

German Revisionpolitik, 1919-1933

Carole Fink

Volume 21, numéro 1, 1986

Winnipeg 1986

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030950ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/030950ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (imprimé)

1712-9109 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Fink, C. (1986). German Revisionpolitik, 1919-1933. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 21(1), 134-145. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030950ar>

Résumé de l'article

La politique révisionniste de l'Allemagne pendant l'entre-deux-guerres a constitué une source première d'instabilité internationale. Du Traité de Versailles à l'avènement d'Adolf Hitler, les hommes d'état de la République de Weimar poursuivirent délibérément une diplomatie nationaliste visant à miner les principales dispositions du traité. La Revisionspolitik, qui unissait la plupart des tranches de la population du Reich, remportait un vif succès : les divisions parmi les anciens alliés et la Russie soviétique contribuèrent aux réalisations des hommes d'État Rathenau, Stresemann et Brüning. En 1933, le nouveau régime Nazi, moins prudent et plus militant, fut en mesure de récolter les fruits du labeur de ces prédécesseurs pour rétablir l'hégémonie allemande en Europe. Les dirigeants nazi étaient aidés en cela par une nation maintenant habituée à une politique étrangère de type irrédentiste aussi bien que par des partenaires diplomatiques qui avaient largement appuyé le révisionnisme de Berlin. Même si l'opinion des historiens continue de différer sur le style, les méthodes, les pratiques individuelles et les buts à court et long terme de la politique étrangère de Weimar, il apparaît clairement que ce fut là l'élément le plus dominant de la diplomatie républicaine.

German *Revisionspolitik*, 1919–1933

CAROLE FINK

Résumé

Germany's revisionist policy in the interwar period constituted a prime source of international instability. From the Treaty of Versailles to the advent of Adolf Hitler, the statesmen of the Weimar Republic pursued a purposeful, nationalistic diplomacy aimed at eroding the treaty's main provisions. Revisionspolitik, which united most segments of the Reich public, was highly successful: the divisions among the former allies and Soviet Russia helped contribute to the achievements of the statesmen Rathenau, Stresemann and Brüning. By 1933 the Nazi regime, less prudent and more militant, was able to build on its predecessors' labours to regain German hegemony in Europe, supported by a nation grown accustomed to an irredentist foreign policy as well as by diplomatic partners who had largely acquiesced in Berlin's revisionism. Though historians still differ over the style, methods, individual practitioners, and short- and long-term goals of Weimar foreign policy, it seems clear that it was the most pervasive, integral element of republican diplomacy.



La politique révisionniste de l'Allemagne pendant l'entre-deux-guerres a constitué une source première d'instabilité internationale. Du Traité de Versailles à l'avènement d'Adolf Hitler, les hommes d'état de la République de Weimar poursuivirent délibérément une diplomatie nationaliste visant à miner les principales dispositions du traité. La Revisionspolitik, qui unissait la plupart des tranches de la population du Reich, remportait un vif succès: les divisions parmi les anciens alliés et la Russie soviétique contribuèrent aux réalisations des hommes d'État Rathenau, Stresemann et Brüning. En 1933, le nouveau régime Nazi, moins prudent et plus militant, fut en mesure de récolter les fruits du labeur de ces prédécesseurs pour rétablir l'hégémonie allemande en Europe. Les dirigeants nazi étaient aidés en cela par une nation maintenant habituée à une politique étrangère de type irrédentiste aussi bien que par des partenaires diplomatiques qui avaient largement appuyé le révisionnisme de Berlin. Même si l'opinion des historiens continue de différer sur le style, les méthodes, les pratiques individuelles et les buts à court et long terme de la politique étrangère de Weimar, il apparaît clairement que ce fut là l'élément le plus dominant de la diplomatie républicaine.

The revisionist diplomacy of a defeated Great Power is a fairly familiar phenomenon in modern history. France after 1763 and 1815, Russia after 1856 and 1918, but especially Germany after 1919 constitute important examples of a highly purposeful and destabilizing foreign policy that has marked Europe's state system up until the cold war and the nuclear age. The volatile ingredients of revisionism

include: onerous financial, military, and territorial provisions that have been imposed from without; signs of dissension or inattentiveness within the victors' ranks; a state policy by the defeated of pursuing all opportunities to overturn the peace; and an alert, resentful public encouraged or willing to blame the nation's troubles on external deprivation and control. Revisionist foreign policy, creating a peacetime *Burgfriede*, is easy to stimulate, slow to be quenched, and exceptionally useful as a diversion both from domestic troubles and foreign-policy irresolution.

The revisionist diplomacy of the Weimar Republic, from the signing of the Versailles treaty to the advent of the Nazis, amounted to the prolongation of the Great War by other means. A well-formulated, consistent, highly publicized policy, stimulating considerable sympathy abroad (which it still enjoys in many Western and Marxist history texts), it nonetheless was a major cause of instability in the 1920s.¹ Germany's weak, factionalized first republic, born of defeat and external dictates, from the start made treaty revision its primary diplomatic goal: the step-by-step erosion of the peace provisions that had stripped German military power, removed territory and population, demoted its economic, financial, and commercial influence, and surrounded the Reich with unfriendly powers, alliances, and institutions. There was an innovation — *Erfüllungspolitik* — which Reich leaders early and skilfully developed and which has caused much historical debate ever since. How was the sometimes very concrete, often quite subtle fulfillment policy related to revisionism? Did it in any way contain the seeds of reconciliation with Germany's former enemies? Finally, there is the old but still important question of where Weimar revisionism fits within the overall course of modern German history: was it a discrete phenomenon in response to the extraordinary circumstances of 1918, or a pervasive policy linking the imperialism of the Second and Third Reichs? These are some questions this paper seeks to address.

In May 1919 at Supreme Command headquarters in Kolberg Ludendorff's successor, Wilhelm Groener, evaluated the bleak results of Germany's *Griff nach der Weltmacht*: the compulsive and disastrous attempt to displace England as a global power that had led to significant reduction of the Reich's position in Europe.² In the new world created by the Russian Revolution and the Anglo-Saxon victory in the West, what were Germany's prospects for revival?

From the German perspective, defeat was a shocking and humiliating phenomenon. The events of 1918–19 constituted a considerable discrepancy from what the public had gleaned from the controlled information provided by the General Staff — the exaggeration of German might and the systematic underestimation of the Entente's capability. At the war's end German troops stood deep in Russia, from Lake Peipus to Rostov-on-Don to the Caucasus, and, on the western front, still on French and Belgian soil. The German public was unaware

-
1. Hans W. Gatzke, intro. to *European Diplomacy Between Two Wars, 1919–1939* (Chicago, 1971), 7–12.
 2. Fritz Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen. Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914* (Düsseldorf, 1969), I.

that the Reich had exceeded its military and economic capabilities, that its leadership had panicked in August 1918, that its ally Austria-Hungary had collapsed, and that the November armistice had saved it from total defeat and the extinction of all legal claims. Feeding the widespread *Dolchstoß* legend of civilian betrayal nurtured by the military, the new Socialist chancellor Friedrich Ebert greeted returning troops in Berlin with the fateful words: "No enemy has vanquished you."³

Germany looked to United States president Woodrow Wilson to direct the negotiating process up to the armistice; his Fourteen Points, linking practical American interests, anti-Bolshevik politics, and humanitarian concerns, had announced his adherence to a just peace without annexations or indemnities.⁴ Hoping Wilson would save the Reich from the sort of peace that it had imposed on Russia (and keep the United States separated from the Allies), the German government responded to Washington's signals by promoting revolution from above on the eve of the military collapse: there was rapid political reform and the kaiser was deposed. Two days after the German republic was declared the armistice was signed. But the terms of the Compiègne agreement clearly indicated that Germany, overestimating Wilson's power and disregarding the Allies' demands for modification of the Fourteen Points, had not avoided the cost of defeat.⁵

The Treaty of Versailles, the climax of a bloody, revolutionary era, was undoubtedly a compromise among French, British, and American principles. Harsh as it was, it was scarcely a Carthaginian peace. The Allies gave way on several issues, including agreeing to a plebiscite on the future of Upper Silesia, which had provided one-fourth of the Reich's coal. German unity was maintained, its economy was virtually intact, and its resources and population, though reduced, were still considerable.⁶ The Russian Revolution had not only destroyed the original Entente but had also created a serious, some feel decisive, concern for the Allies at Paris: not to weaken Central Europe to the point that it might fall prey to Bolshevik expansion. The postwar "cordon sanitaire" of small states erected by the Allies between Germany and Russia constituted an opportunity for, as much as an impediment to, German revival. The new and enlarged states between Finland and

-
3. "An die heimkehrenden Truppen," 10 Dec. 1918, in F. Ebert, *Schriften, Aufzeichnungen, Reden* (Dresden, 1926), II, 127.
 4. See Arno J. Mayer, *Political Origins of the New Diplomacy* (New Haven, 1959), N. Gordon Levin, *Woodrow Wilson and World Politics* (New York, 1968), and Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking, 1918-1919: Missionary Diplomacy and the Realities of Power* (Chapel Hill and London, 1985), 11-117.
 5. For details, see Ferdinand Czernin, *Versailles 1919* (New York, 1964), ch. 1.
 6. Gerhard Weinberg, "The Defeat of Germany in 1918 and the European Balance of Power," *Central European History* 2 (1969): 248-60; also, Winfried Baumgart, "Brest-Litovsk und Versailles: Ein Vergleich zweier Friedensschlüsse," *Versailles-St. Germain-Trianon: Umbruch in Europa vor fünfzig Jahren*, ed. Karl Bosl (Munich and Vienna, 1971), 49-76; Gerhard Schultz, *Revolutionen und Friedensschlüsse, 1917-1920* (Munich, 1967).

Rumania, at odds with each other, dependent on the West for their economic and military survival, and doggedly anticommunist, would in time gravitate economically, culturally, and perhaps politically toward Berlin if the new Weimar Republic paid due outward respect to their independence.⁷

Notwithstanding the disparity between Germany's perceived and real situation in 1919, the not unexpected, but nonetheless rigorous Versailles treaty bound the nation — from the left to the right — into a united opposition and a common revisionist sentiment. First was the compulsion to sign; then there was Article 231, widely (though incorrectly) perceived as a moral condemnation of the Reich; also there were the territorial and population cessions, the prohibition against *Anschluss*, the exclusion from the League of Nations, the demand for the extradition of war criminals, the loss of colonies, and the one-sided financial, economic, transport, military, naval, air, and commercial regulations seemingly aimed at permanently crippling Germany for generations. There were small but irritating indignities and awkward territorial rectifications. Yet above all, there was the threat of huge but unspecified sums of reparations to be determined within two years. With the United States' refusal to acknowledge the connection between reparations and Allied war debts, Germany lost a major hope of relief.⁸

A distinct pattern of German diplomacy was established during the peace negotiations. Berlin insisted on the letter of Wilson's Fourteen Points, but was careful not to provoke the victors. Led by foreign minister Count Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau, a seasoned, intelligent, if also inflexible diplomat, German policy focused heavily on the treaty clauses, especially on points of "honour," on violations of self-determination, and on urging an open, equal international economic system. There were discreet, though fruitless soundings among French and British delegates, continued attempts to gain Wilson's support, and a wide-ranging press campaign, especially on the war-guilt issue.⁹ Germany made friendly approaches to the neutral countries calling for economic justice and the revival of trade, established relations with neighbouring Czechoslovakia, and reached out to Italy. Finally, while the new Weimar government warned loudly of the menace of

7. The Allies' antibolshevism is treated in J.M. Thompson, *Russia, Bolshevism, and the Versailles Peace* (Princeton, 1966) and, especially, Arno Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918-1919* (London, 1968).

8. Leo Haupt, *Deutsche Friedenspolitik 1918-19* (Düsseldorf, 1976); on this larger question see also Denise Artaud, *La question des dettes interalliées et la reconstruction de l'Europe (1917-1929)* (Lille, 1978), I, 123ff, 139ff.

9. See, for example, Haupt, *Deutsche Friedenspolitik*, 343-6, on the meetings between J.M. Keynes and Carl Melchior and Max Warburg at the Chateau Vilette, where the representation of Germany's desperate financial status reinforced Keynes' plan to restore international credit; also Erich J.H. Hahn, "The German Foreign Ministry and the Question of War Guilt in 1918-1919," in *German Nationalism and the European Response, 1890-1945*, eds. Carole Fink, Isabel Hull and MacGregor Knox (Norman, OK, 1985), 43-70.

bolshevism, Brockdorff-Rantzau quietly anticipated a future German-Russian entente as a counterbalance to Allied domination.¹⁰

Once the Versailles treaty was signed, the Weimar Republic was committed to use all its means, primarily political, diplomatic, and propagandistic, in as many arenas as possible to mitigate the costs of Germany's collapse, to block any increase of Allied control, and to regain Germany's independence and freedom of action step by step. This probably could not have been otherwise, given the constellation of forces within Germany and the political situation outside. The 1918 revolution had created no major changes in German leadership. There was little internal sentiment for European peace and reconciliation, or for accepting a significant reduction of German power. John Maynard Keynes's brilliant polemic against the treaty reinforced German hatred of the *Diktat* of Versailles, burying the record of Germany's wartime damage with charges of Allied callousness and injustice at the peace table. In vicious pen-portraits he depicted Wilson as a "blind and deaf Don Quixote" led by the nose by an avenging Clemenceau. Keynes not only influenced the negative vote against the Versailles treaty in the United States Senate, but, with his technical and moral attack on the economic, territorial, and especially reparations clauses, also greatly reinforced Germany's indignation and its campaign to revise the treaty.¹¹

There were three pervasive aims of German revisionism: to reduce the reparations burden, weaken the treaty's military clauses, and alter the treaty's territorial specifications, especially in the east. There were three phases of republican foreign policy. The most crucial, between 1920 and 1924, which was a duel between French treaty enforcement and German resistance, was decided in Berlin's favour. In the second, between 1924 and 1929, Germany consolidated its gains; finally, from the French evacuation of the Rhineland to the advent of Hitler, the Reich's erratic, aggressive *Revisionspolitik* eroded the remainder of the coercive apparatus of the Versailles treaty. Revision was largely pursued on the diplomatic and propagandistic fronts, publicly and privately, mixing several factors or isolating essentials, depending on conditions and the Reich's interests. It was the distinguishing factor of Weimar diplomacy and statesmen.¹²

The first stage began inauspiciously. In 1920 there was not only the abortive Kapp Putsch, but also the Spartacist uprising in the Ruhr, which was followed by French occupation of Frankfurt, Darmstadt, and Offenbach. In the 6 June national elections the Weimar coalition suffered a defeat; the turn to the right signified a repudiation of any sign of moderation and accommodation. To be sure, the

10. Horst-Günter Linke, "Deutschland und die Sowjetunion von Brest-Litovsk bis Rapallo," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 16 (1972): 27.

11. Schultz, *Revolutionen*, ch. 15.

12. Cf. Andreas Hillgruber, "'Revisionismus' — Kontinuität und Wandel in der Aussenpolitik der Weimer Republik," *Historische Zeitschrift* 237 (1983): 597–621; see also Michael Salewski, "Das Weimarer Revisionismussyndrom," *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte. Beilage zur Wochenzeitung 'Das Parlament'* B 2/80 (12 Jan. 1980): 14ff.

international climate was not unfavourable to muscle-flexing, even in Germany's weakened internal and external state. Britain and France were battling over treaty enforcement and the Near-Eastern settlement; the Russians were threatening Warsaw; and the United States, distracted by the presidential campaign, had virtually withdrawn from its former allies. In July 1920 the new German government dispatched a delegation to the Spa Conference, the first to be admitted to an Allied conference since Versailles.

Spa, with its compromise decisions on coal deliveries and German disarmament, set a pattern for the era. Lloyd George, playing mediator, forced concessions on France and Germany, but ultimately had to accept the French position on sanctions. The German delegation, hastily assembled and ill-prepared, brought no concrete proposals on reparations. Industrialist Hugo Stinnes's defiant statements, reminiscent of Brockdorff-Rantzau's protests a year earlier and pleasing to Reich nationalists, were only partially repaired by the more moderate rhetoric of foreign minister Walter Simons, and they served to draw the embattled Allies together. Stinnes also revealed the extent to which German heavy industry, the main target of French economic demands, shaped Berlin's negative diplomacy. It was not inconvenient for Berlin to plead economic and also military obstruction against the Allies' demands. For Germany Spa demonstrated the possibilities and risks of maneuvering between the Entente, the limits of British support, and the advisability of gradualist tactics rather than politically risky "total solutions."¹³

The May 1921 deadline approached, when Germany had to pay its first cash installment of twenty billion gold marks and the Allies had to specify Germany's total reparations bill. Jacques Seydoux, the Quai d'Orsay's undersecretary for Commercial Relations, introduced a plan late in 1920 involving direct agreement between French and German industry. This pragmatic temporary solution failed not only because of the anticipated opposition of the Ruhr magnates and London's objections; Berlin now suggested a link between its future compliance on reparations and the fate of Upper Silesia. The failure of the Seydoux plan brought Germany face to face with the hitherto disunited Allies. At the March 1921 London Conference Simons, protesting that a Reich suffering from internal weakness and mounting inflation would be pauperized at Europe's expense, offered an exaggeratedly low final figure. The Allies, outraged and also exasperated with Germany's nonfulfillment of the disarmament clauses, responded by sending troops into Düsseldorf, Duisburg, and Ruhrort. Faced with reality, Berlin offered a slightly higher figure through Washington, which declined to serve as mediator. On the eve of the deadline, the Allies presented Germany with a bill of 132 billion gold marks, a figure considerably lower than their earlier claims, within five billion of Keynes's original calculation, and, with careful scrutiny, representing almost one-third of that figure in expected payments. The Allies' temporary unity and

13. On Spa, see *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939* (London, 1958-) 1st ser., 8:passim; also Peter Wulf, *Hugo Stinnes. Wirtschaft und Politik, 1918-1924* (Stuttgart, 1979) and Horst Gründer, *Walter Simons als Staatsmann, Jurist und Kirchenpolitiker* (Neustadt, 1975).

toughness reignited German and worldwide indignation; the Fehrenbach cabinet, its year-long policy of bombast and rejectionism checked, resigned.¹⁴

The new government of former Finance minister Joseph Wirth accepted the London ultimatum. Like the decision to sign the treaty on 28 June 1919, Wirth's acquiescence under a threat of force "clarified" the international scene and staved off a military crisis, but in no way represented (or was perceived at the time) as a permanent German capitulation. The French understood that Germany's signature gave no guarantee of further coal deliveries, regular payments, or compliance with other treaty terms. Britain, relieved of a European crisis, more than ever sought a means of improving its own financial and economic situation by negotiating some form of German relief. Premiers Briand and Lloyd George had each bought time with the London ultimatum, but not the assurance of Allied unity in the next crisis; nor had they discouraged new German initiatives.¹⁵

Wirth, a staunch German nationalist with a distinctly narrow political and diplomatic background, appointed the cosmopolitan, articulate Jewish businessman Walther Rathenau as his minister of reconstruction. Together they introduced a new, more active phase of Weimar diplomacy: *Erfüllungspolitik*. Based on outward compliance with the Allied demands, this was a complex, largely coordinated programme in continuation of earlier efforts to strip the treaty of its power and the Allies of their temporary dominance. With a more broadly based government, Germany under Wirth became active on several fronts, more inventive with its initiatives, more concrete with its proposals, more realistic in its expectations of outside support. Germany signed a separate peace treaty with the United States in August 1921, established economic and military ties with Soviet Russia, and also launched an extensive propaganda campaign for the rights of German minorities in the new states of Eastern Europe. The Wirth-Rathenau government also resumed bilateral economic negotiations with France (culminating in the innocuous Wiesbaden agreement), cemented its ties with London, and even moved toward normalization of its relations with Poland.

Within six months the Wirth government, which had made two reparations payments, expected relief and reward for its *Erfüllungspolitik* to bolster its position at home. German industry and organized labour staunchly resisted prolonged financial sacrifice and blocked necessary tax reform. The German public expected the Reich to retain Upper Silesia. On 20 October the League of Nations Council made the not unexpected announcement that the province would be partitioned, with Poland receiving the industrial triangle. The Wirth government resigned two days later. While the German right-wing press gloated over the futility of

14. Peter Krüger, *Die Aussenpolitik der Republik von Weimar* (Darmstadt, 1985), 116–32.

15. Krüger, *Aussenpolitik*, 132; also Ernst Laubach, *Die Politik der Kabinette Wirth 1921/22* (Lübeck and Hamburg, 1968), 36–37, 40, and *passim*.

Erfüllungspolitik, even Wirth's rival, DVP leader Gustav Stresemann, admitted the advantages and lack of alternatives.¹⁶

Wirth almost immediately formed a second government which for the next year pressed tenaciously for reparations relief. Rathenau, now a private individual, journeyed to London and to the Supreme Council meeting in Cannes pleading Germany's incapacity to pay and seeking foreign loans and a reparations moratorium.¹⁷ Named foreign minister at the end of January 1922, Rathenau joined Wirth at the Genoa Conference. There for the first time Germany was invited to participate as an equal with the other Great Powers in a world summit designed by Lloyd George to tackle international financial and economic problems and deal with the resumption of relations between Soviet Russia and the West. The Genoa Conference held few prospects for Germany. There was a looming 31 May payments deadline, and France, with Poincaré having replaced Briand, vetoed a discussion of reparations at Genoa. Britain showed little sympathy for Rathenau's pleas to reduce strict enforcement of the treaty's disarmament provisions.

During Genoa's first week, on the pretext of the remote possibility that the Allies might offer Moscow a share of reparations, Wirth and Rathenau decided impetuously to accept Russia's longstanding offer of a bilateral treaty. The German-Soviet Treaty of Rapallo, which sabotaged the Genoa Conference, little affected the outcome of Berlin's immediate reparations problem. It did serve notice, no doubt for the domestic audience as well as for the Allies, of Germany's aroused independence. It produced the predictable result: the French grew fearful of a German revival, while the German public continued to excoriate the paltry results of *Erfüllungspolitik*. Rathenau, assassinated by right-wing youths on 24 June, was as much a casualty of his nation's inflamed resentment and inability to fathom the government's year-long machinations as of simple racism.¹⁸ The Genoa Conference exposed the Entente's uncoordinated and ambivalent treatment of Germany and Russia, the United States' aloofness, the mounting opposition to the Versailles treaty by the neutral powers, the disunity of the new and enlarged East European states, and the resolve of both Rapallo signators eventually to revise the Paris peace settlement.

The Allies grudgingly granted Germany two postponements in the summer of 1922, setting the stage for a collision before the next deadline in January 1923. Wirth resigned in November, on the rejection of his appeal for a stabilization loan and a three- to four-year moratorium. Wirth's successor, the businessman Wilhelm

-
16. Heinrich Euler, *Die Aussenpolitik der Weimarer Republik, 1918/1923 (Vom Waffenstillstand bis zum Ruhrkonflikt)* (Aschaffenburg, 1957), 287-302; Laubach, *Kabinete Wirth*, 66-79, 93-105.
 17. David Felix, *Walther Rathenau and the Weimar Republic: The Politics of Reparations* (Baltimore and London, 1971), 105-46; Laubach, *Kabinete Wirth*, 131-53.
 18. Carole Fink, *The Genoa Conference: European Diplomacy 1921-1922* (Chapel Hill, 1984), esp. 90-94, 126-33, 162-76, 284-7; cf. Krüger, *Aussenpolitik*, 151-83; Laubach, *Kabinete Wirth*, 161-223.

Cuno, announced a continuation of *Erfüllungspolitik*, but lacked the ability to control or withstand the mounting international crisis. Cuno reiterated Wirth's defunct moratorium request to the Allies and appealed fruitlessly to the United States to promote relief and sponsor a Rhine peace-pact.¹⁹ German diplomacy had reached an impasse. Its refusals were sterile; its pockets were empty. No segment of Reich opinion accepted the Allies' total claims. The year 1922 ended with Germany in massive default on timber deliveries and short on its monthly coal quotas, whereupon the Reparations Commission on 9 January 1923 voted sanctions and, on France's urging, the Allies occupied the Ruhr.²⁰

The Ruhr occupation — the bitter, though anticipated Franco-German confrontation — presented the Reich both with dangers and opportunities. There was the risk that radical and separatist groups might foster further political dissolution, but the government's declaration of passive resistance, evoking memories of the 1914 *Burgfriede*, served almost instantly to unify the country. The massive welfare budget to support passive resistance ultimately ruined the currency in the chaos of hyperinflation, but it also benefitted the government and German heavy industry, which liquidated debts and made major acquisitions with worthless marks. The protracted, occasionally violent climax of the Franco-German quarrel over treaty-execution versus treaty-revision stirred international alarm at the spectre of Germany's collapse. Berlin well understood that the powerful bystanders, Britain and the United States, would ultimately have to intervene to prevent French economic dominance of Central Europe and promote a new, more tolerable reparations settlement.²¹ There was nonetheless the necessity for Germany to demonstrate a modicum of accommodation. When the Allies rejected Berlin's inadequate payment proposals, however, and demanded the end of passive resistance, Cuno in August 1923, with the mark at two million per dollar, resigned.²²

The "Great Coalition" government formed by Gustav Stresemann ended passive resistance, acted decisively against separatism, reformed the currency, and also launched a more vigorous, realistic, and successful diplomacy of splitting the Entente and ultimately reducing reparations. An avowed treaty-revisionist, a wartime annexationist, an opponent of the Weimar constitution, and *Vernunftstre-publikaner*, Stresemann, as chancellor until November 1923 and foreign minister until his death in October 1929, focused primarily on restoring Germany's status as a Great Power. Step by step, using Germany's still-considerable economic power and strategic importance, he exceeded his predecessors in working prudently and

19. Hermann-Josef Rupieper, *The Cuno Government and Reparations, 1922–1923: Politics and Economics* (The Hague, Boston, and London, 1979), 11, 21, 44, 71ff; also Werner Link, *Die amerikanische Stabilisierungspolitik in Deutschland 1921–32* (Düsseldorf, 1970), 160–2.

20. Etienne Weill-Raynal, *Les réparations allemandes et la France* (Paris, 1938–47), II, 290ff, 311ff, 325ff.

21. Rupieper, *Cuno*, 130–47, 152–73, 218ff.

22. Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe* (Princeton, 1975), 356–73.

selectively to erode Versailles and maintain national unity over such burning issues as war guilt, German minorities, disarmament, and reparations.²³ France, after an abortive flirtation with Rhenish separatism and a delaying action against a settlement, was forced by the British and Americans to submit the reparations problem to a committee of experts, which convened in Paris on 15 January 1924. The experts produced the Dawes Plan, which was adopted by the London Conference in the summer of 1924.²⁴

Stresemann, though outwardly unenthusiastic about some of the details of the Dawes Plan, knew that he had won a considerable victory. Despite the plan's unwelcome provisions for reorganization and international control of German finance and industry, it effectively reduced Germany's reparations burden and laid the basis for its economic recovery. Based on the preferred concept of capacity to pay, it ignored Germany's total liability and the duration of its obligation, delayed payments for two years, foresaw a large international loan, abstained from political demands, and acknowledged the economic and fiscal unity of the Reich. This signified an Anglo-American reinterpretation of France's version of the treaty, precluding any further unilateral punitive actions. France's artificial military superiority and economic weakness had been exposed. Stresemann, utilizing the German nationalists' denunciations of the Dawes Plan for imposing "permanent serfdom" on the Reich, succeeded in pressuring the French to evacuate the Ruhr within a year. His own acquiescence was provisional, for Stresemann fully anticipated another reparations reduction three or four years hence.²⁵ Thanks to French hesitancy, Anglo-American determination, and his own tough shrewdness, Stresemann in less than a year in office had made Germany a partner in its own rehabilitation.

With the conclusion of the Dawes Plan, the opening of the floodgates of American loans, and the support of moderate German opinion, the second phase of Weimar diplomacy began. Between 1925 and 1929 Stresemann worked actively for the restoration of full German sovereignty. The very magnitude of its treaty obligations gave Berlin a considerable leverage in each successive phase of negotiations.²⁶ As a result of the Dawes negotiations the Allies became accustomed to talking with the Germans as equals. This created the precondition for Stresemann's masterwork: Locarno.

-
23. Alfred E. Cornbise, "Gustav Stresemann and the Ruhr Occupation: The Making of a Statesman," *European Studies Review* 2 (1972): 43-67; also Wolfgang Michalka and Marshall M. Lee, eds. *Gustav Stresemann* (Darmstadt, 1982), *passim*.
 24. Jacques Bariéty, *Les relations franco-allemandes après la première guerre mondiale* (Paris, 1977), ch. 8-20.
 25. Stephen A. Schuker, *The End of French Predominance in Europe* (Chapel Hill, 1976), 191-3, 374-82.
 26. Stresemann, in a December 1925 speech, stated: "One must simply have. . . so many debts that the creditor sees his own existence jeopardized if the debtor collapses. . . . These economic matters create bridges of political understanding and political support." Quoted in Annelise Thimme, "Gustav Stresemann, Legende und Wirklichkeit," *Historische Zeitschrift*, 181 (1956): 314.

The announcement of a postponement of the evacuation of the Cologne zone, due to the negative report by the Inter-Allied Military Control Commission on German disarmament, triggered Stresemann's proposal for a Rhineland pact. Fearing a possible Anglo-French alliance that might perpetuate the Rhineland occupation and force Germany either into isolation or dependence on Soviet Russia, Stresemann in January 1925 revived Cuno's proposal for a five-power guarantee of the existing Rhine frontiers.²⁷ Stresemann won British support for this more palatable alternative to the Geneva protocol, he won French and British acquiescence in his persistent refusal of an *Ostlocarno*, and he gained German admission to the League without an obligation to participate in possible sanctions against Soviet Russia. Locarno represented a giant step on the road to revision. According to the Versailles treaty any violation of the demilitarized Rhineland was to be considered a "hostile act;" under the Locarno arrangements, however, the signators were obligated to respond only to "flagrant violations." The absence of an *Ostlocarno* and Germany's entry into the League opened the way to a more active and aggressive German minorities policy of whittling away at the legitimacy of Poland and the other new states of Eastern Europe. The 1926 Berlin treaty with Soviet Russia underlined Stresemann's design of establishing Germany's influence in Europe by steering a middle course between East and West.²⁸

The "Locarno era" between 1925 and 1929 was filled with advances and frustration. Nobel-prize-winner Stresemann joined the Big Three in Geneva where he pressed tenaciously for Germany's interests. The IMCC was finally withdrawn in January of 1927, Germany joined the Western powers in signing the Kellogg-Briand Pact in August 1928, and a month later his partners agreed on negotiations for an early evacuation of the Rhineland pending a final solution on reparations. At the Hague Conference of August 1929 Stresemann participated in the adoption of the Young Plan, at last fixing the final sum and duration of German payments, terminating foreign controls, and setting the date (30 June 1930) for the final evacuation of the Rhineland, five years ahead of schedule. Eighteen hours before his death, on 3 October 1929, Stresemann announced: "We are again masters in our house."²⁹

With Stresemann's death, the onset of the Depression, and the demise of Weimar Germany's last Great Coalition government early in 1930, the style and goals of Weimar diplomacy radically changed. The last troops had scarcely left the Rhineland when the Brüning government announced its hopes for eastern territorial revision and for an early evacuation of the Saar. After the September 1930 Reichstag elections, Brüning competed with the Radical Right with loud demands

27. Background to these events is detailed in Jon Jacobson, *Locarno Diplomacy: Germany and the West, 1925-1929* (Princeton, 1972), 4-12; also F.G. Stambrook, "Das Kind — Lord D'Abernon and the Origins of the Locarno Pact," *Central European History* 1 (Sept. 1968): 233-63.

28. Hans W. Gatzke, "Von Rapallo nach Berlin: Stresemann und die deutsche Russlandpolitik," *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte* 4 (1956): 28ff.

29. Cited by G. Castellan, *L'Allemagne de Weimar, 1918-33* (Paris, 1969), 339.

for the scaling down of reparations, with his programme to build a second armoured cruiser, and with his demand for increased German rearmament. Brüning — a sincere patriot, more aggressive, less politically astute and flexible than Stresemann — failed to create a solid domestic base to surmount Germany's economic misery. Hammering away at the shreds of Versailles' military and territorial provisions, he fell from office shortly before Weimar Germany's triumph: the cancellation of reparations at the July 1932 Lausanne Conference. By this time the German republic could no longer be saved by more blows at the treaty.³⁰

When Hitler was appointed Reich chancellor in January of 1933 the German public had become well accustomed to Weimar's revisionist diplomacy. It considered the treaty arrangements unacceptable and impermanent, expected German statesmen to press Germany's claims vigorously, and expected sympathy and accommodation abroad. The Third Reich was thus able to build upon a fourteen-year policy during which Germany, balancing East and West, had regained its sovereignty and played a leading role in European affairs.

To be sure republican diplomacy, punctuated by intense negotiations and agreements with the Allies and also with the Russians, was based primarily on a conception of *peaceful* revision. While Stresemann and his colleagues demanded economic relief and "equality of armaments," and privately referred to short- and long-term goals of regaining Germany's lost territories in the East, there is no evidence that Weimar's *Revisionspolitik* would have involved force to achieve its goals. Nevertheless, *Erfüllungspolitik* and the "spirit of Locarno" created a domestic and international climate of expectations, tough bargaining, and payoffs in return for Germany's grudging adherence to the status quo and pacifying its implicit goal of regaining a leading place in Europe. Rathenau, Stresemann, and Brüning forged the political, diplomatic, and military instruments Hitler used. Germany's often-disunited diplomatic partners and rivals, well aware of Berlin's goals, to some extent promoted them as a means of furthering their own ambitions. During the years between Versailles and the Great Depression, between Wilson and Hitler, German diplomacy was directed against the "injustice" and "inefficacy" of the Versailles treaty. The Third Reich expanded its predecessor's aims to monstrous proportions, leading to the destruction and division of Germany and Europe. Since 1945, the expressions of *Revisionspolitik* and *-politiker* in the Cold War and the nuclear age have understandably been far more muted and more circumspect than under Weimar.

30. Gotthard Jaspas, ed., *Von Weimar zu Hitler 1930-1933* (Cologne-Berlin, 1968); also Werner Conze, "Brüning als Reichskanzler. Eine Zwischenbilanz," *Historische Zeitschrift* 214 (1972): 310-34.