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Foreign Policy

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Foreign policy

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'In the beginning was the Treaty of Versailles in 1919': as a characterization of the Weimar Republic's foreign policy this statement would hit some nails on the head but it would also miss others.

The true part would be that German foreign policy between 1919 and 1933 was indeed constantly directed towards the revision of this treaty: it inflicted too deep an injury on the self-perception of the German public and politicians for even a single one of its basic clauses to be left in place.

Fundamental were naturally first and foremost the territorial secessions: the return of Alsace and those parts of Lorraine that Germany had pocketed from France in 1871 as war booty; the fifteen-year transfer of the Saar region to the League of Nations, which permitted France to exploit its coal mines; the small, largely German-speaking industrial area round Eupen and Malmédy, which after a questionable plebiscite went to Belgium; the loss of northern Schleswig to Denmark after another plebiscite; and, worst of all from the German point of view, the large-scale secessions in West Prussia and the whole of Posen (Poznań) to a re-emergent Poland, which created a sizeable German minority in the new state and together with the creation of the 'Free City of Danzig' (which lay under League protection with special rights also granted to Poland) formed the so-called 'Corridor' cutting off East Prussia from the rest of the Reich. Further consequences of the Versailles Treaty were the territorial losses in Upper Silesia, of which following a plebiscite in 1921 the League of Nations

transferred a part—the economically more important part—to Poland; in the Memel (Niemen) region, which by a circuitous route came to Lithuania in 1923/4, and in the tiny Hultschiner Ländchen (Hlučínsko), which went to the Czechoslovak Republic. Other territorial stipulations included the prohibition of union with the Republic of Austria, the modest remnant of the former Habsburg empire, which at first called itself *Deutsch-Österreich* (German Austria) after what was now its majority population, and—territorially the most extensive, economically almost the least significant, having always been a financial liability—the loss of all colonies in Africa, Asia, and Oceania, which were awarded as League of Nation mandates to the victorious powers.

Sensitive too was the restriction of sovereignty resulting from the occupation of the Rhineland. This was divided into three zones from north to south; it subjected the left bank of the Rhine and three extended bridgeheads on the right bank at Cologne, Koblenz, and Mainz to the occupying forces of the victorious powers; the zones were to be evacuated, on condition of good behaviour in the future by Germany and meticulous fulfilment of the treaty, after five, ten, and fifteen years respectively. The occupation of the Rhineland had been chiefly a French concern in the negotiations: it was intended to offer a guarantee and form a glacis, and was linked to further dispositions of a military nature. The west bank of the Rhine and a strip 50 km wide to the east were to be demilitarized, so that no German soldier could be stationed there and no German fortification maintained. But that was only one of the restrictions. The army could consist of only 100,000 serving soldiers (which meant in practice that it could not train reservists), and, moreover, it could not be equipped with heavy weapons; the navy, except for some small units, was to be surrendered to the victors; Germany was forbidden to possess the new weapons of the world war—tanks, submarines, and an air force. The result was that after this treaty Germany neither would be able to launch an attack, nor defend itself against its now much stronger neighbours, France and Poland.

Especially serious too, in German eyes, was Article 231, which laid the sole blame for the war on Germany and its allies. True, this 'war guilt article' had been devised by the Allies primarily

as a legal justification for demanding that Germany should pay reparations for the entire cost of the war. But in Germany it was taken above all as a moral condemnation. This new rule of international law, of determining who had caused a war and thereby justifying the payment of reparations (as against the older practice of excluding the question of causes from peace treaties and making the loser pay), arose for two main reasons. The prolonged social mobilization necessary for total war among all belligerent countries had only been possible as a result of the exceedingly massive and hitherto unknown intensity of propaganda, which presented the other side not only as the people to be defeated, but as a veritable demon. This propaganda would long continue after the war to have an influence on both sides and place almost insuperable social obstacles in the way of any rapprochement.

The demand for comprehensive German reparations can be also explained by domestic imperatives: Lloyd George fought the election campaign immediately following the end of the war with the slogan 'The Germans will pay' in order to give credibility to his promise of sweeping—and urgently needed—social measures in an England battered by crises, while in France the politicians comforted a population hard hit by four years of war on French soil with the hope that everything would be restored to its previous level by German payments. The actual total of reparations, however, was not laid down in the treaty, but only an advance payment. Establishing the exact amount was left to the victors, in whose hands it became a throttle that France above all wished to use; the French were by no means satisfied with the outcome of Versailles, but saw that their hopes of sidelining Germany in the long term and preventing a return to hostilities had not really been fulfilled. Besides reparations, other provisions, such as those on special German export duties and one-sided most-favoured-nation clauses, were an attempt to refill the empty coffers of the European victors (themselves heavily indebted to the USA) and to prevent a rapid German recovery.

But the statement with which we began this chapter is also imprecise, since it describes only half the truth, principally the way in which the peace treaty was perceived in Germany. First of all, the treaty's reception as a national humiliation may be explained by German wartime propaganda which was able to

build on the widespread and deep conviction from before the war that it was the enemy who was to blame for hostilities, having 'encircled' Germany, forcing a pre-emptive strike in order to escape the annihilation threatening it sooner or later. Secondly, until shortly before the war ended propaganda had nurtured confidence in victory, especially on the political right, which branded any initiative for a compromise peace as defeatism. Lastly, as late as 3 March 1918 the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk had supposedly brought a brilliant end to the war in the east (which, incidentally, as a draconian peace that exceeded the conditions of the Versailles Treaty showed how Germany could deal with those in its power). When a mere six weeks before the armistice of 11 November 1918 the military leadership, in a sudden volte-face, admitted that victory was no longer possible, the political leadership immediately banked on Wilson's 'Fourteen Points' that seemed to promise Germany, all things considered, a 'just' peace. Thus both politicians and people later felt that they had been grossly deceived, and that the peace treaty did not accord in every aspect with these Fourteen Points.

If people in Germany had not been subject to these various self-deceptions, they could have viewed the Treaty of Versailles more soberly: to be sure some 13 per cent of German territory, including economically important regions, was lost, but the potential for being a Great Power with some 60 million inhabitants and still the strongest economy in Europe remained. This was due simply to the fact that this peace arose from a compromise between the important victors, the USA, Great Britain, and France. It was above all neighbouring France that harboured far more draconian ideas: Paris dreamt of dismantling the Reich and returning Germany to the state of affairs before 1871 or even 1866; at the very least of detaching the Rhineland, to be either annexed or turned into a buffer state that would sooner or later gravitate towards France.

In defeat those who had been responsible for the victory propaganda searched for domestic scapegoats and found them in the parties which since spring 1919 carried the new republic, namely the so-called 'Weimar Coalition' of Social Democrats (SPD), the left-liberal German Democratic Party (DDP), and the Catholic party, the Centre. In particular the Social Democrats were subjected to the allegation that they had 'stabbed the army in the back', which later was exposed as a myth. This accusation was

made by prominent right-wingers (whose chief organization was the anti-republican German National People's Party, DNVP), and sanctified by the pronouncements of leading military men, including the last supreme commander Paul von Hindenburg. Thus responsibility for defeat lay not with the imperial army, which had remained 'undefeated in the field', but with left-wing politicians on the home front through their support of strikes and, above all, in the final days of the war, with the naval mutiny that had led directly to the fall of the monarchy. The military had planned cleverly ahead by having the armistice agreement, against all normal practice, signed on 11 November 1918 by those politicians who had come to power just two days before through the unceremonious disappearance of the imperial regime and who found themselves at Compiègne facing the commanders of the victorious armies.

Thus the horror of losing the war and the supposedly draconian peace were early on associated with the distress that very many in the middle class felt at the loss of imperial rule. The revolution of November 1918—modest as it was, at least in its effects—was linked by many liberals and above all the right with the 'shame of Versailles'. But even on the left—beyond the Social Democratic leadership—the revolution had not fulfilled every dream of greater social justice. As a consequence, from the very beginning not many people were prepared to make a success of the republic by identifying with the fresh start it offered. It was only in the few middle years of the republic that social divisions were to some extent overcome, and not by accident was a relatively realistic foreign policy possible in this period.

The Versailles Treaty

But let us return to our original point concerning the treaty. Illusions that the victorious powers were bound by Wilson's 'Fourteen Points', and obligated by the armistice, were also harboured by the representatives of those political parties that from 1917—albeit with little effect—had pursued a compromise peace. Even these moderate politicians had been infected (or feared the allegation of treason) and did not believe that they could simply accept the

draft treaty handed on 7 May 1919 to the new German foreign minister Brockdorff-Rantzau, an aristocratic diplomat 'converted' from imperial service to the republic.

Even the Social Democratic chancellor of the republic, Philipp Scheidemann, allowed himself to be drawn into the rising tide of objections by stating before the National Assembly that the 'hand . . . must wither' that signed this peace. But protests led only to trivial modifications to the treaty text. When it became clear that no substantial amendments to the treaty could be attained, the entire cabinet followed the foreign minister in resigning, and a new minority government was formed without the DDP. There was a brief boom in plans for refusing to sign the treaty. But it took the declaration of the high command that, given the current power relations, any refusal to sign would be futile and might lead to an invasion by the victors, ending with Germany crushed, to bring about the bitter recognition that there was no realistic alternative. Even the last attempt to get the Allies at least not to insist on the 'points of honour' (the 'war guilt article' 231, the demand for the extradition of the numerous alleged war criminals and the ex-Kaiser, now living in Dutch exile) failed in the face of the ultimatum to sign without 'ifs' or 'buts'. The National Assembly, which had made its acceptance conditional on the deletion of these clauses, did not really consent to the signing performed under humiliating conditions on 28 June 1919 by the German minister sent to Versailles. Nonetheless, a large majority voted for a parliamentary declaration that the deputies who had supported signing the treaty had acted 'only from patriotic motives'—an expression that was swiftly forgotten, at least on the right.

The First World War with its numberless victims had a lasting traumatic effect on society in every state affected. But whereas the population in the victorious countries could at least draw some satisfaction, in Germany there was a spreading atmosphere of impotence and humiliation, which became a burden the republic could hardly bear. All in all, what was signed in Versailles was at any rate not a peace that brought peace, and probably could not be, given the totality of the war, the first of its kind in world history. Immediately after the signing and then after the ratification of the treaty on 10 January 1920, Germany sought to partially avoid fulfilment. There was resistance especially on the

question of 'points of honour'. To be sure the Dutch failure to hand over Wilhelm II, who had inspired British propaganda even during the war to the cry of 'hang the Kaiser', was not really the consequence of a German initiative, but originated in The Hague. But the Reich government successfully refused to surrender 'war criminals', and the stand-off over this issue in February 1920 ended in the compromise that Germany itself would investigate and try them before the newly constituted Reich court in Leipzig—which apart from a few trials and a handful of convictions was largely a dead letter.

This early success at avoiding fulfilment may have frustrated the attempts made just after the war by the German Foreign Office and the Reich government to return to reality through a clear orientation towards the West (and in particular the USA), and replaced them with the illusory hope of quick successes in other aspects of revision. First of all there were efforts to put off the reduction in the size of the Reichswehr. This attitude on the government's part was not motivated only by foreign-policy considerations. The forced withdrawal of the remaining German troops in the Baltic after the armistice had brought into the Reich a further serious potential source of disorder at the very time when the *Freikorps*, who the government repeatedly relied upon to suppress attempted uprisings on the left, were facing disbandment. Thus the victors' ultimatum for a further reduction of the army to 200,000 men, issued in February 1920 immediately after the Treaty of Versailles had come into force, was not the least of the factors leading extreme right-wing forces around Wolfgang Kapp, the former leader of the Vaterlandspartei, and General Walther Freiherr von Lüttwitz, joined in the background by Erich Ludendorff, who by the end of the war had been the ruling spirit of the Supreme Army Command, to attempt in March 1920 a putsch against the republic.

To be sure the amateurism of the putsch—which nevertheless drove the government out of the capital to Dresden and then to Stuttgart—and the determined resistance of workers, who had swiftly responded with a general strike, put paid to it after a few days. However, when in its aftermath the trade unions' demands for a more Socialist policy turned into local uprisings in the Ruhr, and the Reich government sent in troops (and that

after the Reichswehr's ambivalence during the Kapp Putsch), who temporarily crossed the demarcation line of the neutralized region, the victorious powers, in particular France, reacted mercilessly: as punishment they occupied Frankfurt and its environs, which hitherto had lain outside the zone of occupation. The Reich government was thus shown in a manner that left no room for misunderstanding that breaches of the treaty, especially of its military clauses, would not be tolerated even when the authority of Berlin was in danger; the Reichswehr was thus not allowed even to remain as an instrument for maintaining order within the Reich.

A quite different hope for revision entered several heads early on, namely that of cooperation with the other pariah of the post-war order, Soviet Russia. Thus the contacts broken off at the end of the war were slowly resumed, stopping short of full diplomatic relations. To be sure, the vague expectation that a Russian victory in the war against Poland in 1920-1 would afford the opportunity for a renewed partition proved to be illusory in the light of the Poles' unexpected success and the Treaty of Riga in 1921; but Poland, as the common enemy and a target for revision, remained the bond between Berlin and Moscow, at times fragile, and always strained by ideological differences and the activity of the Comintern in Germany. This constellation was also a counterpart to the French plan of building close ties with Poland and Czechoslovakia, in order to contain Germany within a pincer grip should the need arise. Moreover, the Reichswehr early on saw the opportunity offered by the rapprochement of avoiding the treaty limitations on armaments. Reichswehr officers could be trained in arms that Germany had been forbidden to possess. In return, the Soviet Union, as it was officially called from 1922, hoped for German help in building up the Red Army. Finally, there were also hopes within German economic circles that they could do good business by rebuilding the Russian market.

A far more pressing consideration was that of reparations. Here too German foreign policy attempted to bring about a speedy revision. But a series of conferences and decisions by the Allies or their Reparations Commission (Spa 1920, London 1921) culminated in 1921 in the final demand of 132,000,000,000 gold Marks. After Berlin refused to comply, the victors, led by France and with

English participation, by occupying Düsseldorf, Duisburg, and Ruhrort and confiscating the harbour dues raised there, again clearly demonstrated that they did not intend to allow any room for negotiation. Under consideration were not only their own debts to the USA and the immense costs of reconstruction. For the French, the reparations question served above all as a political means to exorcize the fear that their neighbour on the right of the Rhine might regain its strength—an attitude regarded with due scepticism in London, where, even during the Paris peace negotiations, there had been a disinclination to allow France to slip into the prominent role that Germany had occupied before the First World War. This scepticism peaked several times, but never led to an open breach—not least for the very reason that London harboured the false hope that in view of its own problems in the empire and the newly acquired territories in the Near and Middle East, it could maintain the status quo in Europe with as few major squabbles as possible.

The cabinet of Chancellor Joseph Wirth (1921–2) had finally to bow to pressure in the reparations question and recognized that only a ‘policy of fulfilment’, an attempt to meet Allied demands as far as possible, would demonstrate that they could not be fulfilled. In parallel, however, quite different initiatives were undertaken. Wirth’s minister for reconstruction (and, from January 1922, foreign minister), Walther Rathenau, took soundings with his French counterpart about a scheme for payment mainly in goods and labour, in order to protect German currency. Such moves in Germany towards a readiness to cooperate foundered on the resistance of the French right and French industry, but they were also hampered by the fact that in the heated state of German public opinion, further inflamed by the extreme right, any apparent German concession passed for treason.

One factor intensifying this attitude and which drove Germany closer to the Soviets was a decision by the League of Nations affecting Germany’s eastern border. Under the Treaty of Versailles, Germany was initially debarred from membership. Since the USA too, after Wilson’s failed effort at getting the treaty ratified in Congress, had turned its back on Europe as regards politics, the League quickly attained the reputation of being a tool of the European victors. In March 1921, in a plebiscite in Upper Silesia,

a region of mixed population, which had taken place amidst skirmishes between German and Polish irregulars, some 60 per cent voted to remain in Germany. The League now recommended to the victors in October 1921 to act on the result in such a way that the eastern, more industrialized part should go to Poland and only the larger but economically less significant remainder stay German. In Germany this reignited the charge of bad faith against the victors who dominated the League, and refuelled considerable hatred towards Poland.

Such auspices boded ill for foreign minister Walther Rathenau's plan of willing cooperation. Instead he let himself be drawn into an action that in the long term further diminished what little faith there was amongst the victors in German trustworthiness. On 16 April 1922, on the fringe of the conference in Genoa summoned on the initiative of Lloyd George and intended to advance the rebuilding of the shattered European economy by also reintegrating the Soviet Union into the market, Rathenau, behind the backs of the western delegates, struck a treaty with the Russians in the little seaside resort of Rapallo. The preliminaries had been conducted some time before, chiefly by his secretary of state at the Foreign Office, Ago von Maltzan, who favoured cooperation with Moscow against Poland. However, the actual decision to conclude the treaty was taken in haste by the German delegation, because Maltzan postulated the danger that the Soviet Union would settle with the Western Powers at Germany's expense and could then assert its hitherto dormant claims for reparations. Taken only on its content, the Treaty of Rapallo was merely one of normalization: full diplomatic relations were to be resumed; each side renounced its claims on the other—respectively reparations and compensation after Soviet confiscations—and gave assurances of good economic cooperation. The result, however, was a grave setback to German relations with the Western Powers. This was not only because they wrongly believed in the existence of a secret article on military cooperation, but also because they judged Rapallo to be an attempt at confronting the victors with a bloc. So understood, 'Rapallo' retained until after the Second World War an almost mythical significance as a byword for the threat of German–Soviet cooperation. Rathenau was not really comfortable with such an eastward-looking policy. Indeed his moderation

towards the victorious powers cost him his life on 24 June at the hands of members of the 'Organisation Consul', which had been responsible for a series of assassinations, including that of Matthias Erzberger in 1921, the Centre Party politician who had signed the armistice in 1918.

No direct path leads from Rapallo to the occupation of the Ruhr in January 1923, when France, accompanied by Belgium, sent first 60,000, later 100,000, soldiers—thinly disguised as protection for a 'party of engineers'—into the Ruhr area, the industrial heart of Germany. Poincaré had once again become French prime minister at the beginning of 1922 and he still held firmly to his aim of weakening Germany. He thus exploited a slight delay in German fulfilment of delivering coal and mining timber to extract a ruling from the Reparations Commission that there had been a serious breach and thus procure himself a lawful excuse to treat the Ruhr itself as a 'productive pledge'. Thus began a sequence of developments in German foreign and domestic politics that brought the country close to collapse.

This scenario, however, was not immediately apparent. The call by the Reich and the affected *Länder* (regional states) for passive resistance to the Ruhr occupation, condemned as an illegal act of violence, and against the attempt to collect the reparations directly by exploiting the mines, was maintained by civil servants and workers over the whole area. However, the Reich government, now led by Wilhelm Cuno, refrained from denouncing the entire Treaty of Versailles as the radical right demanded. Cuno knew that this would result in the destruction of Germany just as surely as any violent resistance as demanded by the emergent *völkisch* parties. Furthermore, isolated instances of such violent resistance were mercilessly repressed by the French, who administered the area under martial law, and repeatedly led to death sentences and executions that merely increased beyond all measure German hatred towards the occupiers.

German foreign policy hopes rested on British intervention. London had firmly dissociated itself from the Franco-Belgian invasion and continued to make its disapproval clear. But Berlin's hope for stronger English pressure on France and the expectation that the initial failure of the attempted economic exploitation of the Ruhr would at least cause Paris to resume negotiations proved

deceptive. Thus the *Ruhrkampf* or 'Struggle for the Ruhr' became a race against time. France erected a tariff barrier around the newly occupied area, cutting off the occupied territories from the Reich; the military administration expelled a great many civil servants with their families eastwards across the line of occupation (the number is estimated at in excess of 130,000); this made provision of the Ruhr and Rhineland from within the Reich steadily more difficult. Yet Berlin could not shrug off its duty to support the region. And this caused one problem to run out of control, though it was not new and was not actually caused by the *Ruhrkampf*: namely, inflation, as the Reichsbank completely lost control of the currency in the face of the immense costs of financing the resistance.

The Stresemann era

By August 1923 the Cuno government had to recognize that its policy of all-out non-compliance with Paris had failed. For the next few months, the chancellorship fell to Gustav Stresemann, who led a grand coalition from his own centre-right German People's Party to the SPD. Over the following years Stresemann clearly dominated, and to a large extent personified, German foreign policy until his early death in 1929. Born in 1878 into a lower-middle-class family in Berlin, Stresemann had a youthful career in trade and economic associations behind him and even before the world war represented the then still unfamiliar type of the professional politician. During the war he had been a fervent annexationist and only with difficulty got over the fall of the imperial government, the defeat, and with it the end of his dreams. But with his native pragmatism Stresemann had gradually brought himself and his party around to the republic, since he saw no realistic alternative. His political ideal was the creation of a broad 'people's community' (*Volksgemeinschaft*, a term later much misused by the Nazis), which also envisaged a stronger social integration of workers. Politically this vision demanded cooperation with the SPD and possibly also its incorporation into his government. In the following years, however, it was always a

laborious task for him to create a willingness to cooperate with the SPD among the economic wing of his party, dominated as it was by Rhineland industrialists.

When Stresemann became chancellor in August 1923, it quickly became clear that his government had no other option but to call off the *Ruhrkampf*. Last desperate efforts to force Paris, either directly or indirectly from London, to negotiate the matter peacefully were unsuccessful. Poincaré insisted on total German capitulation, meaning the end of passive resistance without any promise of concessions. Faced with the hyperinflation that made financing the *Ruhrkampf* increasingly impossible, the Reich government had finally to give way and at the end of September called off the resistance.

But this produced new dangers that seemed virtually impossible to control, for the eight months of passive resistance had mobilized the population to such an extent that a return to normality was no simple matter. And at the extremes of the political spectrum there were forces ready to exploit this public mood. This was especially the case in Saxony (and neighbouring Thuringia), where the Comintern-inspired KPD (German Communist Party) had a hold on the state apparatus through its participation in government and sought to bring about a revolutionary situation. In Bavaria, politicians on the extreme right harboured vague plans for restoring the old order in the Reich, to be kick-started from Munich. Lastly, the situation in the occupied Rhineland and Ruhr was also explosive. For some weeks the abandonment of resistance left the region entirely exposed to the occupiers' whim, and given the financial straits of Berlin no further support could for the moment be expected. Hence the businessmen of the Ruhr sought direct contact with the occupiers. But they also wished to improve the competitiveness of their mines and factories by reversing some social improvements resulting from the revolution. As a result there was a ferocious struggle over the eight-hour day in the coal mines, which the working class regarded as the most important symbol of the successes of 1918.

The desperate situation in the Rhineland and Ruhr gave rise locally to very different schemes for a solution. One was for autonomy within the Reich with more intensive contacts with France, backed for instance by the lord mayor of Cologne, Konrad

Adenauer. Another scheme included the more radical plans of the separatists, who in autumn 1923—with the connivance of the French occupation regime, which had still not given up hopes of realizing the plans for the Rhineland it had drawn up in 1918–19—sought through actions at local and regional level to bring about the total separation of the Rhineland from the Reich and for some weeks took over de facto power in some districts. The resistance to these actions by the population at large—with massive support from the Reich, some of it secret—contributed to the end of the separatist rebellion along with the now quite unambiguous signal from London that Paris had gone too far.

The *Ruhrkampf* had proved a Pyrrhic victory for France, and this provided a new opportunity for German foreign policy. The franc had collapsed, and now Great Britain and above all the USA, which despite its political isolationism towards Europe had a strong economic interest in the continent, made their presence felt by denying France the means of using the reparations question as a political instrument. Washington and London compelled Paris to transfer the problem to an economic commission of experts, and in so doing made clear that they would no longer let French reparations policy torpedo their own interests in the economic recovery of Europe. Thus 1923 marked the climax of the post-war period in Europe: the last great attempt by France to bring about, unilaterally and by force, the security it believed it had not achieved in the Paris peace negotiations, and the parallel recognition in Germany that nothing was to be gained by head-on confrontation with France and no quick revision of the Versailles Treaty was thinkable.

Stresemann preferred to stake his policy on Anglo-Saxon interest in the reintegration of Germany in the world economy. This also coincided with his own idea of how his country could be a Great Power again, namely through renewed realization of its great potential in that economy. But this could be achieved only in cooperation with the other powers and in a largely peaceful Europe. This aim was, at least for the foreseeable future, to govern foreign policy. Stresemann was principally concerned with German interests, but in this approach he was no different from his French and British negotiating partners, Aristide Briand and Austen Chamberlain, who likewise put their national interests above all

else. More decisive was the paradigm shift in his methods: whatever Stresemann may have dreamt of as the goal of German foreign policy (which given the contradictory evidence can probably never be established beyond all doubt), peaceful means of bringing about an economic rehabilitation of Europe were incompatible with a frontal assault on the key elements of the Treaty of Versailles. It was this principle (in which Carl Schubert, his secretary of state from 1924, concurred) that fundamentally distinguished Gustav Stresemann's foreign policy from that of his predecessors—and also, as we shall see, from that of his successors.

But much work was needed before this policy bore fruit. In the spring of 1924 the commission of experts under the American banker and later vice-president Charles Dawes presented its recommendation for a restructuring of reparations. It was initially discussed in summer by the victors at a conference in London, before—signalling a new departure in post-war policy—a German delegation was admitted for genuine negotiations and not merely to receive an ultimatum. The details of the Dawes Plan accepted at the end of the conference need only be outlined: the Allied demands for reparations were modified in such a way that safeguarding the German currency, in the interests of world economic development and thus above all of the Anglo-Saxon states, became an equally important aim; the sums to be paid each year were to begin with relatively small amounts and rise only gradually; at each stage economic experts were to examine whether Germany could afford the proposed annual payments without serious damage. Reparations were thus largely taken out of politics and subjected to economic considerations. The Dawes Plan showed quick results: investment poured into Germany from the USA, which for the time being brought relief, but at the end of the decade would prove to be an insidious danger.

However, the London Conference also revealed the dilemma that confronted Stresemann throughout the following years: in order to obtain domestic support for his foreign policy, he had to be able to point to counter-concessions from the Allies so as not to become a victim of propaganda, especially from the DNVP, alleging a sell-out of German interests. In London he achieved this with French agreement to withdraw from the Ruhr within a year. This made possible the two-thirds majority in the Reichstag

for the Dawes Plan, made necessary in view of the constitutional change entailed by removing the Reichsbahn from direct Reich ownership, and which in future would guarantee reparations. In spite of the campaign against it, some DNVP deputies voted for it after coming under pressure from agrarian and industrial interest groups. Stresemann was for ever after constantly performing a high-wire act in domestic politics in order to sell each step he took in foreign policy, either with real or possible concessions by the victors, or in the expectation of 'returns', especially with regard to the occupied Rhineland. The nationalistic tone to be found in several of his speeches and writings can be simply explained by this need.

The fact is that Stresemann had recognized that only empathy with the unsatisfied French need for security and a solution to this problem could make progress possible. When in January 1925 it became known that, owing to German failure to fulfil certain disarmament terms the Allies would not, as provided in the Versailles Treaty, withdraw from the northern occupation zone in the Rhineland, at the same time as the threat was growing that Great Britain would make an anti-German treaty of guarantee with France and Belgium, he went on the diplomatic offensive. Supported by the British ambassador Lord D'Abernon, Stresemann proposed a security pact to London and Paris. At its core was to be the mutual inviolability of Germany's western border with France and Belgium as drawn up in Versailles: that is, a voluntary confirmation by Germany rather than a forced signature, and France's renunciation of any changes in its favour. The following months were marked by intensive diplomatic negotiations, in the course of which pressure was placed on Paris by London and Washington to accept the initiative.

There were two main potential stumbling blocks: France pressed for similar guarantees from Germany for its eastern border with its allies Poland and Czechoslovakia, which Stresemann rejected as totally impossible. The other Allied demand related to German entry into the League of Nations. After the prohibition at Versailles, this now passed for the precondition for reintegrating Germany in European politics and no doubt also for controlling it. Entry into the League, however, would not only stir up the hatred manifested especially on the right against this allegedly anti-German

instrument of the victors, but under the League constitution Berlin would be in the unwelcome position of having to offer at least indirect assistance to any anti-Soviet policy the Western Powers might adopt, thus cutting the 'wire to the East' that had existed since Rapallo.

Both problems were eventually solved. At the Locarno conference in October 1925 the delegates initialled the 'Treaties of Locarno'. At their core was the undertaking by Germany, Belgium, and France not to change their common borders by force, which was sealed by Great Britain and Italy as guarantors of these agreements together with the permanent demilitarization of the Rhineland. The pact was completed by arbitration treaties involving France, Belgium, Germany, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Germany's treaties with its eastern neighbours, however, did not provide for any strict obligation and were thus distinctly less binding than those with its neighbours to the west. Stresemann had thus succeeded in keeping open the question of the eastern border and its possible revision. In respect of German entry into the League, agreement was made possible by a last-minute concession from the Western Powers, who ruled out *de facto* any anti-Soviet obligations on Germany. Both Briand and Chamberlain went a good deal of the way towards Germany and Stresemann, since they too had an interest in resolving the security question and together recognized that only the reintegration of Germany into European politics at Locarno would make it possible.

Even so, the Locarno Treaties resulted in a ferocious political storm in Germany. At the beginning of 1925 the DNVP had for the first time accepted governmental responsibility in a centre-right coalition under the non-party chancellor Hans Luther. In the second round of the presidential elections that April, Paul von Hindenburg, the candidate above all of the DNVP, emerged as the successor to Friedrich Ebert, who had died unexpectedly at the end of February. This election was enough to show that a relative majority of the German population preferred to bask in the faded glory of past victories, and encouraged the anti-republican DNVP to hope that it could now pursue a decidedly 'national' foreign policy. It was therefore unsurprising that the coalition collapsed over the question of the treaties after the DNVP rank and file compelled its leaders to leave the cabinet,

since Locarno was perceived as the 'politics of abdication'. Even Stresemann's references to revisions eventually leading to the recovery of full sovereignty in the occupied Rhineland were of little help. Nevertheless, Luther's minority cabinet could rely in its foreign policy on the opposition SPD, which, regardless of whether it was in or out of government, provided a bulwark for Stresemann's policy of compromise. As a result the Reichstag voted by a majority for the Locarno Treaties, which were finally signed in London on 1 December 1925. True, German entry into the League of Nations was delayed until September 1926, since its demand for a permanent seat on the Council was contested by other states with similar ambitions. Nonetheless, the treaties led to the reintegration of Germany and a new phase in European foreign policy, which, in the close collaboration of Stresemann, Briand, and Chamberlain at their regular meetings, strongly resembled the maintenance of peace by the nineteenth-century 'Concert of Europe'.

German–French rapprochement

The conclusion in April 1926 in Berlin of a German–Soviet friendship treaty did little to harm Stresemann's overture to the West. This agreement was intended to appease Moscow, where the new course in German foreign policy was jealously watched. Thus the Treaty of Berlin was received with comparative equanimity by London and Paris, even though it contained mutual promises of neutrality in case of war that ruled out *de facto* French intervention in a Soviet–Polish war.

More important for Stresemann in the following period was the hope of achieving the 'returns' on which he justified his foreign policy at home. For the moment these hardly included revision of the eastern frontier, even if for a short time the illusion was entertained in Berlin that it might be possible to exploit or even exacerbate Poland's financial difficulties and persuade it, in its economic depression, to give or sell back former German territories. Equally illusory was the hope of an agreement with Belgium on the retrocession of Eupen-Malmédy. But of greater importance were more acute questions of sovereignty, especially

concerning the Rhine, and here Germany could see definite initial successes. Already at the end of 1925 the occupiers withdrew from the first (northern) Rhineland zone, and in 1927 the Inter-Allied Military Control Commission, which up till then had supervised German disarmament, ceased its work.

Economic relations too with France (as with other important trading partners) were considerably intensified. The two countries' potash and aluminium industries reached cartel agreements in 1926; in the same year their heavy industries, together with those of Belgium and Luxembourg, struck an accord on the 'International Steel Cartel'; finally, in 1927 a trade treaty advantageous for both parties was signed, which taken together seemed to point the way to an intensification and stronger association between the two countries' economic interests. Overall, amongst the Great Powers it was Germany whose foreign trade policy in the years after 1925 (especially at the World Economic Conference of 1927 in Geneva and its follow-ups) was the most strongly engaged in a liberalization of European trade that allowed even a customs union to seem a not totally impossible goal. This was an integral part of Stresemann's foreign policy, for Germany's status as a Great Power was to be regained by way of its economic power. Even if this foreign trade policy achieved only partial successes, partly because of French and British reservations, it was Franco-German relations in those years that produced further positive rapprochement. In the second half of the 1920s a network was created—admittedly a very loose one—of Franco-German contacts (e.g. in scholarship, science, cultural relations, and youth movements and exchanges). This aroused in the albeit relatively small groups involved the hope that they could move, step by step, towards mutual cooperation not only at the political and economic level, but also culturally.

At the political level Stresemann and Briand had, just after German entry into the League of Nations in August 1926, attempted the major breakthrough of a complete settlement of all outstanding questions between Germany and France. In a long-prepared-for and only ostensibly improvised tête-à-tête in the French village of Thoiry near Geneva, they agreed to resolve the pressing question of the remaining Rhineland garrison, to bring forward the restitution of the Saar region, and to end the Allied military

control of Germany. In return for an early withdrawal, Germany would liquidate its obligations under the Dawes Plan in order to pay off its reparations debt to France ahead of time and thus relieve the latter's precarious financial situation. Nothing came of this plan, since not only did French public opinion resist the supposed concession of withdrawing from the Rhineland ahead of schedule, but the American banks opposed the liquidation of the loans. Nonetheless this attempt at an understanding between Stresemann and Briand shows the possibilities that had arisen since Locarno but also the limits.

The apparent continuation of a 'Concert' between Stresemann, Briand, and Chamberlain during the League sessions was something quite different from the work Woodrow Wilson had imagined the League doing. Wilson had wanted to put an end to the secret diplomacy he blamed for the outbreak of the world war. But the often completely confidential cooperation of the three statesmen and their supporting diplomats did bear fruit after 1925, not least the (mainly declaratory but by no means meaningless) Kellogg-Briand Pact, in which a total of sixty-three countries committed themselves in 1928 (including states that joined later) to outlaw war. That Germany should take part in the preliminary negotiations and exchanges between the USA and France showed how far, thanks to Stresemann's policy of entente, Germany had returned to international diplomacy. This return, however, could be achieved only by adopting a policy of moderation that aimed at compromises and excluded force to attain foreign-policy ends. Thus Stresemann's vision had itself become a factor for stabilizing peace in Europe. And even though it certainly included revisionist aims, this vision was nevertheless governed by the recognition that only a reintegrated Germany could ever achieve them and any departure from peaceful means must inevitably mean a return to isolation.

It was quite another question how far German public opinion was ready to be patient and wait for a successful outcome of Stresemann's constantly promised 'returns', which neither France nor Great Britain were ready to grant quickly. In 1928 it became clear how easily German opinion could be stirred up, when the question of reparations appeared once more on the horizon. The Dawes Plan envisaged a rise in German 'normal annuities' for 1928/9. Since this

would manifestly have damaged the German economy, the French and British insisted on linking the unconditional withdrawal from the Rhineland repeatedly demanded by the Germans, and most recently in September 1928 at the League of Nations session in Geneva, with a final settlement of the reparations question. As in 1924, an international commission of experts was charged with devising a plan, which was finally accepted in August 1929 under the name of the 'Young Plan'. In brief, it fixed the total German reparations debt at a final figure of 112,000,000,000 gold Marks, laid down the time over which payments should be spread (fifty-nine years), and was particularly advantageous for Germany in that for the first years after coming into force it prescribed lower annual instalments than the Dawes Plan. Furthermore, the victors linked German acceptance of the Young Plan to the promise to withdraw from the Rhineland by the middle of 1930, five years before the date in the Versailles Treaty, thereby fulfilling the first major goal of Stresemann's revision policy.

A mere five weeks after the Young Plan had been agreed in The Hague, Stresemann, who had suffered from poor health and whose rigorous work regime had, as a consequence, worn him out, died at the age of 51 on 3 October 1929. His state funeral in Berlin became a powerful demonstration of republican forces. Some of them may well only now have realized what they had lost: as foreign minister he had dared for many years to pursue compromise with the West while minimizing dissatisfaction within Germany at the slow pace of results. In the last few months of his life he seems occasionally to have had doubts about the progress of his policy himself; and it is impossible to determine whether he could have successfully maintained his policy of incremental gains especially in the domestic and foreign circumstances of the ensuing years. Equally unanswerable is the hypothetical question whether the frequent tardiness of France and Great Britain to make counter-concessions is also partly responsible for the fact that Stresemann's great political aim of strengthening German society at home by achieving an accepted place amongst the Great Powers had been attained to only a small extent by the time of his death.

The reception of the Young Plan in Germany already showed this all too clearly: instead of its positive aspects for the country being recognized, it met with fierce resistance, systematically stoked

by an invigorated nationalist right comprising the DNVP, the National Socialists under Hitler, and the veterans' organization, the Stahlhelm. They set in motion a campaign for its rejection using slogans about the lasting enslavement of the German people. The debate reached a hitherto unknown pitch of shrill demagoguery. The proposed law submitted to a referendum by the radical right provided amongst other things for the unilateral repeal of Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles and threatened all German signatories to treaties imposing burdens on Germany with jail. True, the referendum at the end of 1929, with the support of only 13.8 per cent of the electorate, was superficially a debacle for the right, and in spring 1930 the new reparations plan was accepted by the Reichstag. But the NSDAP (National Socialist German Workers' Party) had achieved a great success through its alliance with the DNVP: it had broken out of isolation and forced its way from the extreme right of the *bürgerlich* (bourgeois) camp; in addition it had brought a new tenor to the domestic debate on foreign policy that from then on would become decisive.

The end of rapprochement

Julius Curtius, who succeeded his deceased party colleague as foreign minister, may by his own account have thought of continuing the policy of compromise. But as it happened, a new approach was soon taken that de facto amounted to the first breach with Stresemann's methods. After the acceptance of the Young Plan in March 1930 the last government to enjoy parliamentary legitimacy, a grand coalition under the Social Democratic Chancellor Hermann Müller, broke up. A series of 'presidential cabinets' followed, beginning with the Centre chancellor Heinrich Brüning, that relied more on the authority of the Reich president than on a majority in the Reichstag. Brüning's cabinet quickly championed a far more active revision policy. By the time of the 'liberation of the Rhineland', that is, the withdrawal of the last Allied troops at the end of June 1930, accompanied by a massive outburst of nationalism that celebrated this as a belated victory over France, there was no mistaking the interplay between public mood and the

nationalistic slogans adopted even by those politicians one would not consider as radical, and which worked off each other to create fever pitch. To this must be added the domestic consequences of the world economic crisis, namely mass unemployment that prepared further ground for radical propaganda. At the same time the depression led to attempts at autarky in all the affected countries (in Germany especially in agriculture), which again undid the healthy impact of economic cooperation of previous years.

The Reichstag elections in September 1930 with large gains for the NSDAP, not least as a result of its nationalistic propaganda in foreign policy, were a warning signal. The Brüning government saw itself—not entirely against its will—compelled to submit to these nationalistic stirrings. The brusque manner in which Germany rejected Briand's European Plan in May 1930, which (totally in French interests) sought to create European institutions, had already pointed towards a policy focused more sharply on an autonomous limiting of national states in favour of creating common-interest areas in Europe. However, the first major act in this direction, when foreign minister Curtius unexpectedly staged the coup of a customs union with Austria, turned into a fiasco because the Western Powers saw the beginning of an incorporation of Austria, prohibited by Versailles. As a result of the dilettante manner in which the union was prepared, the German initiative collapsed when brought before the International Court of Justice in The Hague in a test case. This not only cost Curtius his post, which Chancellor Brüning took on, but destroyed the international trust in the reliability of German foreign policy that Stresemann had built up.

Far more serious, however, were two other developments, namely Brüning's scheme for a solution to the reparations question and the ever-louder cry for 'equal rights' for Germany, which primarily concerned the question of armaments. It was, however, the reparations question that displayed in its most immediate form the close reciprocal connection between foreign and domestic policy that pervaded the entire Weimar Republic. Brüning's idea was that Germany could think of equal rights (and the underlying aims of dominance in Central Europe and supremacy over south-east Europe) only if it first shook off the pressing burden of reparations with all its might. To this end he wished to show

Germany's creditors that his economically prostrate country was in no way capable of bearing the burdens of the Young Plan. In order to prove this to the outside world, he gambled domestically on a policy of deflation covered by emergency orders of the president. This sharpened the economic crisis in Germany, pushed up the total of unemployed to a peak of 6,000,000, and indirectly drove more voters to the radical fringes of the KPD and NSDAP. He thus exacerbated the domestic crisis in order to achieve his foreign-policy aim of getting reparations cancelled. True, some economic historians believe that Brüning had no real alternative to his deflationary policy on economic grounds. But however that controversy may be judged,¹ the decisive fact is that Brüning deliberately introduced this policy, which led to the lowering of wages and salaries, to prolonged recession, to a massive increase in unemployment, and to mass impoverishment, in order to resolve the reparations question.

This policy was not without success. Great Britain had long ceased to be convinced of the wisdom of the Versailles Treaty; the German territorial losses in the east and in particular the intermittent oppression of the German minorities in neighbouring Poland and Czechoslovakia, which had already provoked repeated German protests in Stresemann's time, had created a feeling in London that if the occasion arose German revisionism in that region could certainly be accommodated. Meanwhile reparations had long been discredited in England, not least by the early harsh verdict of John Maynard Keynes, who had denounced them as economic nonsense. Brüning and his government could therefore certainly hope for a degree of understanding in London for their efforts. A France left alone in upholding the Treaty of Versailles could not put up any really decisive opposition. A step in this direction came with the announcement of a one-year moratorium for all debtors (including also French and British debts to the USA) by President Hoover in summer 1931. Finally, conference after conference moved ever closer towards the likely conclusion that reparations would in the long run come to an end.

In the disarmament question too, discussed from 1927 in preliminary conferences of the League of Nations and in February 1932 at the general Disarmament Conference, Germany went on the offensive. The basis of the discussions was the declaration

in the Versailles Treaty that enforced German disarmament was to be only the first stage of general disarmament. But for many years none of the victorious powers had felt itself bound by this undertaking. The German demand for equal rights in the disarmament question was therefore formally justified. But the inherent threat that if the others did not disarm Germany would proceed to rearm posed the danger right from the start that there would be no room for negotiation. France, where the hopes awakened at Locarno for ongoing cooperation with Germany had disappeared, was not disposed to throw away voluntarily its remaining trump card: its military superiority. Thus the Disarmament Conference dragged along without making any real progress, and, incidentally, strengthened the idea in Germany, heavily propagated by the radical right, that the Western Powers had no interest in a Germany with truly equal rights. Here, too, the last dividends of Stresemann's policy of entente and compromise were lost.

In some ways, then, the foreign policy of Brüning's presidential cabinet meant a return to the situation before 1924 when both sides eyed each other with distrust and looked only to their own advantage, while every positive development for the other country was interpreted as a disadvantage for one's own. Foreign policy had once again become a zero-sum game.

Aggressive revisionism

Meanwhile, in 1932 polarization in domestic politics had also widened as a result of Brüning's policy of deflation, resulting that spring in Nazi large gains in regional election after regional election. There were repeated street battles between extremists of left and right, and in parts of the *bürgerlich* parties there were recurrent plans to bring the National Socialists into government. In foreign policy Brüning was moving closer stage by stage to his goal of ending reparations. But shortly before achieving success he was toppled at the end of May 1932 as result of an intrigue in circles close to the aged President Hindenburg. In these reactionaries' eyes he had not achieved his true aim of dispatching the SPD into political insignificance and bringing about the transformation of

the system in an authoritarian direction, for he had repeatedly relied on SPD tolerance for his programme.

Brüning was followed by the politically incompetent Franz von Papen at the head of the so-called 'cabinet of barons'. This cabinet was able to chalk up the success of getting the other powers at the Lausanne conference in the early summer of 1932 to agree an end to reparations. And then in July, almost as a counter-move, Germany dramatically left the sluggish Disarmament Conference in Geneva and made further participation dependent on the other powers' advance recognition of Germany's equal rights in armament matters. This was a further step towards a more brutally assertive revision policy. Whereas Brüning had made far-reaching demands, but then had been drawn into negotiations, in the few months of Papen's government German foreign policy proceeded by ultimatum and showed, for instance with the walkout from the Disarmament Conference, that it was ready to go it alone. While Brüning had sought cooperation with a receptive London, Papen basked in the illusion that he could achieve better results by a bilateral understanding with France. But Paris desisted since it quickly saw the danger of diplomatic isolation and the risk of dependence on Germany should it follow this course.

Papen did not have time to put the change of direction to the test, for the domestic stand-off now overshadowed everything else. In the elections for the Reichstag at the end of July 1932 Hitler's NSDAP for the first time became the largest party, no doubt helped in part by Papen's aggressive revisionist policy that had now become respectable. After all, why should one support a government that was still showing restraint, or other parties for that matter, when one could back a far tougher revision policy, as espoused by Hitler, which called for the definitive annulment of Versailles? True, at the new elections in early November 1932 his party suffered considerable losses, but it remained nonetheless the largest party, and the formation of a stable government was not to be expected. At the beginning of December 1932 the 'kingmaker' of the past few years, General Kurt von Schleicher, emerged from the shadows and made a last effort as chancellor to rescue the façade of constitutionality, behind which there remained only a republic long since hollowed out. Foreign policy was very much in the background during his few weeks in office. But even his

planned bid for freedom in domestic policy failed when at the end of January 1933, again as a result of intrigues, Hindenburg appointed Hitler as chancellor of a new presidential cabinet.

With Hitler, foreign policy was quickly pushed into the foreground. His first great drumbeat was withdrawal from the League of Nations in October 1933, which was spectacularly confirmed by a plebiscite. To be sure the League had shown, at the latest with its ineffectual entry into the Manchurian conflict of 1931/2, how ill suited it was to handle major crises. But all the same it was a place for international negotiation, and that is precisely how Stresemann had made use of it. The German withdrawal now proved to the entire world that the country would no longer be drawn into laborious international discussions, but would proceed unilaterally—or at best bilaterally. The reintroduction of conscription and the unilateral renunciation of the military clauses of the Versailles Treaty in 1935, followed by the remilitarization of the Rhineland in early 1936 in open breach of the Locarno Treaties, were represented abroad as revisionist measures and accepted by the weakened Western Powers practically without lifting a finger. Both developments indicated the line he intended to take. In Hitler's calculation they already served to prepare for a new war whose aims would go well beyond revision of the post-war order of 1919.

The end of the First World War did not bring an ordered peace that could lead to the genuine pacification and development of Europe. This was universally felt, but above all in Germany where the unexpected defeat and even more the ensuing peace treaty were experienced as a deep humiliation. That they both coincided, moreover, with the collapse of the old regime and the establishment of the republic was a heavy burden that militated against its taking root. Thus, after initial and swiftly disappointed hopes, especially amongst Social Democrats, that with the overthrow of the old order Germany would be accepted as one of the progressive democracies, political attention was rapidly turned to attempts to revise the Treaty of Versailles. Apart from minor successes, however, it turned out that this path gave Germany little effective defence—especially in the reparations question, which above all France used as a political tool. By the time of the Ruhr occupation at the latest, with the conflicts and domestic problems that resulted

from it, there was a danger that Germany might break up and revert to its condition before the foundation of the state in 1871.

Recognizing this danger, Stresemann came to the conclusion that a cautious policy of revision was to be attained only through an understanding with the Western Powers and a policy of entente. Above all, Stresemann believed Germany's economic potential, which could be thrown onto the scales only in a peaceful Europe, could be utilized to restore its former status. The middle years of the republic became the successful years in foreign policy as Germany was gradually re-accepted into the company of Great Powers and step by step moved towards full sovereignty (albeit not fast enough for Stresemann's critics).

After Stresemann's death and under internal and external pressures this approach of friendly compromises between interests was abandoned; the return to a more aggressive policy of revision brought about certain advances, in particular the end of reparations. With this shift a hardening in foreign policy occurred, while in domestic policy interaction with fiercer nationalism merely played into the hands of extremists on the right. Thus the soil was prepared for Hitler's propaganda of the humiliated German people, so that up to 1938 he enjoyed broad support for his alleged 'policy of revision'. With the subjugation of Poland in 1939 and with the victory over France in 1940, Hitler reached the height of his public esteem in Germany: now at last the 'shame' of 1918 seemed to have been wiped away. But that was merely the first step along the path that would lead to a far more catastrophic defeat and the temporary end of German statehood.

Notes

1. See the contribution by Harold James in the present volume.