Brest-Litovsk, Peace of (1918)
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A. Introduction

1 At the fortress town of Brest-Litovsk in present-day Belarus, which served as German military headquarters on the Eastern Front of World War I, the Central Powers—Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and Turkey—and the new Soviet government of Russia signed the Armistice Convention between Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Germany, Turkey, and Russia on 15 December 1917. On 9 February 1918, the Central Powers and the Ukrainian Central Rada (Council) signed the Treaty of Peace between Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Germany, Turkey, and Ukraine recognizing Ukrainian independence from Russia; and on 3 March 1918, the Central Powers and Soviet Russia signed the Treaty of Peace between Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, Germany, Turkey, and Russia (the ‘March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk’) that formally ended Russia’s involvement in the Great War (→ Peace Treaties). By accepting the harsh peace terms of Russia’s enemies, the Soviet government both exacerbated an ongoing civil war with its political opponents within the borders of the former Russian empire and provoked armed intervention by Russia’s wartime allies Britain, France, Japan, and the United States. Domestic and international objections to the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk centred on Russia’s forced cession of considerable territory and resources to Germany, and/or on Russia’s betrayal of its Allied Partners at a critical point in the war. The Supplementary Treaty of Berlin, signed on 27 August 1918, further committed the Soviet government to political and economic co-operation with imperial Germany. Although the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk was in force only eight months before the surrender of the Central Powers nullified it in November, its exemplification of a German-dictated ‘victor’s peace’ reinvigorated the Allies’ drive to defeat Germany, and served to justify the comparatively less stringent conditions that the Allies imposed on their German adversary in the Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany (→ Versailles Peace Treaty [1919]).

B. The Brest-Litovsk Peace Treaty

2 A decades-long system of secret treaties (→ Treaties, Secret) and alliances, which had been developed to protect competing economic and territorial interests, entangled the Great Powers of Europe in a general war following the outbreak of hostilities between Russia and Austria-Hungary in the summer of 1914. The Russian empire and its democratic allies Britain and France, pre-war partners in the Triple Entente, agreed in an additional secret treaty of September 1914 to make no separate peace with the opposing Central Power States, of which the German and Austro-Hungarian empires comprised the core. However, as the least developed economy among the major European powers, Russia performed so abysmally on the Eastern Front against the military and industrial might of Germany that the Russian political system collapsed in not one but two revolutions in 1917.

3 Whereas the Provisional Government of parliamentary leaders that replaced the tsarist regime in March 1917 reconfirmed Russia’s wartime commitments to the Western Allies, Russia’s continuing defeat on the Eastern Front turned its labouring population against the Provisional Government and towards the Bolshevik party led by Vladimir Lenin. He promised the Russian people an immediate end to the disastrous war, in addition to political and economic empowerment through a national system of democratically elected workers’ and peasants’ soviets (councils). Overthrowing the Provisional Government on behalf of a new ‘government of the soviets’ in November 1917, the Bolshevik party immediately issued a Decree on Peace ([done 7 November 1917] [1917] 208 Izvestija 1) proposing that ‘all warring peoples and their governments’ declare an immediate armistice and enter negotiations for a general ‘peace without annexations or indemnities’. Furthermore, the decree renounced the secret → diplomacy traditionally practised by European powers and
promised the publication of all secret treaties to which previous Russian governments were party.

4 The Soviet appeal for a general peace went unanswered by the Western Allies, who refused to recognize the legitimacy of the revolutionary regime. The military establishment of Germany, however, was willing to pursue a separate peace arrangement with Soviet Russia that would free German troops fighting on the Eastern Front for a decisive assault in the West, while the Austrian Government was desperate for a peace arrangement that would save its citizens from famine. On 15 December 1917, Soviet Russia and the Central Powers signed an → armistice at the German-held fortress of Brest-Litovsk in what was then Russian Poland, all parties agreeing to convene for formal peace talks the following week.

5 Three different delegations of Soviet representatives participated in increasingly contentious peace negotiations with the Central Powers at Brest-Litovsk between late December 1917 and late February 1918. The first Soviet delegation introduced a proposal for a peace based on no indemnities, no annexations of territories taken in the war, and national → self-determination for ethnic majorities. However, the first round of talks stalled after the Central Powers insisted that German forces should continue to occupy the western borderlands of the former Russian empire in order to assist the non-Russian majorities with national self-determination (→ Occupation, Belligerent). The second Soviet delegation to Brest-Litovsk was antagonized by the Central Powers' recognition of Ukrainian independence in a treaty signed with the anti-Bolshevik Ukrainian Rada on 9 February 1918. Ironically, this treaty imposed obligations such as regular grain deliveries to Germany and Austria-Hungary that denied Ukraine true autonomy. On 10 February 1918, Leon Trotsky, leader of the second Soviet delegation, announced that Russia’s response to the peace conditions set by the Central Powers was ‘neither war nor peace’: Russia would leave the war but refused to sign an unjust peace. When German military authorities reacted to Trotsky’s ‘revolutionary’ position by resuming hostilities, occupying a large portion of central Russia, and issuing an ultimatum to Petrograd, the reluctant Bolsheviks finally acceded to Lenin’s more pragmatic argument for an ‘immediate peace’, however annexationist, in order to secure the ‘breathing space’ necessary to preserve the November revolution and consolidate Soviet power. On 3 March 1918, the third Soviet delegation to Brest-Litovsk signed a treaty that deprived Russia of Poland, the Baltic provinces, Finland, Ukraine, and much of the Caucasus-territory containing one-third of its population, agricultural land, and railway network, half of its industry, and three-quarters of its iron ore production and coal supply.

C. Later Developments

6 In addition, political and financial treaties supplemental to the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk were signed in Berlin on 27 August 1918, requiring Soviet Russia to make enormous indemnity payments to Germany in gold and commodities in exchange for Germany’s pledge of non-interference in anti-Soviet conflicts on Russian territory. Imperial Germany benefitted the most among the Central Powers from this series of treaties, which both enhanced its resources and enabled it to divert forces from the Russian borderlands it occupied to the Western Front. However, the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk also provided Austria-Hungary with the much-needed relief of peace in the East and, in concert with the February treaty, a guaranteed bread supply from Ukraine. Turkey re-obtained areas in the Caucasus that it had lost to Russia in 1878.
Incensed by ‘Red’ Russia’s capitulation to the German enemy, violation of the secret treaties, and calls for an international workers’ revolution, the Western Allies willingly aided political opponents of the Bolshevik regime in the Russian civil war. Allied interventionist forces from Britain, France, the United States, and Japan supported anti-Soviet ‘White’ armies fighting in the northern, southern, and eastern peripheries of the former empire well after the German surrender and consequent nullification of the Brest peace in November 1918. When no Bolshevik-inspired workers’ revolution had swept across Europe by the end of 1919, the Allied leaders agreed to shift from a policy of intervention against the Soviet Government to a policy of quarantine.

The Versailles Peace Treaty imposed on Germany by the Allies in 1919 not only abrogated the notorious March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk but also eclipsed it historically. However, scholars such as JW Wheeler-Bennett and RK Debo have emphasized the galvanizing effect of the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk on the Western Allies and thus its contribution to the eventual Allied victory. For the United States and its democratic partners in Europe, the Brest peace of March 1918 was a horrific attestation to the future of any State over which imperial Germany might claim victory. Regarded with ‘near universal scorn’ to this day, according to Debo (at 157–8), the treaty that Germany forced on Russia has been used continuously to cast in a kindlier light the somewhat less punitive Versailles Peace Treaty that Germany was later forced to sign with the Allies. GF Kennan, on the other hand, has pointed out that the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in fact left Russia with more territory in 1918 than did the final border settlements under Allied oversight in 1920 (at 370).

D. Assessment

Concerning developments in peace treaty law and practice, H Steiger has found two major differences in internal structure between the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed by the Central Powers and defeated Russia in 1918 and the Paris peace treaties signed by the Allies and the defeated Central Powers in 1919–20 (→ Peace Treaties after World War I). Whereas the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk declared, in accordance with European tradition, that the state of war had ended and its signatories would ‘live henceforth in peace and amity’, the Paris treaties only declared that the state of war had ended, leaving out the traditional peace clause. Moreover, the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk formally stipulated a reciprocal renunciation of war damages, whereas the Versailles Peace Treaty held Germany responsible for the war and, in a significant break with tradition, imposed reparations for all damages, civilian as well as military (→ War Reparations). Yet compensation for war expenses had been increasingly demanded by European victors since the Napoleonic wars ended in 1815 (Steiger 83, 85–86), and the supplementary political and financial treaties of August 1918 authorized Germany to collect war costs from Russia despite the formal renunciation of indemnities in the March Treaty of Brest-Litovsk.

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