect. His evaluation of the international situation was correct, and he had no high hopes for a stunning victory and Germany becoming a world power as a result of the war. Occasionally, when he was impressed with successes of the German army, he was more optimistic, but never for long. His worry was the dangerous isolation of Germany in the international arena. Having learned that the situation at the eastern front was good, on 28 August 1917 he wrote: “I now look forward with optimism... If we are reasonable and do not expect to rule the world, then we shall survive with honour militarily and otherwise.”⁸ Such optimism was rare however. Marianne Weber recalled that he was considered to be a “pessimist” because he was of the opinion that the war should exclusively be

⁴ W. J. Mommsen, M. Steinberg, *Max Weber and German politics 1890-1920*, University of Chicago Press, 1990, https://books.google.pl/books?id=a99RC3rJoIgC&redir_esc=y, p. 79.

⁵ H. Olszewski, *Nauka historii w upadku. Studium o historiografii i ideologii historycznej w imperialistycznych Niemczech*, Poznań 1982, pp. 76-81; K. Schwalbe, *Wissenschaft und Kriegsmoral. Die deutschen Hochschullehrer und die politischen Grundfragen des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Göttingen 1969.

⁶ M. Weber 13 April 1915 to Helen Weber, in: M. Weber, *Briefe 1915-1917*, Tübingen 2008, p. 38.

⁷ M. Weber, *Erfahrungsberichte über Lazarettverwaltung*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Politik im Weltkrieg. Schriften und Reden 1914-1918*, Tübingen 1984, pp. 26-48.

⁸ W. Mommsen, M. Steinberg, *Max Weber...*, p. 192.

defensive and peace should be made on the basis of the *status quo*.⁹ He did not count on a “victorious peace” dictated by Germany, but he hoped for a consensual peace negotiated by partners respecting one another and – if possible – a peace strengthening Germany’s security in the west and expanding its sphere of influence to the east. He strongly condemned Germany’s monstrous plans to annex territories in the west and east, but supported the idea of establishing countries dependent on Germany at the expense of Russian territories. He viewed unlimited submarine warfare as madness, rightly expecting that it would provoke the United States to become involved in the European war. America’s entrance into the war on the side of the allies would tip the balance in their favour.¹⁰ He was of the opinion that only in the future and in more favourable circumstances might Germany strive to become a world power. “The real task of German policy in the war, Weber therefore emphasized, was not to seek territorial acquisitions of any kind beyond its national boundaries but to create a favourable basis for a *future German world policy*.”¹¹

Weber believed that Germany had entered the war in a highly unfavourable international situation and with a government unprepared to face the current challenges of world politics. In 1895, having recognised the Junkers’ contribution to uniting the country, he declared the end of their world. He also strongly criticised the bourgeois class, which kept gaining economic power but was unable to undertake a great mission of expansion overseas.¹² Weber was also highly critical of the “personal rule” of Wilhelm II, underlining that Wilhelm was a dangerous dilettante threatening German interests with his irresponsible activities. In no way was Weber an enthusiast of the republican concept. Instead, he highly valued the consolidating role of monarchy and favoured a parliamentary (constitutional) monarchy. He proposed abandoning the Prussian three-class electoral law, introducing the principle of government accountability to parliament, and limiting the political influence of the military and of bureaucratic routines through their democratic control. At the turn of 1918 and 1919, Weber propagated his reform ideas in his essays and numerous public lectures instantly reported on in the daily press. While speaking in Munich on 4 November 1918, he appealed for limitation of the political impact of the military and for a rationalisation of bureaucracy. “Everything that is rightly called militarism should be eliminated from German politics. That means primarily any politicisation of the army, every intervention by military authorities in matters of their no concern. All that follows from a private rule should be eliminated. The nation’s control over bureaucracy shall be introduced.”¹³ Weber highly valued British parliamentarianism,

⁹ M. Weber, *Max Weber: A Biography*, London 1975, p. 526

¹⁰ M. Weber, *Die verschärfte U-Boot-Krieg*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Politik im Weltkrieg...*, pp. 115-125.

¹¹ W. Mommsen, M. Steinberg, *Max Weber...*, p. 193.

¹² M. Weber, *The national state and economic policy* (Inaugural lecture, Freiburg, May 1895), <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03085148008538611>.

¹³ M. Weber, *Deutschlands politische Neuordnung*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands. Schriften und Reden 1918-1920*, Tübingen 1988, p. 365.

though mostly for the Westminster practices favourable to shaping strong political leaders and to the emergence of an efficient, ambitious and expansionary elite in power.¹⁴ “Under his pen, liberal and parliamentary institutions became the necessary condition of the nation’s world role. He recommended them sometimes to argue that the nation, the German nation is able to play a major role in the world.”¹⁵

The military defeat speeded up Germany’s democratisation. The military authorities effectively pressed for the creation of Max von Baden’s government on 3 October 1918, hoping that the new government would soften the negative picture of Germany and help negotiate more favourable peace terms. Marshall Paul von Hindenburg and General Erich von Ludendorff warned against the approaching defeat of the German army in the west and demanded that a ceasefire be negotiated immediately and peace negotiations started. On 23 October 1918, the Americans sent a note refusing to legitimise “the monarchical autocrats”. In Germany this was interpreted as a demand for the Kaiser’s abdication, and thus as a humiliating intervention in German home affairs. The note made it clear that the coalition would only accept such armistice terms which would warrant the implementation of President Wilson’s 14 Points (8 January 1918) and prevent Germany from pursuing further armed operations. On 9 November 1918, a German republic was proclaimed. The armistice was signed on November 11, 1918. German forces withdrew to the Rhine and the occupation of France, Belgium, Luxemburg, Alsace and Lorraine ended. The severity of the defeat was far beyond Weber’s worst dreams. Initially, he thought that the demands of the German commanders-in-chief to introduce parliamentary rule and negotiate an immediate armistice were excessive and close to panic. He still assumed that the German army – upon its withdrawal to Germany – would be capable of effectively resisting the allied forces and that there was a chance to press for acceptable peace terms. After the government of Max von Baden presented its armistice proposal, Weber had no doubt that the war was completely lost and there was no space now for the vision of Germany as a world power. “He had viewed a war for German equality to be unavoidable, and he was in principle inclined to support such a war. The war turned out to be a struggle to preserve Germany’s national existence.”¹⁶

Shortly before the armistice was signed, Weber still had hopes that the terms could be negotiated to the benefit of Germany. He was fully aware, however, that the international situation was highly unfavourable to Germany. In his private correspondence of 10 October 1918, he wrote: “It would be a peace that none of us had contemplated [...]. We must begin once again to reconstruct Germany from the bottom up [...].”¹⁷ Weber was ready to accept the giving up of Germany’s domi-

¹⁴ M. Weber, *Vorschläge zur Reform der Verfassung des Deutschen Reiches*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Politik im Weltkrieg...*, pp. 268-288.

¹⁵ R. Aron, *Max Weber et la politique de puissance*, in: R. Aron, *Les étapes de la pensée sociologique*, Paris, 1967, p. 643.

¹⁶ W. J. Mommsen, M. Steinberg, *Max Weber...*, p. 190.

¹⁷ M. Weber 10 October 1918 to A. Müller, in: M. Weber, *Briefe 1918-1920*, Tübingen 2012, p. 252. After Mommsen p. 286.

nance in the east, but he still hoped for a division of the territories into the a German sphere of influence including Poland and Courland, and a Russian sphere including Latvia and Estonia. On 8 January 1918, when President Wilson announced that Alsace-Lorraine would be returned to France, Weber suggested asking him to allow the matter to be put to arbitration.¹⁸ Weber accepted the need to evacuate German forces from north-eastern France and Belgium, but insisted that in Belgium only Belgian forces be stationed. In an anonymous text published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 27 October 1918, Weber did not hide his concerns that once German forces were evacuated from the occupied territories, Germany would lose a valuable argument possibly dividing the victorious coalition, and thus Wilson would not mediate between a defeated Germany and revenge-thirsty France and Britain. His reasoning was that the presence of German forces in occupied territories would somehow balance the French and British forces, and thus Wilson would have more space to manoeuvre. He kept hoping that disagreements in the coalition camp could be used to the advantage of Germany.¹⁹ Some of his ideas were extravagant. He totally disregarded the will of the war-weary public and thought about armed resistance, risking allied occupation of some parts of Germany. He expected popular involvement like in 1813. The only thing he worried about was the disintegration of the Reich, especially the separation of Bavaria, which might seek agreement with the victors on its own.

In territorial matters, Germans referred generally to Wilson's idea of national self-determination which translated into drawing borders according to the interests of the populations concerned. Weber announced that if the self-determination principle was violated and the terms of the peace treaty in the west and east were exorbitant and unfair, chauvinism would unavoidably spread in German society, including the working class. His prophesy was that the League of Nations would prove dead internally and President Wilson would not build a lasting peace, but an environment facilitating permanent conflicts.²⁰ In March 1919, Weber protested against the French plan to annexe the Saar. He referred back to Wilson's idea of national self-determination and warned about German irredentism in the west and east, that is, dangerous partisan movements intended to reclaim a "lost" or "unredeemed" area annexed to a foreign state.

In response to the political violation of our German brothers' rights in the east and west, the world will face the emergence of German irredentism the military resources of which will differ from Italian, Serb and Irish movements only in respect to the will of 70 million Germans supporting it. And I openly say that I expect students to join in.²¹

¹⁸ M. Weber, *Die politische Lage Ende 1918*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Politik im Weltkrieg...*, p. 754.

¹⁹ M. Weber, *Waffenstillstand und Frieden*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Politik im Weltkrieg...*, p. 642.

²⁰ M. Weber, *Deutschlands künftige Staatsform*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands. Schriften und Reden 1918-1920*, p. 110.

²¹ M. Weber, *Die wirtschaftliche Zugehörigkeit des Saargebiets zu Deutschland*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, p. 241.

In the case of the Saar, the population situation was clear. In the east, however, there were areas where different nations lived, and thus Weber introduced his additional criterion of the German economic interest.

The linguistically mixed areas of Upper Silesia, for example, belong to Germany because of the strong economic foundations. The entire territory “looks up” there. Without Upper Silesia the economic life east of the Elbe would be crippled and Upper Silesia too if separated from Germany.²²

It is worth recalling that during the war, Weber strongly supported the idea of a Polish state dependent on Germany. He never thought about adjoining Prussian Poland to it.

Basically, Weber accepted that Alsace-Lorraine would return to France, especially since he was very critical of the disastrous integration policy towards Alsatians.²³ On the other hand, the prospect of Prussian Poland’s return to the new Polish state made him openly furious. Those lands were German. He supported the idea of German armed resistance in the east and called for it in his public speeches in November and December 1918. He continued to make emotional appeals to start irredentist movements; that is, he wanted the German population there to militarily resist Polish rule. In his correspondence of 13 November 1918, he put this in exceptionally brutal words:

If the Poles should invade Danzig and Thorn, or the Czechs move into Reichenberg, the first task is to establish a German irredenta. I cannot do it myself, because I have not the physical strength. But every nationalist must do it, especially the students. Irredenta means: nationalism with revolutionary instruments of force. Probably to you Sir, it sounds more amicably than ‘war’ but it means the same. And that is how I understood it while giving my speeches and I am going to say it in public.²⁴

On 7 May 1919, the German delegation to Paris received a draft of the Treaty of Versailles. Its part on the Polish border was fiercely criticised by experts including Weber. He signed the experts’ appeal of 22 May 1919 rejecting plebiscites in ethnically mixed regions.²⁵ The experts offered some territorial concessions to the Posen [Poznańskie] region but strongly opposed any concessions in Upper Silesia. They hoped that Poland might instead accept access to German ports and harbour facilities, railways and waterways. Plebiscites were a threat. It was expected that the practice could spread and give results unfavourable to Germany’s interests. The fol-

²² M. Weber, *Die wirtschaftliche Zugehörigkeit des Saargebiets zu Deutschland*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, p. 236.

²³ M. Weber 13 November 1918 to K. Goldstein, in: M. Weber, *Briefe 1918-1920*, Tübingen 2012, vol. I, pp. 301-302.

²⁴ Cf. W. Mommsen, M. Steinberg, *Max Weber...*, p. 312.

²⁵ [Zur Frage von Volksabstimmungen im Osten], in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, p. 296.

lowing statement was categorical: "We take no responsibility if the government – in whatever form – mentions a plebiscite."

Weber's anti-Polish fury is well illustrated by a small incident at a sitting of Johann Heinrich Bernstorff's committee (29 March–2 April 1919) working on preparations for possible peace negotiations. On 29 March, the issue of Polish workers' migration was discussed; this was a topic highly relevant to German industries. The discussion focused on a possible agreement with Poland which would regulate the migration of workforce. Weber's reaction was heated:

I think we should worry that Poland insists we let its workers to Germany because that is the most reliable measure to Polish the entire German east. It is our interest to seal our border against every Polish worker; the border Caprivi opened causing most detrimental losses to German agriculture and colonial interests. It is our vital interest which happily overlaps with the interest of German workers because those workers would be excluded from German labour market. Actually, I do not see how we are to secure jobs in Germany if we keep here half a million strong Polish workforce. It would be a crime against the German population if we could not close the border at any time.²⁶

Weber did refer to his stance presented earlier, in 1895, in his famous Freiburg address titled "The national state and economic policy"²⁷. Then he spoke about labour migration of Polish farmhands, which was welcomed by Prussian landowners, but seen by Weber as an existential threat to the still higher German population numbers in West Prussia. Weber was simply afraid of Polonisation, especially in areas bordering on Russian Poland. He then criticised the Junkers for their narrow economic interests, use of cheap Polish labour and readiness to sacrifice a much more important national interest. In 1893-1899 Weber was a member of the Pan-German League, an ultra-nationalist organisation, and left it in protest at the League's support for landowners' interests in the east.

In Germany, in November 1918, a vivid discussion began on the question of responsibility for the outbreak of the Great War. Pressed by the social-democratic left, the Council of People's Representatives told Karl Kautsky (*Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* – USPD) to prepare for printing German documents related to the situation immediately before the armed conflict. It was clear that the objective was to disclose and discredit Kaiser Wilhelm II's diplomatic machinations and to emphasise strongly that the new Republic would not continue the imperialistic tradition. That, in turn, was to open the door to an agreement with the victorious countries and to ease the peace treaty terms. Kurt Eisner (USPD), the first republican Prime Minister of Bavaria, had similar motives. He was behind the publication of several secret documents on 23 November 1918. Those documents explicitly attributed blame to Germany. In that situation, on 29 November 1918,

²⁶ [Zur Frage der Grenzsperr für polnische Arbeiter] Sitzung vom 29. März 1919, nachmittags, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, p. 263.

²⁷ M. Weber, *Der Nationalstaat und die Volkswirtschaftspolitik*, in: M. Weber, *Gesammelte politische Schriften*, Tübingen 1971.

Foreign Minister Wilhelm Solf proposed to open the archives of all powers and appoint an impartial commission to examine the contents of the archives with a view to identifying those responsible for starting the war. Germany re-invoked that idea several times, but to no avail. It was the peace conference and not a group of experts that would decide who was the aggressor and who was not. Opening the Paris conference on 18 January 1919, President Raymond Poincaré blamed Austria-Hungary for invading Serbia, and Germany for its attacks on Belgium and France. That became part of the Treaty of Versailles (Preamble and Articles 227-231) and other related peace treaties with the Central Powers. However, the reference was always to “responsibility” and not to “blame/guilt”. It remains interesting what psychological mechanism made Germans interpret that as an accusation of their “exclusive guilt”.

Weber was aware that from the viewpoint of the victorious powers, Wilhelm II was the embodiment of German aggression and he was directly responsible for the war’s outbreak. Weber openly supported a parliamentary monarchy, but the dilettante and personal rule of Wilhelm he had long judged abysmal, since it deeply hurt Germany’s interests. Weber could not envisage Wilhelm on the throne at the time of the armistice, and certainly not at the signing of the peace treaty. In October 1918, Weber came to the conclusion that only Wilhelm’s rapid abdication could save the House of Hohenzollern, safeguarding the family from humiliating external pressure and – above all – it could help negotiate better peace terms. Unquestionably Weber was right in arguing that it was hard to imagine a peace with Wilhelm II on the throne.²⁸ In his letter to Friedrich Naumann, dated 17 October 1918, Weber continued to appeal for the Kaiser’s immediate abdication. He emphasised, however, that the abdication was not to entail a declaration of ethical guilt for the war, either personal or – even more so – on the part of the whole nation or state. “There is no space for a confession of *ethical* guilt on his or our part in it. Today, however, no one can question that his *political* mistakes were severe. And he must face the consequences so that he and the nation could live with dignity.”²⁹ Wilhelm II’s voluntary abdication would, however, be a symbolic confession by the head of state that political decisions which he had taken or endorsed were wrong. Such an abdication could also be interpreted as a conciliatory gesture towards the Entente in the same way as the introduction of government accountability to parliament (parliamentary rule). Since eventually Wilhelm II was forced to abdicate on 9 November 1918, his abdication could not play the role that Weber had conceived. Furthermore, the slim chance that Germany would still be a monarchy vanished. In November and December 1918, Weber publicly accused Wilhelm II of fleeing Berlin, effectively provoking the revo-

²⁸ Cf. Max Weber’s letters to Hans Delbrück (11 October 1918), to Gerhart von Schulze-Gaevernitz (11 October 1918) and Friedrich Naumann (12 October 1918), M. Weber, *Briefe 1918-1920*, Tübingen 2012, vol. I, pp. 257-263.

²⁹ M. Weber 17 October 1918 to Friedrich Naumann, in: M. Weber, *Briefe 1918-1920*, Tübingen 2012, vol. I, p. 273.

lution and also for the harsh peace terms which Weber rightly expected.³⁰ Weber was highly critical of Wilhelm II's discreditable and unworthy conduct. There was no dignity in it, while Weber repeatedly appealed for the honourable conduct of political elites and the nation in the face of defeat.

The issue of the responsibility of the ruling elites became particularly sensitive after 7 May 1919 when the Versailles Treaty proposal was presented. Its Article 227 read that Wilhelm II was to be brought to a special tribunal for "a supreme offence against international morality", while Articles 228-230 laid down that persons accused of acts in violation of "the laws and customs of war" were to be tried by military tribunals. On 14 May 1918, Weber sent a letter to General Erich von Ludendorff suggesting that all higher commanders surrender voluntarily to the Americans and declare that neither the monarch nor lesser officers were to be blamed for any decisions taken. "Thus I believe that such a move (made in a simple non-theatrical way which is characteristic of you as far as I can judge) could be the last significant favour to the benefit of the country, the dynasty, officer corps and to you personally..."³¹ In his letters to relatives and friends, Weber explained that by rising to the challenge of the enemy's accusations one saves the honour of the army in the eyes of society and lays the foundation for the future rebirth of the officer corps. It was important to him that Wilhelm II would not be stigmatised, although he fled to the Netherlands while Weber thought he should have surrendered to the enemies. If he had, he would have risked "Elba or St. Helena" at most.³² General Ludendorff declined Weber's proposal. Not yet aware of that fact, Weber returned to his proposal in a conversation with Ludendorff on 30 May 1919. Only accounts of third parties are available. Apparently, Ludendorff said: "I have no intention to make such a sacrifice to the German nation which treated me shamefully." Weber tried to explicate: "That is not about the German nation but the respect German soldiers deserve, about the honour of the officer corps."³³ Their conversation came to nothing; both Ludendorff and Weber maintained their respective positions. Of course, Ludendorff had no intention of surrendering to the enemies. Weber did not hide his profound disappointment with Ludendorff as a person too. He believed that the German military and political elites had lost respect for themselves, had lost their dignity in the face of defeat. His regard for the German governing elites was not high.

³⁰ M. Weber, *Deutschlands künftige Staatsform*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, Tübingen 1988, p. 102.

³¹ M. Weber 14 May 1919 to E. Ludendorff, in: M. Weber, *Briefe 1918-1920*, Tübingen 2012, vol. I, p. 608.

³² M. Weber to C. Mommsen (14 May 1919), Friedrich Naumann (15 May 1919), Hans Delbrück (15 May 1919), in: M. Weber, *Briefe 1918-1920*, Tübingen 2012, vol. I, pp. 612, 616-617, 619-619.

³³ [*Eine Unterredung mit Erich Ludendorff am 30. Mai 1919*], Aufzeichnung vom Richard Thoma, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, p. 549.

The topic of German war guilt appeared in Weber's private correspondence almost immediately after the armistice. In response to a letter of Kurt Goldstein, a known pacifist, Weber wrote (13 November 1918):

I was silent about the guilt for *others'* war. Neither did I take part in the disgusting moralising which was disgusting on both sides. That is why I can now say: this wallowing in guilty conscience is an *illness*, which I have come across many times. It is like flagellation in the religious sphere and masochism in the sexual one. [...] In the last two years German policy was shameful not because it was a war policy but because it was *irresponsible* and *mendacious*. Our policy before the war was *stupid*, not ethically objectionable. It certainly cannot be called that.³⁴

Publicly, Weber almost immediately started criticising Eisner's stance, and that was reported by the press. Speaking in Frankfurt on 1 December 1918, he reproached "political masochists" who by disclosing documents of guilt tried to win the enemies' sympathy.³⁵ On 3 January 1919, in Heidelberg, "The speaker condemned Eisner's approach to publishing the 'documents of guilt' which are a weapon only for the enemies to dictate hard peace terms"³⁶. It was reported that in Fürth, on 14 January 1919, Weber said:

The Bavarian government's separate actions related to war guilt shall be strongly condemned. A formal confession of guilt is to serve best the French policy which blames Germany for the war. It is the highest interest of France to be absolved of guilt and then to act as a prosecutor of Germany in front of Wilson who will decide about law and illegality, about guilt and innocence because he wants to. Eisner's publications did immeasurable damage. The Reich must strongly protest against such a policy.³⁷

What Eisner did was totally out of place in Weber's understanding of politics as a ruthless struggle to rule, as there was no place for the guilt issue. Weber, actually against himself, was forced by the circumstances to deal with the question of responsibility for the war.

Weber contested the "German war guilt" in his article (probably inspired by the *Auswärtiges Amt*, the German Foreign Office) published in *Frankfurter Zeitung* on 17 January 1919³⁸, one day before the speech of President Poincaré. Weber first socially marginalised those who believed in the German guilt, and to an extent he was right in doing so. He said that "[...] dies Literatenvolk ist nicht Deutschland und sein

³⁴ M. Weber 13 November 1918 to K. Goldstein, in: M. Weber, *Briefe 1918-1920*, Tübingen 2012, p. 302. In his letter of 24 November 1918, Weber wrote about "political and social masochism of honourless pacifists who now lustfully wallow in guilt feelings", *ibid.*, p. 320.

³⁵ M. Weber, [*Das neue Deutschland*], in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, p. 383.

³⁶ M. Weber [*Diskussionsbeitrag zur Rede...*], in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, p. 432.

³⁷ M. Weber, [*Probleme der Neuordnung*], in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, pp. 453-454.

³⁸ M. Weber, *Zum Thema der „Kriegsschuldfrage“*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, pp. 179-190.

Gebaren entspricht nicht der wirklichen inneren Stellung der Deutschen zu ihrem Kriegsschicksal.“ [these literary people are not Germany, and their conduct does not correspond to the real attitude of Germans to their own war fate]. Later, he identified people who saw the cause of the war in such secondary events as Austria-Hungary's ultimatum to Serbia (23 July 1914) as “Schwachkopf” (“weak head”) or halfwits.³⁹ Thus he strongly suggested that the documents published on Eisner's initiative were not of primary importance because the reason for the war was the policy of Russia.

In the case of this war there is one, and only one power that desired it under all circumstances through its own will and, according to their political goals required: Russia. That is tsarism as a system and obliging social classes. [...] In 1914, in Russia, there was no social class of positive influence which would not have wanted the war. Thus after the dissension between Germany and England, Germany could have avoided the war with Russia only temporarily and only on the condition of giving up all lands of West Slavs and its own independence to Petersburg and Moscow's absolute rule. [...] It was known – and on 4 August 1914 German Social Democrats knew it too – that a war against this system was a good war, and that the achievements of German army leaders, which brought about its collapse, would always belong to glorious pages of German history. In relation to Russia whose conduct was decisive for the war as such, there was no German ‘war guilt’ what so ever. A discussion about the guilt is only possible with the Western opponents.⁴⁰

Weber's view that Russia threatened the existence of Germany was not new. He had expressed it several times in his earlier articles and commentaries.

Weber strongly believed that Germany would emerge safely from the dispute over guilt with the western powers. He criticised France for having acted surprised at the German aggressive actions in a situation where France had refused to remain neutral in case of a German-Russian war. He blamed France for fuelling anti-German attitudes while Germany never stopped wishing for an amicable agreement. He blamed Belgium that it had violated neutrality by preparing to defend itself only against Germany: “The defensive measures had been directed only against Germany, the seacoast as well as the border with France had been left unprotected.” Weber was ready to admit that “the anger of the surprised masses of the Belgian people is understandable to us” but added that “the ‘guilt question’ was not so simple as it was often assumed”⁴¹. He admitted that German diplomatic dealings with England were not free of mistakes, but England was “non-generous” in its colonial policy towards Germany. Furthermore, the English did not understand what the purpose of building the German fleet was (“But in the English policy perspective, the real reason for war was the uncertainty about the aims and intended scale of German navy development.”⁴²). As to the United States, German diplomacy made several mistakes, including the infamous telegram by Zimmermann. However, Germany simply misinterpreted American intentions.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

The approach of Germany was chiefly due to the preconception that America intended to intervene in the war anyhow. That assumption was obviously absolutely false. However, the reason why it could arise at all was due to the fact that in America, there was also a 'war ideology' to which references were made in Germany.⁴³

(On walls in American students' flats, German duelling swords were displayed!) All together German "mistakes" did not appear very serious: irresponsible policy towards Morocco, "Tirpitz's self-righteous policy", Wilhelm II's "recklessness" and "vainglory" and dilettante policy which was hard to oppose since Englishmen adored the German Emperor (sic!).

Weber approached war guilt more seriously in his lecture "Politics as a Vocation" delivered on 28 January 1919 in Munich.⁴⁴ He elaborated on the issue of guilt in the last part, on relations between politics and ethics, unambiguously referring to the then ongoing discussion on war guilt.⁴⁵ Of key importance was the following part of his lecture:

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 a bigoted self-righteousness. Every new document that comes to light after decades revives the undignified lamentations, the hatred and scorn, instead of allowing the war at its end to be buried, at least morally. This is possible only through objectivity and chivalry and above all only through dignity. But never is it possible through an 'ethic', which in truth signifies a lack of dignity on both sides. Instead of being concerned about what the politician is interested in, the future and the responsibility towards the future, this ethic is concerned about politically sterile questions of past guilt, which are not to be settled politically. To act in this way is politically guilty, if such guilt exists at all. And it overlooks the unavoidable falsification of the whole problem, through very material interests: namely, the victor's interest in the greatest possible moral and material gain; the hopes of the defeated to trade in advantages through confessions of guilt. If anything is 'vulgar', then, this is, and it is the result of this fashion of exploiting 'ethics' as a means of 'being in the right'.⁴⁶

In his paper published a few days earlier, Weber expressed no doubt that Russia was responsible for the war's outbreak. France and Great Britain were partly responsible, while Germany had made some mistakes too. In the quoted lecture, on the other hand,

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ The text of that lecture was published in late 1919 and then reprinted many times. For the newest excellent critical edition see M. Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf. Politik als Beruf*, Tübingen 1992, pp. 157-252. See also *The profession and vocation of politics* in: *Weber: Political Writings*, eds. P. Lassman, R. Speirs, Cambridge 1994, pp. 309-369 and quoted here: <http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Politics-as-a-Vocation.pdf>.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 355-369.

⁴⁶ Quoted after <http://anthropos-lab.net/wp/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/Weber-Politics-as-a-Vocation.pdf>, p. 22.

he tried to argue that looking for the “guilty one” made no sense because societal structures, that is some anonymous powers or forces, were decisive, and they could not bear any responsibility, especially moral. He expected that a politician would think about the future and not about the past as if it was possible to separate one from the other. It is hard not to see that the ‘futile’ guilt dispute was about the future and *not instead* of a debate on the future. Germany both started and lost the war. Even if it had won the war, it would be detested as an aggressor. Weber acted like a politician would. Since the past was inconvenient and a huge burden, he appealed for a focus on the future and warned against publishing documents which would revive “the undignified lamentations, the hatred and scorn”. In other words, Weber wished to build a consensus in German society and an agreement with the Entente on maintaining a deafening silence and putting the past aside. The practice of putting the past aside had been followed in international relations and sometimes had been part of peace treaties, but this Great War was an unprecedented disaster and that practice was no longer applicable. The outcomes of German and Austro-Hungarian aggression were so overwhelming and widespread that a tendency to condemn any aggressor was natural. Somehow Weber did not see that the huge European conflict changed the perception of war and the sovereign right to resort to violence in international relations. At the same time, Weber had no sympathy for his opponents. Their intentions appeared low to him. The victor in his “undignified self-righteousness” is “right” and the devastated loser confesses: “I had to fight for a morally bad cause.”⁴⁷ The victor wants to maximise his moral and material gains and the defeated confesses his guilt to “trade” for better peace terms. Weber’s eristic arguments were not impressive.

In his lecture Weber clearly condemned the publication of compromising documents by Eisner and the acceptance of the Allies’ attribution of the guilt to Germany. He did not go into the content of the documents. Instead, he underlined the harm (in his opinion) done to Germany’s interests with their publication. According to Weber, Eisner was guided by the ethic of conviction, while a politician should adhere to the ethic of responsibility, “in which case one has to give an account of the foreseeable results of one’s action.” It followed that while discrediting Wilhelm’s policy, the social-democratic left did not better the terrible image of Germany in the world, but thoughtlessly weakened Germany’s position right before the peace conference.

Finally, let us consider the duty of truthfulness. For the absolute ethic it holds unconditionally. Hence the conclusion was reached to publish all documents, especially those placing blame on one’s own country. On the basis of these one-sided publications the confessions of guilt followed – and they were one-sided, unconditional, and without regard to consequences. The politician will find that as a result truth will not be furthered but certainly obscured through abuse and unleashing of passion; only an all-round methodical investigation by non-partisans could bear fruit; any other procedure may have consequences for a nation that cannot be remedied for decades. But the absolute ethic just does not *ask* for ‘consequences’.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

Only when avoiding and being silent about the issue of guilt turned out to be no longer possible was Weber inclined to accept the ruling of an impartial commission as Wilhelm Solf had suggested. The impartial commission idea had its appeal, but to Germans only. Outside Germany it did not meet with interest. In principle, the proposal to study the conditionalities of the outbreak of war was reasonable, but it was unrealistic to expect that the peace conference would delay its judgement of war guilt until experts produced their report.

It was Max von Baden, the former Chancellor, who created the *Arbeitsgemeinschaft für Politik des Rechts (Heidelberger Vereinigung)* – the Heidelberg Association for a Policy of Justice to examine war guilt and improve the image of Germany by fighting accusations of its responsibility for the outbreak of the Great War. The founding meeting of the Association took place at Max Weber's house in Heidelberg on 3-4 February 1919. In Albertin's opinion, it could well be seen as the first "spiritually focused" protest against the pronouncements of Germany's war guilt in Germany and abroad.⁴⁹

The Association was notable not only because of its obvious propaganda task, but also because of its highly regarded membership. The founding members were Max Weber and his brother Alfred, distinguished historians Hans Delbrück and Hermann Oncken, economist Lujo Brentano, lawyer Walther Schücking, liberal politician Conrad Haußmann, General Maximilian Graf von Montgelas, and lawyer Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy. Some enjoyed high authority among academics, some had very good contacts with governmental circles, including the *Auswärtiges Amt*. Nearly half of the members belonged or were close to the liberal *Deutsche Demokratische Partei* founded in November 1918. The most important thing was that a majority of the members had not disgraced themselves with excessive support for Germany's annexation plans. Though their attitudes to the annexation plans differed, on the whole the members had a perceived mandate to represent the moderate. Another thing was that Max von Baden's speech of 3 February 1919 presenting the programme of the Association was far from moderate. He strongly criticised the policies of the victorious powers for not following Wilson's Fourteen Points, disrespecting armistice terms, prolonging the naval blockade and, primarily, for enforcing the "peace of vengeance" instead of working on the apparently promised "peace of justice".

An appointment of an impartial commission to examine respective parties' responsibilities for the war's outbreak fitted the German concept of the peace of justice perfectly. Max von Baden developed that idea further proposing to establish three international commissions which would investigate the responsibility for the war's outbreak, for its prolongation, and for breaches of the laws of war. He also mentioned other expert commissions, for instance a commission resolving colonial disputes and a commission supervising the implementation of nations' right to self-

⁴⁹ L. Albertin, *Liberalismus und Demokratie am Anfang der Weimarer Republik*, Düsseldorf 1972, p. 213. Cf. W. Jäger, *Historische Forschung und politische Kultur in Deutschland. Die Debatte 1914-1980 über den Ausbruch des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Göttingen 1984, pp. 29-31; A. Luckau, *The German Delegation at the Paris Peace Conference*, New York 1941.

determination.⁵⁰ The results of the work of those various commissions were to be essential for the “peace of justice”.

The programme of the Association presented by Max von Baden was edited, shortened and sent to press on 7 February 1919. It was its first public announcement and appeal titled “Für eine Politik des Rechts”.⁵¹ The signees were selected from opponents of Germany's annexation policy (Weber included) who dared to claim that during the war they had “fought against every policy which ignored rights of other nations”. Such a statement was, to put it mildly, an exaggeration. The core of the appeal was that there was a “common guilt” of all the great powers involved in the war and thus also of the victors, who claimed their right to judge a case in which they had an interest and pursued their imperialistic war goals which they had “ceremoniously” promised to abandon. The victors were accused of violating an arrangement obliging them to respect Wilson's Fourteen Points, of continuing the naval blockade and of detaining prisoners of war. It was demanded that Germany should have military capabilities to defend itself against unlawful aggression on its eastern border. Most importantly, participants of the peace conference were refused the right to judge who was an aggressor and who was not. The signees declared they all shared the opinion that only a neutral commission of inquiry could try to determine the share of guilt borne by individual countries and their responsibility for the war that had ravaged European civilisation. That commission was to have access to all archives and hear all sides. Weber signed the appeal of the Heidelberg Association, but he was not convinced that the idea of the commission was workable.⁵² On 7 March 1919, the British government issued a note stating that Germany's responsibility for the war had long been established and did not need to be examined. On 6-14 March, an international conference was convened in Bern, Switzerland. The German delegation (mainly members of the USPD) supported the resolution calling for an investigation of the guilt issue by a German tribunal. After consulting members of the Heidelberg Association, Max von Baden came to a conclusion that the Association should appeal to the German Foreign Office to continue efforts to appoint an international commission to investigate the war guilt issue. As many Association members worked for the government, it was decided that the appeal should best be an open letter by Max Weber to *Frankfurter Zeitung*. The letter was dated March 20 and published on March 22.⁵³ Weber recalled that a unilateral decision to

⁵⁰ [Zur Gründung der Heidelberger Vereinigung], in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, pp. 203-204.

⁵¹ *Für eine Politik des Rechts*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, pp. 523-525.

⁵² In his speech of 1 March 1919, Weber mentioned the neutral commission project but he was not enthusiastic about it. His reservations were that it would not contribute to peace among the involved nations, that research might go on for years, and that the victors or better lawyers would decide anyway and every published finding would stir up old animosities. M. Weber, *Die wirtschaftliche Zugehörigkeit des Saargebiets zu Deutschland*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands*, p. 242.

⁵³ M. Weber, *Die Untersuchung der Schuldfrage*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, pp. 231-232.

publish relevant German archives remained questionable and that their publication should be complemented by trustworthy commission hearings of state leaders directly involved in the events leading to the war. The hearings were to help reconstruct the complexity of the international situation as German politicians understood it in 1914 and to explain their motives at the beginning of the war. The Heidelberg Association was aware that appointing experts from neutral states might be difficult, because the acceptance of German guilt was increasingly widespread. On the other hand, an exclusively German commission would simply appear untrustworthy. In his personal letter to *Frankfurter Zeitung*, Weber complained about “the unlimited cowardice of the neutral” and warned that an exclusively German parliamentary commission or committee would become an arena of political struggle. Nevertheless, Weber was hopeful. “I think that a possibly politically independent commission the members of which would be experienced personalities from Germany and other countries including, obviously, pacifist countries would be the one fully entitled to do the work.” He added that the commission members should not have been involved “politically” recently.⁵⁴

The *Auswärtiges Amt* was in favour of a neutral commission, but at the turn of 1918 and 1919 it established a special unit under Wilhelm von Bülow to gather documents questioning the Allies’ stance on war guilt. On 22 March 1919, the German government decided that von Bülow’s unit was to prepare a résumé of the war guilt issue, since this was needed by the German delegation to the Paris peace conference.

On 7 May 1919, the German delegation received the text of the peace treaty, which stated that Germany was responsible for the war’s outbreak (Preamble, Articles 227–231, especially Article 231). Minister Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau instantly rejected the claim that Germany was solely responsible for the war. He did so in his speech of May 7 and later in his note of May 13. Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau demanded that Germany be officially given access to the conference internal report on “authors of the war” (submitted by the Commission on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War and on Enforcement of Penalties and dated 29 March 1919). The report covered the international situation right before the war and concluded that the blame for the war lay primarily with the governments of Germany and Austria-Hungary. Some excerpts were published in the press. Germany illegally obtained access to the full report and Wilhelm von Bülow’s unit prepared a detailed review of and objections to the report. On 13 May, Brockdorff-Rantzau informed Berlin about his plan to create a German working commission that would challenge the arguments given in the conference internal report. The point was to select authority figures ready to justify and confirm the German stance without involving the German government to a significant degree. At the time, the German government was inclined to silence the issue of guilt in its talks with the Allies. The chances that an impartial international commission could be created were slim, and thus a German-only com-

⁵⁴ M. Weber 20 March 1919 to *Frankfurter Zeitung*, in: M. Weber, *Briefe 1918-1920*, Tübingen, 2012, vol. I, p. 532.

mission was to be its substitute. The German commission was to be joined by Max Weber, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Hans Delbrück and Max Graf Montgelas, who were active members of the Heidelberg Association. The role of the German commission of "professors" was explicated by von Bülow in his letter of 15 May 1919 addressed to the German Foreign Office:

Our intention is to appoint a commission of professors to examine the report of our enemy. The commission's conclusions will not be binding or obliging for the government. The commission will be able to refute main accusations of the opponents and should present materials on events preceding the war which will demonstrate that the Entente, Russia primarily, had played with war for years. The material is fully convincing. It is addressed to our friends abroad in neutral and hostile countries to enable them to speak for our rights. So far they have been silenced with the argument that we are solely guilty and deserve punishment. Thus the objective of our undertaking is not to address the guilt issue, which would lead to never-ending and pointless disputes, but to propagate a fair apportionment of responsibility. That is why our commission of professors will not pass any judgement on the guilt, will not accuse anybody but will again appeal to examine the issue impartially.⁵⁵

Thus Brockdorff-Rantzau actually wanted to use an allegedly unofficial commission of professors to tackle the issue of guilt whereas the government in Berlin was increasingly inclined to avoid that issue in its relations with the victors. Members of the German delegation to the peace conference were concerned about unnecessarily provoking the big three: President Woodrow Wilson, Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau and Prime Minister David Lloyd George. As it turned out later, those concerns were fully justified. To make things worse, the "professors" did not wish to uncritically endorse the ready-to-be-signed text given to them by von Bülow's unit, and they had difficulties agreeing on their position.⁵⁶ Hans Delbrück's memorandum, for example, caused a fierce dispute. He defended Vienna's policy towards Serbia and Berlin's support for it. Furthermore, he justified Germany's violation of Belgium's neutrality. Max Weber went to Paris unwillingly. He was concerned about Germany's excessive compliance and did not want to be a figurehead.

The *White Book* produced by von Bülow's unit was to challenge the message of the conference internal report of 29 March 1919, excerpts of which Germans knew from press publications and, as mentioned earlier, they actually had the full report.⁵⁷ The substantial weight of von Bülow's written observations was carried by eleven

⁵⁵ Legationssekretär von Bülow an den Unterstaatssekretär im Auswärtigen Amt Freiherr Langwert von Simmern, in: *Akten zur deutschen Auswärtigen Politik 1918-1945*, Serie A, Band II, Göttingen 1984, p. 50.

⁵⁶ For a detailed discussion of discrepancies see the editorial note preceding *Bemerkungen zum Bericht der Kommission der Alliierten und Assoziierten Regierungen über die Verantwortlichkeiten der Urheber des Krieges*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, pp. 306-321 in particular.

⁵⁷ In 1919, Germany published an essential part of the Allies' report dated 29 March 1919. Cf. *Rapport présenté à Conférence des Préliminaires de Paix par la Commission de Responsabilités des auteurs de la Guerre et sanctions*, in: *Das Deutsche Weißbuch über die Schuld am Kriege*, Berlin 1927, p. 19.

appendices. Those included various documents and comments on them. The “professors” disputed the content of the introductory note titled “Bemerkungen zum Bericht der Kommission der Alliierten und Assoziierten Regierungen über die Verantwortlichkeiten der Urheber des Krieges”⁵⁸. On 27 May 1919, it was signed by Max Weber, Albrecht Mendelssohn Bartholdy, Hans Delbrück and Max Graf Montgelas and subsequently called the professors’ memorandum. The following day it was approved by the German delegation in Paris and passed (with appendices) to Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau, the chairman of the conference. In an accompanying note, Brockdorff-Rantzau attributed the authorship of the German *White Book* to the German commission of independent scholars and publicists, which, of course, was not true. Weber’s actual contribution to the professors’ memorandum raised some doubts. Sometimes it was belittled and sometimes exaggerated. Anyway, it was always included in his political writings. It was Wolfgang Mommsen who convincingly argued that the original version was indeed edited and changed and that the changes matched Max Weber’s argumentation and style. Weber did not write a new version but his interventions were more than editorial.

A number of additional perspectives were incorporated anew, in particular the account of diplomatic events was extended even if not to the extent Max Weber would like. Be it said that Max Weber exerted much influence in contrast to Hans Delbrück who only partly managed to push through his positive assessment of Austria-Hungary politics. It served Weber good that he agreed with the basic argumentation in the original text on one issue which was the opinion that the search for the responsibility for war should primarily focus on tsarist Russia.⁵⁹

Germany’s stance was rooted in the assumption that the responsibility for the outbreak of the war was divided. Many countries were responsible and, in essence, the pre-war system of international relations was to be blamed. On 7 May 1919, on receiving the peace treaty text, Minister Brockdorff-Rantzau said:

In the last fifty years, the imperialism of all European states has chronically poisoned international relations. Policies of retaliation, policies of expansion and disregard for peoples’ right of self-determination contributed to the European malady, which reached its crisis in the world war. The mobilisation of Russia deprived statesmen of the possibility of curing the disease and placed the decision in the hands of military authorities.⁶⁰

Member of the professors’ commission Graf Montgelas, who later studied war guilt in detail, saw deeper causes of the war in the political culture saturated with imperialistic ambitions.

⁵⁸ *Bemerkungen zum Bericht der Kommission der Alliierten und Assoziierten Regierungen über die Verantwortlichkeiten der Urheber des Krieges*, in: *Das Deutsche Weißbuch...*, pp. 63-77 and Anlagen, in: *ibid.*, pp. 78-230.

⁵⁹ Editorial note on *Bemerkungen zum Bericht...*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, p. 313.

⁶⁰ Rede des Grafen Brockdorff-Rantzau vom 7. Mai 1919, in: *Das Deutsche Weißbuch...*, p. 1.

The total war was unavoidable because all big powers, with no exception, had a strong imperialistic drive. Their only objective was to strengthen their powers and secure their standing taking part in the arms race on land, at sea and in the air. The war had to come because those in power forgot that only peace serves true nation's interests, and because the need of economic solidarity among all countries vanished.⁶¹

According to the German side, all powers were responsible for the war and that was why Germany pressed for a careful identification of their respective responsibility by an impartial commission. On 7 May 1919, Brockdorff-Rantzau again called for such a commission to be appointed. The submitted German "Bemerkungen zum Bericht der Kommission der Alliierten und Assoziierten Regierungen über die Verantwortlichkeiten der Urheber des Krieges" – later translated into English as *Observations on the Report of the Commission of the Allied and Associated Governments on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War* – was signed by members of the professors' commission and began as follows:

The undersigned are of the opinion that the question of the responsibility for the outbreak of the war can not be decided by one side which was itself a party to the war, but that only a commission of inquiry, recognized by both sides as impartial, to which all records are accessible and before which both parties alike can state their case, can venture to pronounce judgement as to the measure in which each single Government is responsible for the fact that the catastrophe dreaded by all nations has overtaken mankind.⁶²

The aim of the submitted *Observations* was not really to force through the neutral commission project, which was doomed to fail, but to challenge the message of the Allies' internal report of 29 March 1919 and to pave the way for a revision of Articles 227–231 of the peace treaty draft. The next part of *Observations* was devoted to circumstances directly preceding the outbreak of war, and aimed to demonstrate that Austria-Hungary and Germany expected the conflict with Serbia to be a local one and that Germany's diplomatic efforts to ease Vienna–Petersburg tensions were nullified with Russian mobilisation. The factual details of the argumentation have been already meticulously verified in relevant literature referred to in the editors' erudite notes in a critical edition of Max Weber's political writing.⁶³ The general tone of the *Observations* and the categories to which they referred are still interesting. A good illustration of the above is the following excerpt on the politics of Vienna:

⁶¹ M. Montgelas, *Leitfaden zur Kriegsschuldfrage*, Berlin 1923, p. 1.

⁶² *Bemerkungen zum Bericht...*, in: *Das Deutsche Weißbuch...*, p. 63. *Observations*, p. 31. Full English text of "German white book concerning the responsibility of the authors of the war : translated by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Division of International Law." https://archive.org/stream/germanwhitebookc00carn/germanwhitebookc00carn_djvu.txt contains *Observations on the Report of the Commission of the Allied and Associated Governments on the Responsibility of the Authors of the War* quoted here.

⁶³ *Bemerkungen zum Bericht der Kommission der Alliierten und Assoziierten Regierungen über die Verantwortlichkeiten der Urheber des Krieges*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands...*, pp. 324–351.

Austria had, it is true, adopted the position that the previous failures of Serbia to redeem her promises forbade her to be satisfied with the results of purely diplomatic action and constrained her to rely on the effect produced by a military expedition. Germany approved of that attitude and thereby encouraged Austria. [...] the measures taken against Serbia were not in conflict with the procedure employed at that time by other States, and they were conceived in good faith as a means of removing inflammable material which had for a long time contained within itself the danger of a world war.⁶⁴

It followed that Austria-Hungary's armed aggression against Serbia was "encouraged" by Germany because, at the time, an aggressive action simply appeared to be more effective than diplomatic negotiations, and it was also to serve the cause of peace by lowering the risk of a world war. Furthermore, it was admitted in the *Observations* that both Vienna and Berlin were aware of the risk of a total war. "Germany did not desire the World War, although she regarded it as a danger which lay within the sphere of practical considerations."⁶⁵ Thus the signatories of *Observations* willingly or not confirmed the responsibility of Germany and Austria-Hungary for the outbreak of the world war. Weber's interventions redirected the focus to deeper causes of the war. To identify them two crucial questions had to be answered. Those questions were: 1. Which governments had most frequently contributed to the threat of war in Europe? and 2. Which governments pursued political and economic aims which could only be realised by means of a war? The answer was obvious: "Plans of conquest were worlds removed from the thoughts of the leading German statesmen."⁶⁶ Later, Montgelas also extensively argued that Austria-Hungary only wanted to maintain the *status quo*, that Austria-Hungary worried about their empire bursting into pieces due to internal Slavonic movements and that Germany had no aims whatsoever which would require military measures ("Germany did not aim at political goals attainable only through a war be it in Europe or anywhere else."⁶⁷). In *Observations* it was emphasised that contrary to its enemies' propaganda, Germany did not act on a premeditated plan to start the war. The war was not planned by responsible politicians and there was no societal approval of a war. Only small groups thought about a war.

It is one of the most lamentable mistakes of a section of foreign public opinion that the reprehensible and irresponsible utterances of a small group of chauvinist writers should be regarded as the expression of the mental attitude of the German nation, whilst, unfortunately, much larger groups in other countries pandered in at least as great a degree to chauvinism by their utterances.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ *Bemerkungen zum Bericht...*, p. 65. *Observations*, https://archive.org/stream/germanwhitebookc00carn/germanwhitebookc00carn_djvu.txt, p. 32.

⁶⁵ *Bemerkungen zum Bericht...*, p. 71. *Observations*, https://archive.org/stream/germanwhitebookc00carn/germanwhitebookc00carn_djvu.txt, p. 37.

⁶⁶ *Bemerkungen zum Bericht...*, p. 71. *Observations*, https://archive.org/stream/germanwhitebookc00carn/germanwhitebookc00carn_djvu.txt, p. 37.

⁶⁷ M. Montgelas, *Leitfaden zur Kriegsschuldfrage...*, p. 164.

⁶⁸ *Bemerkungen zum Bericht...*, p. 72. *Observations*, https://archive.org/stream/germanwhitebookc00carn/germanwhitebookc00carn_djvu.txt, p. 39.

It was nevertheless admitted that there were “mistakes” in the German policy. In essence, the German Chancellor who was in office in 1914 “inherited” a “structure of the German State” which made his efforts to relieve international tensions unworkable. Thus moral blame should not be sought where there was nervousness and weakness in face of a small but noisy group of radicals. The German narrative went as follows: initially Berlin thought that military action against Serbia would serve peace well; at the same time Berlin accepted that if Russia intervened, Germany would be obliged to meet her alliance commitments; however, after Germany learned Serbia's answer to Austria-Hungary's ultimatum, in the end on July 1914 its only objective was to prevent a war.

Weber's impact on the content of *Observations* is visible in the highly negative view expressed of the Russian policy, well known from Weber's earlier publications. In fact, some pronouncements were identical. Weber was sincerely and deeply convinced that there was a structural conflict dividing Germany and Russia and that conflict had to lead to war, sooner or later. Undoubtedly, Russia was, for Weber, a power which could attain its goals by military measures only; for instance, the dissolution of Austria-Hungary, expansion of Russia's influence in the Balkans and control over the Black Sea straits. Consequently, in *Observations*, Russia was explicitly identified as the party unambiguously responsible for the war.

[...] among the great European Powers, there existed at least one, whose policy, pursued systematically for many years before the war, could only be realized by an offensive war, and which therefore worked deliberately towards that end. That power was Russian Czarism, acting in conjunction with the highly influential Russian circles, which had been drawn into the orbit of its policy.⁶⁹

Thus Germany's war with Russia was a typical defensive war.

Czarism, with which any real understanding was completely impossible, constituted the most fearful system of individual and national slavery ever conceived before the Peace Treaty which is now laid before us. The German nation, as the whole of Social Democracy then rightly declared, only agreed to fight whole-heartedly and resolutely in 1914 on the understanding that the war was one of defense against Czarism. Even now, when Germany's military power is destroyed forever, we consider that this war of defense was unavoidable. The moment the object of overthrowing the power of Czarism was attained, the war lost its meaning.⁷⁰

Germany could have avoided war with Russia only by failing to meet its alliance commitments to Austria-Hungary and sacrificing its “national independence” [sic!]⁷¹. In *Observations* it was pointed out that France could have reclaimed

⁶⁹ *Bemerkungen zum Bericht...*, p. 73. *Observations*, https://archive.org/stream/germanwhitebookc-00carn/germanwhitebookc00carn_djvu.txt, pp. 40-41.

⁷⁰ *Bemerkungen zum Bericht...*, p. 77. *Observations*, https://archive.org/stream/germanwhitebookc-00carn/germanwhitebookc00carn_djvu.txt, p. 42.

⁷¹ *Bemerkungen zum Bericht...*, p. 76. *Observations*, https://archive.org/stream/germanwhitebookc-00carn/germanwhitebookc00carn_djvu.txt, p. 42.

Alsace-Lorraine also only by resorting to military measures, and thus the war with France was militarily offensive but politically defensive. Great Britain was treated relatively gently.

* * *

Max Weber was fully aware of the severity of Germany's military defeat and its consequences. First of all, Germany ceased to be a power and became eliminated from the milieu of world powers. He emphasised that Germany should reject "imperialist dreams" and "a purely autonomist ideal of nationality."⁷² In his speech in Munich on 4 November 1918, he said: "What we face now is a complete reorientation of Germany's foreign policy. This policy should be nationalist but not imperialist."⁷³ In his private correspondence dated 24 November 1918, he wrote that the time of "Anglo-Saxon domination" had arrived and that Germany's "position of power was over."⁷⁴ That did not mean giving up on the struggle to obtain the best possible terms in the peace treaty. Weber initially had hopes that President Wilson would act as a mediator between Germany and France and Great Britain. He also played with the idea that the German nation might resist the terms of the peace treaty with armed actions. He considered the option of not signing the peace treaty and taking the risk that Germany would be occupied by Entente military forces. He relatively easily accepted the loss of Alsace-Lorraine; however, he was furious at the thought that former Prussian lands would be adjoined to Poland. He openly appealed to the German population in the lands lost to fight for them with arms, and he promised that the Reich would actively support that fight. In a way his words were prophetic.

Weber was critical of the debates on war guilt for two main reasons. Firstly, all disputes with a moral leitmotif did not accord with his idea that politics is a fight with its own rules on responsibility ethics which meant calculating the gains and losses of every decision (to be) taken. Thus he could criticise the German policy for mistakes made, for omissions or dilettante acts, but he did not condemn them as violating moral categories. Secondly, he was well aware that the image of Germany blamed for the European catastrophe would bear heavily on its ultimate confrontation with the victorious powers and that German society would find it difficult to accept that Germany was not under "siege" from its enemies and that the war was not defensive, which was a legend widely spread. Thus he eventually decided to take part in the guilt debate, in which he sometimes used bizarre arguments. Nevertheless his persistence in blaming Russia for the war drew attention, and he was not the only one to take that view. His attitude to France and Great Britain was much more lenient.

⁷² M. Weber, *Deutschlands künftige Staatsform*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands. Schriften und Reden 1918-1920*, Tübingen, 1988, p. 109

⁷³ *Deutschland politischer Neuordnung*, in: M. Weber, *Zur Neuordnung Deutschlands. Schriften und Reden 1918-1920*, Tübingen, 1988, p. 365

⁷⁴ M. Weber 24 November 1918 to Otto Crusius, in: M. Weber, *Briefe 1918-1920*, Tübingen, 2012, vol. I, p. 320

Observations, which he co-edited and signed, contained all of the arguments used by Germany later when it demanded a revision of the Treaty of Versailles. Some of those arguments were revived in Germany on the centennial anniversary of the start of World War I.

Zbigniew Mazur, prof. dr hab. Instytut Zachodni, Poznań (mazur@iz.poznan.pl)

Keywords: Max Weber, Great War/First World War, Germany's responsibility

ABSTRACT

The author presents the views of Max Weber, a German sociologist, historian and political theorist on war and Germany's responsibility for its outbreak. Max Weber (1864-1920) belonged to a generation in which condemnation of war as such was rare while the cult of armed combat as a test of individual fitness and collective organisation was not infrequent. Like many of his contemporaries Weber claimed war to be an admissible, at times even a desirable way of regulating international conflicts. He considered politics in Darwinist categories i.e. in terms of ruthless rivalry and struggle for power played out inside and among countries.

