I. Kriegsziele und Friedensschluß, 1914–1919

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France and the German Question in the Era of the First World War¹

This paper examines French war aims against Germany during World War I. It traces the prewar roots of wartime policy before discussing that policy's evolution in the first and second halves of the conflict. Historians had largely neglected this subject until in 1966 Pierre Renouvin published a pathbreaking article in response to the debate on Germany's war aims launched by Fritz Fischer². Renouvin signalled the imminent opening of the relevant Paris archives, and in the next two decades several other writers followed his lead. Little new information has been added, however, since Georges Soutou's *L'Or et le sang* in 1989³, and French

¹ I have used the following abbreviations:

AN Archives nationales, Paris

FO Foreign Office papers, Public Record Office, London

JO Journal officiel de la République française. Débats parlementaires: Chambre des Députés/Sénat. Compte-rendu in extenso.

LGP Lloyd George papers, House of Lords Record Office, London

MAE Archives du Ministère des Affaires étrangères, Paris

PAM Pont-à-Mousson archive, Blois

SHA Service historique de l'armée de terre, Vincennes

The Tardieu manuscripts and the Série A-Paix in the MAE have been recatalogued since I consulted them. I have used the previous file numbers.

² *Pierre Renouvin*, Les Buts de guerre du gouvernement français, 1914–1918, in: *Revue historique* 235 (1966) 1–37. *Fritz Fischer*, Griff nach der Weltmacht: Die Kriegszielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland 1914–18 (Düsseldorf 1961); English edn., *Germany's Aims in the First World War* (London 1967).

³ Among the principal works were: *Pierre Miquel*, La Paix de Versailles et l'opinion publique française (Paris 1972); *Guy Pedroncini*, Pétain: Général en chef, 1917–1918 (Paris 1974); *David R. Watson*, Georges Clemenceau: A Political Biography (London 1974); *André Kaspi*, Le Temps des américains: Le concours américain à la France en 1917–1918 (Paris 1976); *Jacques Bariéty*, Les Relations franco-allemandes après la Première Guerre Mondiale (Paris

war aims are considered here in the light of what appears to be a completed cycle of research⁴.

Before 1914

French leaders first identified Germany as the principal threat to their security in 1866–67. After Prussia defeated Austria, Emperor Napoleon III launched a fruitless search for allies, and an arms race began. These developments help explain why France declared war in 1870, and the resulting catastrophe and the cession of the provinces of Alsace-Lorraine confirmed the new pattern of Franco-German relations⁵. Between 1871 and 1914 those relations passed through three phases.

Until the early 1890s France was diplomatically isolated. As World War I leaders such as Raymond Poincaré and Georges Clemenceau uncomfortably recalled, all the other European Powers were more or less aligned with Germany, and new crises in 1875 and 1887 underlined France's exposed position. None the less, the Third Republic staged a remarkable recovery from its defeat, and the cementing of an alliance with Russia in 1891–94 ended France's acutest vulnerability to war threats from Berlin.

Between the early 1890s and 1905 Germany ceased to expand its army, and France was more secure, but domestic consensus over defence policy broke down. Radical politicians brought the French army under tighter civilian control and shortened military service from three years to two. Yet meanwhile French commentators became preoccupied with Germany's faster economic and demographic growth⁶, and extra-European conflicts with Britain produced little Franco-German rapprochement. On the contrary, in 1900 the Germans stipulated that if France wanted co-operation against London it must reaffirm the legitimacy of Germany's possession of Alsace-Lorraine. The French Foreign Minister, Théophile Delcassé, turned to seek accommodation with Britain, and achieved it in 1904 with the celebrated *Entente cordiale*⁷.

1977); *Georges-Henri Soutou*, *La France et les marches de l'est, 1914–1919*, in: *Revue historique* 578 (1978) 341–388; *Walter A. McDougall*, *France's Rhineland Diplomacy, 1914–1924: The Last Bid for a Balance of Power in Europe* (Princeton 1978); *Gisela Steinmeyer*, *Die Grundlagen der französischen Deutschlandpolitik, 1917–1919* (Stuttgart 1979); *Marc Trachtenberg*, *Reparation in World Politics: France and European Economic Diplomacy, 1916–1923* (New York 1980); *David Stevenson*, *French War Aims against Germany, 1914–1919* (Oxford 1982); *Jean-Baptiste Duroselle*, *Clemenceau* (Paris 1988); *Georges-Henri Soutou*, *L'Or et le sang: les buts de guerre économiques de la Première guerre mondiale* (Paris 1989).

⁴ But see *John F. V. Keiger*, *Raymond Poincaré* (Cambridge 1997).

⁵ *Raymond Poidevin* and *Jacques Bariéty*, *Les Relations franco-allemandes, 1815–1975* (Paris 1977).

⁶ *Claude Digeon*, *La Crise allemande de la pensée française, 1870–1914* (Paris 1959) is the classic discussion.

⁷ *Christopher M. Andrew*, *Théophile Delcassé and the Making of the Entente Cordiale: A Reappraisal of French Foreign Policy, 1898–1905* (London, New York 1968) 172–175.

The final prewar period began when Germany attempted in the First Moroccan Crisis of 1905–06 to disrupt both the Anglo-French entente and the Franco-Russian alliance. It not only failed to do so, but encouraged military and diplomatic liaison between Paris and London. All the same, down to 1911 European diplomacy stayed relatively fluid, and economic trends favoured Franco-German co-operation. French banks made short-term placements on the German money markets, French steel production drew increasingly on Ruhr coking coal, and the Ruhr combines imported iron ore from Normandy and from the French portion of Lorraine. French and German heavy industry were more closely interconnected than they would be again until the 1950s. If peace broke down, however, this same economic interdependence would necessitate that the entire resources of the Rhine-Meuse basin be controlled by one or the other side⁸.

After the second Moroccan (or Agadir) crisis of 1911, relations deteriorated rapidly. Although Jean-Jacques Becker has stressed the limits of the French “national awakening” (*réveil national*) in these years⁹, patriotic feeling undoubtedly revived among Parisian students, among politicians, and in the press. Publicists, aided by new frontier incidents, again spotlighted Alsace-Lorraine. French financiers withdrew short-term deposits from Germany, French officials restricted German purchases of French iron ore, and each country obstructed imports from the other¹⁰.

First as premier in 1912 and then as president in 1913–20, Raymond Poincaré was central to prewar politics. Although his diplomacy exacerbated German anxieties, he did not provoke a showdown. His objective was to deter and to contain Berlin, though also to repel invasion if deterrence failed. No French government would risk hostilities over Alsace-Lorraine, and in 1912 Poincaré rejected a German offer to grant greater autonomy to the lost provinces because he feared that friendlier relations with Berlin would jeopardize the Franco-Russo-British Triple Entente¹¹. Although willing to negotiate over second-order issues such as Asia Minor, he was convinced he must uphold French independence against an untrustworthy, bullying neighbour.

Poincaré therefore intensified military and diplomatic co-operation with St. Petersburg and London. He supported Russia during the First Balkan War in 1912, and the French and Russian general staffs agreed that in hostilities with the Central Powers they would unleash rapid and synchronized offensives. In November 1912, Britain agreed to consult with France if peace were threatened. The German Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg realized that diplomacy was failing

⁸ *Raymond Poidevin*, *Les Relations économiques et financières entre la France et l'Allemagne de 1898 à 1914* (Paris 1969); *Carl Strikwerda*, *The Troubled Origins of European Economic Integration: International Iron and Steel and Labor Migration in the Era of World War I*, in: *AHR* 98 (1993) 1106–1141.

⁹ *Jean-Jacques Becker*, 1914: *Comment les Français sont entrés dans la guerre* (Paris 1977).

¹⁰ *Poidevin*, *Relations économiques*, Part IV.

¹¹ *John F. V. Keiger*, *France and the Origins of the First World War* (London 1983) 69–71.

to break Germany's "encirclement" by the Triple Entente, and that realization encouraged him to contemplate more forceful methods¹².

France and Russia, moreover, were determined to keep pace with German rearmament and sensed that they were gaining the edge. After Russia reorganized its army in 1910, the Agadir crisis prompted Berlin to redirect its armaments policy away from naval competition with Britain and toward land expansion through army bills approved in 1912 and 1913. The French responded with their 1913 law restoring three-year military service and with a massive reequipment credit¹³. Yet from Germany's vantage point France in July 1914 appeared threatening in the medium term but vulnerable in the short. The Three-Year Law, which caused two classes of raw recruits to be called up in the autumn of 1913, expanded the standing army, but temporarily diluted its quality. By 1917, in contrast, the reform would yield much greater benefit, while a French-financed programme of Russian railway construction, approved in January 1914, would exacerbate Germany's vulnerability in the east¹⁴.

The 1870s and 1880s had underlined the dangers posed by isolation; the years from 1890 and 1905 spotlighted those of domestic disunity. French policy in the crisis of July-August 1914 reflected these lessons. The government restrained the army from taking precautions until Germany had done so, and held it ten kilometres behind the frontier. Although Poincaré and the prime minister, René Viviani, were for much of the crisis out of radio contact with Paris while sailing back from a visit to St. Petersburg, on regaining the capital they urged Russia to take no steps that might encourage German mobilization. But the message came too late. In the meantime the French ambassador in Russia, Maurice Paléologue, had pledged that France would stand by its alliance in all eventualities. When confronted with a German demand for French neutrality, Poincaré and Viviani refused to commit themselves, and when Germany declared war on the Russians they assured the latter they would join them, though even now Poincaré waited for Germany to take the initiative in opening hostilities. To ensure domestic unity and to reassure Britain it was essential to seem non-provocative, and French leaders succeeded in doing so. None the less they went to war with an offensive strategy and believing that the European military balance had altered to their advantage¹⁵.

¹² Samuel R. Williamson, Jr., *The Politics of Grand Strategy: Britain and France Prepare for War, 1904–1914* (Cambridge, Mass. 1969).

¹³ David Stevenson, *Armaments and the Coming of War: Europe, 1904–1914* (Oxford 1996); David G. Herrmann, *The Arming of Europe and the Coming of the First World War* (Princeton 1996); Gerd Krumeich, *Armaments and Politics in France on the Eve of the First World War: The Introduction of Three-Year Conscription, 1913–1914* (English edition, Leamington Spa 1984).

¹⁴ Stevenson, *Armaments*, chs. 5, 6.

¹⁵ Keiger, France, and M. B. Hayne, *The French Foreign Office and the Origins of the First World War, 1898–1914* (Oxford 1993), for the July Crisis.

1914–17

The war began badly. The Germans repulsed France's opening offensives and overran its richest industrial areas. After being turned back at the battle of the Marne in September 1914, they dug in fifty miles from Paris. Still, that France had withstood the initial onslaught and kept Britain and Russia on its side gave French leaders grounds for optimism. Nor did they foresee four years of carnage. The "short-war illusion" identified by Lancelot Farrar in the July Crisis persisted after the trench lines formed¹⁶. Governments prolonged the fighting through incremental decisions to hold on for six months more and trust in the next offensive. But each abortive operation and each fresh casualty bill added new obstacles to a compromise peace.

What prospects were there for such a compromise? Germany's western war aims were schizophrenic¹⁷. Bethmann Hollweg's "September Programme" of 9 September 1914 intended to make France's "revival as a Great Power impossible for all time". France would lose the Longwy-Briey iron-ore basin, and possibly its northern coalfields and the Channel ports, as well as its Central African colonies. It would enter a German-led customs union and pay a crippling indemnity¹⁸. But this programme represented "provisional notes" drafted when total victory momentarily seemed imminent, and after the battle of the Marne Bethmann and the new Commander-in-Chief, Erich von Falkenhayn, agreed that Germany could not defeat all its enemies¹⁹. Bethmann was prepared to moderate his war aims in order to achieve a separate agreement with one or more allies, and he renewed his prewar efforts to split the Triple Entente. During 1915 the chancellor saw Russia as the most promising candidate for a breakaway, but Falkenhayn's ferocious Verdun offensive in the following year was intended to destroy France's will to fight. As defined by State Secretary Gottlieb von Jagow in June 1916, Germany's conditions for a French separate peace would be merely Longwy-Briey and a protective glacis; though if France fought on the terms would be much harsher. Following internal discussions in the autumn, the German leaders concurred that France's losses would be confined to Briey-Longwy and its Central African possessions²⁰.

In public the French authorities alleged that the Berlin government shared the aims of the extremist Pan-German League²¹. A rally of patriotic associations at

¹⁶ *Lancelot L. Farrar, Jr., The Short-War Illusion: German Policy, Strategy, and Domestic Affairs, August-December 1914* (Santa Barbara, Calif. 1973).

¹⁷ *Hans Gatzke, Germany's Drive to the West: A Study of Germany's Western War Aims during the First World War* (Baltimore 1950); *Fischer, Aims*; *Soutou, L'Or et le sang*; *André Scherer and Jacques Grunewald* (eds.), *L'Allemagne et les problèmes de la paix pendant la Première guerre mondiale* (4 vols., Paris 1966–78).

¹⁸ *Fischer, Aims* 103–105.

¹⁹ *Farrar, Illusion*, ch. 9.

²⁰ Jagow to Romberg, 8 June 1916; Bethmann to Grünau, 7 Nov. 1916, *Scherer and Grunewald* (eds.), *L'Allemagne*, Vol. 1 docs. 268, 369.

²¹ E.g. Pétain article, "Pourquoi nous nous battons", in: *Le Figaro*, 27 June 1917, FO 800/201.

the Sorbonne in March 1917, for example, held in the presence of Poincaré and Premier Aristide Briand, denounced Germany as a permanent menace. A compromise settlement, leaving it free to renew aggression, would end French independence and great-power status. The invaded provinces must be liberated, reparation paid, and the dead avenged²². Other public declarations reiterated these themes.

In reality, by this point Briand knew that the territorial price of a separate peace with Germany would be relatively cheap²³. But such a peace would shatter the alliances on which French security rested as well as thwart France's own developing war aims. In September 1914 Viviani told Tsar Nicholas II that French troops would advance toward his forces until the Allies could obtain "every legitimate reparation and ... guarantee for many years the peace of the world"²⁴. Until French soil was cleared negotiations were unwelcome, and French governments vehemently rejected mediation efforts²⁵. By the Pact of London, signed in September 1914, France, Britain, and Russia undertook not to make a separate peace or offer terms without a previous inter-Allied accord. In the Straits Agreement of March 1915 London and Paris headed off an implicit Russian threat to leave the war by endorsing St. Petersburg's claims to annex Constantinople and the Bosphorus. In February 1916 the Declaration of Sainte-Adresse pledged the Allies to restore Belgian independence. While the French authorities signed up to a lengthening list of coalition objectives, France's allies remained uncommitted to its own war aims.

A word is needed here about terminology. War aims – the conditions France would impose if Germany lost – were necessarily hypothetical, predicated on a victory that remained uncertain until the conflict's final weeks. Determining them was an exercise for which administrators overwhelmed by pressing tasks had little patience²⁶. But for purposes of analysis declared aims should be kept distinct from confidential ones. Absolute war aims that could not be abandoned short of utter defeat (such as regaining Alsace-Lorraine) must be distinguished from supplementary goals (such as taking German colonies) that would be desirable if victory permitted. Differing views about how to define war aims and about what forms of evidence shed light on them have led to differences in historical interpretation. Thus whereas Renouvin concluded that French war aims consistently included only Alsace-Lorraine, and that more ambitious demands were short-lived, Soutou is impressed by the continuity (*permanence*) from 1915 onwards of French ambi-

²² Bertie to Balfour, 7 Mar. 1917, FO 371/2934. Deschanel to Briand, 19 Feb. 1917, AN F127976.

²³ Bertie to Balfour, 1 Feb. 1917, FO 800/169.

²⁴ Delcassé to Paléologue, 21 Sept. 1914, MAE, Papiers d'Agents, Paléologue MSS Vol. I.

²⁵ Stevenson, War Aims 13.

²⁶ According to the Political Director of the Foreign Ministry, only "professors and idealistic theoreticians" had the leisure for post-war questions. Margerie to de Billy, 3 Aug. 1916, MAE, Papiers d'Agents, de Billy MSS (63).

tions to dominate the Rhineland. He has provided a valuable corrective, but both viewpoints contain elements of the truth²⁷.

The one French economic claim pursued overtly throughout the war was that for reparations. The one such territorial claim was for the provinces lost in 1871. Whereas before 1914 no French government had been willing to launch hostilities for Alsace and Lorraine, now none was willing to cease hostilities without regaining them. The Alsatians and Lorrainers themselves voted for autonomist rather than pro-French parties before 1914, and French leaders never dared entrust the issue to a plebiscite²⁸. But all French parties except for the left wing of the Socialists supported the provinces' unconditional restoration. Viviani could proclaim this objective without endangering the political truce.

Conversely, the fragility of domestic consensus inhibited governments from specifying a solution to France's security problem, despite growing calls on them to do so. Nationalists such as Maurice Barrès raised the question of the left bank of the Rhine from spring 1915 onward, and the eastern frontier "haunted" industrialists such as the director of the Pont-à-Mousson steelworks, Camille Cavallier²⁹. In August 1915 the iron and steel trades association, the Comité des Forges, set up a peace-treaty commission, and in December the Comité's secretary testified to a government advisory committee³⁰. Many French businessmen feared that the restoration of Alsace-Lorraine, with its steel and textile mills, would create overcapacity and exacerbate France's coal shortage. Undeterred, the Comité des Forges eventually decided to press for German coal deliveries and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine and the Saar coalfields, and to welcome in principle the acquisition of yet further Rhineland territory³¹. In the winter of 1916–17 the other main French business organizations and the largest political party, the Radicals, adopted war-aims programmes, and a new pressure group, the Comité de la rive gauche du Rhin, demanded that Germany should lose sovereignty over the left bank³².

Pressure from nationalists and from business was offset by Socialist and Radical caution, and not until the ministry of Aristide Briand (November 1915 – March 1917) did France equip itself with a programme of anti-German aims. It did so, as concerned economics, at the inter-Allied Paris Economic Conference of June 1916. As concerned territory, it did so with the "Cambon letter" and Doumergue agreement of January–March 1917. The initiative and the agenda for the Paris conference came from Briand's Commerce Minister, Etienne Clémentel, who feared that immediately the war ended Germany would begin an export drive while France remained handicapped by the destruction of its northern industries. Clé-

²⁷ *Renouvin*, *Buts de guerre* 35–36; *Soutou*, *Marches de l'est* 387.

²⁸ *Raymond Poincaré*, *Au Service de la France* (10 vols., Paris 1926–33), vol. 6, 67–71.

²⁹ Cavallier to Pinot, 17 Mar. 1915, PAM 06673.

³⁰ Hearing of Robert Pinot by Bureau d'études économiques, 3 Dec. 1915, MAE Série A-Paix (178).

³¹ Minutes of the Commission de Direction of the Comité des forges, PAM 06673.

³² On this group, Driault to Balfour, 7 August 1918, FO 371/3436.

mentel wanted to form an Allied trading bloc in retaliation against Berlin's projected European customs union. A hitherto free-trading Britain agreed that the Allies must co-operate in reconstructing their devastated regions, reserve raw materials primarily for themselves, retaliate against postwar enemy dumping, and consolidate their economic independence from the Central Powers. None of this led to immediate action, in part because Russia and Italy wanted continuing access to German and Austrian markets. But in contrast to pre-1914 trends toward economic integration, France was looking now to postwar discrimination against the Central Powers and to minimizing trade with them³³.

Although France's declared territorial war aims in 1914–16 were limited to Alsace-Lorraine, the government left unclarified whether the provinces' northern border would be that of 1815–70, 1814, or 1790³⁴. From 1915 on, moreover, Poincaré and Briand spoke of "guarantees" of French security against German aggression³⁵. This codeword probably referred to the left bank of the Rhine, whose possession would give France a military frontier on the river. For the authorities to commit themselves to such a solution, however, stimuli from within the hexagon needed reinforcement from outside it. In March 1915 Nicholas II had pledged that in return for the Straits Agreement he would support French claims against Germany's western borders. Delcassé, the French Foreign Minister in 1914–15, preferred to leave this undertaking as a promissory note and discouraged closer discussion of European war aims. When Briand took over as premier and foreign minister, in contrast, he relaxed the censorship of war-aims discussion in the press, consulted industrialists, and faced increasing controversy on the subject in his cabinet³⁶. In August 1916 the headquarters staff (GQG) of the French Commander-in-Chief, General Joseph Joffre, drew up its recommended peace conditions, proposing that Alsace-Lorraine and the Saar should be annexed and that the left bank of the Rhine should be divided into autonomous states in a customs union with France, occupied for thirty years while Germany paid an indemnity³⁷. In the same month Sir Edward Grey, the British foreign secretary, suggested conversations about war aims. But warnings from the embassy in Petrograd had greater impact, Paléologue urging that France should head off a Russian separate peace by committing the tsar to territorial expansion at Germany's expense. While the Government prepared a mission to Russia, Paul Cambon, the ambassador in London, drafted with his brother Jules, the secretary-general of the Foreign Ministry, a document intended to guide conversations with Britain. Almost certainly

³³ On the Paris conference, *Soutou*, *L'Or et le sang*, chs. 7 and 8; Commerce Ministry files, AN F127988.

³⁴ The 1814 frontier gave France most of the Saar coalfield and a salient round Landau; that of 1790 somewhat more.

³⁵ Poincaré message, 5 Aug., and Briand speech, 3 Nov. 1915, JO (Chambre), 1915 1227, 1681–1682.

³⁶ *Stevenson*, *War Aims* 27, 31, 38–40.

³⁷ GQG memoranda on peace conditions, 25 Aug. and Oct. 1916, SHA 14N/35. *Joseph J.-C. Joffre*, *Mémoires du Maréchal Joffre*, 1910–1917, Vol. 2 (2 vols., Paris 1932) 371–80.

they were influenced by the GQG recommendations. In January 1917 the cabinet approved a modified version of the brothers' draft, which Briand dispatched to Paul Cambon on the 12th as the "Cambon letter". Until the end of the war it would remain the most authoritative statement of French objectives³⁸.

Greater ambiguity surrounds the Doumergue agreement, a Franco-Russian exchange of letters between 14 February and 10 March. Briand had sent Gaston Doumergue, his minister of colonies, to Petrograd with a copy of the Cambon letter and instructions to discuss war aims. But Doumergue drew up a much more specific agreement than the letter envisaged, and Briand's *chef du cabinet* at the Foreign Ministry, Philippe Berthelot, authorized Doumergue to sign it. The agreement was negotiated in great confusion and without the cabinet being informed. None the less, after investigating the circumstances Briand's successor, Alexandre Ribot, ruled that France was bound³⁹.

Inter-Allied diplomatic developments determined the timing of the Cambon letter and the Doumergue agreement, but French ideological, economic, and strategic exigencies shaped their content. Restoring Alsace-Lorraine would give France potash, iron ore, steel and textile mills, and an eastern frontier on the Rhine, but the French leaders wanted the provinces also for reasons rooted in their sense of national identity. The demand for the Saar, in contrast, though it had some historical plausibility if presented as a claim to the 1790 or 1814 frontier, was primarily intended to reduce France's coal dependence on Germany. Finally, the claim to the left bank had essentially a security justification, and was much the most controversial. The Cambon letter demanded Alsace-Lorraine with the frontier of 1790 (therefore including the Saar), but its final draft said nothing explicit about Rhineland buffer States, referring instead to "neutrality" and "provisional occupation", although the left bank was to be detached from German sovereignty and France to have the "preponderant voice" in its fate⁴⁰. The Doumergue agreement, in contrast, called "at the very least" for the frontier of 1790, and for the left bank to be divided into disarmed and independent buffer states under long-term French occupation⁴¹. Briand grudgingly promised in exchange to support the Russians in demanding whatever they wanted on Germany's eastern border. Yet simultaneously his ministry was in contact with Austria-Hungary, to which in March 1917 Poincaré and Jules Cambon offered Germany's territories of Silesia and Bavaria, while indicating that France would expect reparation, indemnities, the Alsace-Lorraine of 1814, and "guarantees" on the left bank⁴². Briand's explo-

³⁸ Stevenson, *War Aims* 40–44, 48–49.

³⁹ Ibid. 51–56.

⁴⁰ Briand to Paul Cambon, 12 Jan. 1917, MAE, Papier d'Agents, Pichon MSS (4). Published in part in Georges Suarez, *Briand – sa vie, son oeuvre*, Vol. 4 (6 vols., Paris 1938–52) 128–130.

⁴¹ Letters exchanged between Paléologue and Pokrowski, 14 Feb. 1917, MAE Série A-Paix (164).

⁴² Hearings of Alexandre Ribot and Jules Cambon by Commission des affaires extérieures of Chamber of Deputies, 30 Apr. and 7 May 1918, AN C7491.

ration of a separate peace with Vienna may help explain his reluctance to endorse the Doumergue accord.

By spring 1917 the French leadership's preferred solution to the German question was becoming clear. Germany would be disarmed, lose territory to Russian Poland, and cede sovereignty west of the Rhine. Transferring Alsace-Lorraine and the Saar would help equalize French and German heavy industry, while the Paris Economic Conference resolutions would keep Germany dependent on the Allies. The Reich would lose its overseas colonies, pay reparations, and be squeezed between French armies west of the Ruhr and Russian ones east of Berlin. French politicians disregarded a recommendation from the GQG to break Germany up, but they would deprive it of all power to do France harm.

1917–19

Within weeks of the Doumergue agreement, France began to fight a very different war. The fall of Nicholas II, American belligerency, and the failure of the April 1917 offensive launched by General Robert Nivelle transformed the context of the Franco-German relationship.

It is true that Germany's Western European war aims changed relatively little in 1917, and even softened. Bethmann Hollweg and the new High Command of Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff were prepared to cede some border territory; Georg Michaelis, who replaced Bethmann as Chancellor in July, was willing to abandon Longwy-Briey if Germany were guaranteed access to its ore⁴³. But the Germans still refused to return most of Alsace-Lorraine, and in Eastern Europe their ambitions were expanding dramatically. In 1917–18 they constructed at Russia's expense a chain of satellites extending from the Black Sea to the Baltic.

France, on the other hand, was approaching exhaustion. Nivelle's defeat was followed by mutiny, strikes, and plummeting civilian morale. 1917 witnessed fragile and short-lived ministries under Alexandre Ribot and Paul Painlevé, and because of disagreements over war aims the Socialists withdrew from the cabinet. After November the premiership of Georges Clemenceau restored firm leadership, but economically and militarily France was now much more dependent on its allies, and their support for its war aims remained highly uncertain.

Nicholas II's territorial demands had been embarrassing, but at least he had backed French claims in return. The Russian Provisional Government that replaced him pressed its allies to repudiate annexations and indemnities. After the Bolsheviks seized power, they published and denounced the wartime secret treaties, including Doumergue's, signed a ceasefire, and made peace at Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. Italy, which the French distrusted, was no substitute. In Britain the Lloyd George Government remained evasive even about Alsace-Lor-

⁴³ Grünau to Bethmann, 24 Apr. 1917; Prussian Crown Council, 4 Sept. 1917, *Scherer and Grunewald* (eds.), *L'Allemagne*, Vol. 2 docs 87, 236.

rairie. Paul Cambon read out the Cambon letter to Grey's successor, Arthur Balfour, in August 1917, but met with no encouragement and discontinued the dialogue⁴⁴. Finally, the United States, which entered the war as an "Associated Power" rather than an ally, reserved its right to make peace separately and gave no undertaking whatever to support French goals.

A first question in the face of these imponderables was whether to fight on at all. In the Chamber of Deputies in June 1917, Victor Augagneur caused a sensation by demanding how if Russia dropped out France could win a decisive victory, and whether it was not obliged to limit its objectives⁴⁵. In the event, neither the French military nor the political leadership abandoned hope of success, but both became more cautious. In association with General Philippe Pétain, Nivelle's replacement as commander-in-chief, Painlevé (as war minister from March to November 1917) recast strategy. The French army must conserve its strength in order to play a leading part in a victory to be achieved probably in 1919. For 1918 Pétain planned a limited offensive in Upper Alsace, in pursuit of "gages" or pawns for use in peace negotiations⁴⁶. Meanwhile, whereas Delcassé in 1915 had refused any conversations with the Central Powers, Briand, Ribot, and Painlevé in 1917 all sounded out Austria-Hungary about the possibility of a separate peace. Nor did they reject contacts with Germany, although Ribot insisted that France's partners must be consulted. On this latter point, in the "Briand-Lancken" affair of autumn 1917, Briand wavered, but Ribot and a hesitant Painlevé vetoed his proposed meeting in Switzerland with a German official⁴⁷. Ribot had decided, as he telegraphed to his Washington ambassador, that to speak of peace as imminent would be to "enter into Germany's game ... Until the United States has made the decisive effort it is preparing we shall not be in a favourable position to negotiate."⁴⁸ Clemenceau's view was similar⁴⁹. As 1918 dawned, the French leaders had opted for a gamble that America's aid could bring a victory adequate to achieve their objectives.

Renouvin believed that French war aims contracted after the spring of 1917. In contrast, Soutou stresses the continuity between the Cambon letter and Clemenceau's peace programme two years later⁵⁰. Certainly, the greater universalism of French public rhetoric was misleading. Ribot echoed the American President Woodrow Wilson in appealing for democracy in Germany, but Clemenceau dropped that theme, and French leaders seem to have placed little confidence in a change of regime in Berlin. Ribot endorsed the principle of a League of Nations in

⁴⁴ Balfour to Bertie, 2 July 1917, FO 371/2937. Paul Cambon to Ribot, 10 July 1917, MAE Pichon MSS (4).

⁴⁵ Chamber of Deputies, 2 June 1917, appended to JO (Chambre), 16 May 1925, 518–520.

⁴⁶ *Pedroncini*, Pétain 122–146.

⁴⁷ *Stevenson*, War Aims, ch. 3; *Pierre Renouvin*, *Le Gouvernement français et les tentatives de paix en 1917*, in: *La Revue des deux mondes* (15 Oct. 1964) 492–513.

⁴⁸ Ribot to Jusserand, 30 Sept. 1917, MAE, *Papiers d'Agents*, Jusserand MSS (32).

⁴⁹ Clemenceau in Commission des affaires étrangères du Sénat, 19 Dec. 1917, Archives du Sénat, Paris.

⁵⁰ *Renouvin*, *Buts de guerre* 2; *Soutou*, *Marches de l'est* 368–387.

order to humour Wilson and the Socialists, but Clemenceau was openly cynical about the idea. The Dumont resolution on war aims, passed by the Chamber of Deputies on 6 June 1917, rejected “conquering and subjugating foreign populations”, yet beside demanding reparations and the return of the invaded territories and of Alsace-Lorraine it called for “lasting guarantees of peace and independence” for all League of Nations members⁵¹. This hint that the League alone would be insufficient protection mirrored Ribot’s handling of the debate on the resolution. He stood by the Cambon letter and criticized the Doumergue agreement, but repudiated neither document⁵². In the ensuing Senate debate, he spelled out that he desired the Alsace-Lorraine of 1790 and that a neutral and autonomous buffer State between France and Germany “cannot be considered a conquest; it is a protective measure”⁵³. When Clemenceau took over, his foreign minister, Stephen Pichon, referred the Chamber back to the Dumont resolution as authoritative⁵⁴. Clemenceau’s apparent acquiescence when President Wilson unveiled the American peace programme in the Fourteen Points of January 1918 was grudging and insincere.

All the same, the reconfiguration of the alliance and France’s growing dependence on London and Washington severely restricted French diplomacy. French soundings about American adhesion to the 1916 Paris economic resolutions, for example, got nowhere, and in 1917–18 Clémentel pursued just one aspect of the earlier programme. America’s war entry enabled the allies to control most of world trade in food and raw materials. Clémentel wanted those controls to continue in peacetime, thus guaranteeing France the commodities it would need for reconstruction and providing permanent leverage over Germany. Yet although the British expressed sympathy, Wilson was hostile, and after the Armistice he insisted on world commerce being deregulated as fast as possible⁵⁵. As for territory, the overriding French concern was simply a British and American undertaking to restore the Alsace-Lorraine of 1871 without a plebiscite. Lloyd George’s January 1918 speech at Caxton Hall and Wilson’s Fourteen Points gave more reassurance on this issue than previously, although their language remained ambiguous. But there was no prospect of either leader’s endorsing claims to the Saar or the Rhineland. Even within the Paris bureaucracy discussion of these subjects ceased from the autumn of 1917 until the autumn of 1918, or at any rate has left no archival trail.

Instead, French efforts focused on Eastern Europe. The objectives here were still to weaken Germany by taking territory and to strengthen potential French allies, but the Russian Revolution necessitated a complete reconsideration of how to

⁵¹ Dumont resolution, published in JO (Chambre) 16 May 1925, 539–540.

⁵² *Stevenson*, War Aims 69–70.

⁵³ Ribot speech, 6 June 1917, published in JO (Sénat) 1968, 764–767.

⁵⁴ Pichon speech, 27 Dec. 1917, JO (Chambre) 1917, 3626–3631.

⁵⁵ *Soutou*, *L’Or et le sang*, chs. 13 and 20; *Marc Trachtenberg*, “A New Economic Order”: Etienne Clémentel and French Economic Diplomacy during the First World War, in: *French Historical Studies* 10 (1977) 315–341.

achieve them. Clemenceau informed Wilson that leaving Germany a free hand in Eastern Europe would be to “lose the war”⁵⁶. He was willing to help the Bolsheviks if they resisted German expansion, but after Brest-Litovsk he turned his hopes toward the eventual reemergence of a non-Communist Russia, stripped of its western borderlands⁵⁷. In April 1918, moreover, in the so-called “Czernin incident”, he made public the secret Austro-French conversations conducted in the previous year via Prince Sixte de Bourbon, thus writing off any possibility of Austria-Hungary’s making a separate peace. If both Russia and Austria-Hungary were discarded, the best remaining course appeared to be support for East European nationalism, and France took the lead among the allies in calling as early as December 1917 for a united and independent Poland. In June 1918 a letter to the Czech National Council pledged French support for an independent Czechoslovakia including the Germans of the Sudetenland⁵⁸, and in September a letter to the Polish National Committee promised backing for “a free Poland corresponding to the latter’s national aspirations and bounded by its historic [i.e. 1772] limits”⁵⁹.

It is crucial evidence in support of Soutou’s continuity thesis that, after the tide of battle turned on the Western Front, French thinking reverted to earlier and more ambitious objectives. On 28 September 1918 Clemenceau approved a broad new programme of economic aims. Another conference was to supersede that of 1916, its agenda including the “systematic use of the raw-materials arm as a means of compelling German industry to co-operate peacefully with that of other nations”⁶⁰. As for territory, Pichon told Poincaré in August that France must have the Alsace of 1790 and a neutralized left bank of the Rhine⁶¹, while Pétain’s staff renewed their planning to seize “gages”, this time by an offensive into Lorraine⁶².

The November Armistice forestalled this latter operation, but the ceasefire conditions made it unnecessary anyway. During the discussions of the Armistice Marshal Foch advised Clemenceau that it must “put into our hands sureties which will guarantee that in the peace negotiations we obtain the conditions that we wish to impose upon the enemy”, and Clemenceau’s reply acknowledged that “the necessary guarantees of the peace must have *points d’appui* in the clauses of the Armistice”⁶³. At an inter-Allied conference in Paris, the Premier secured agreement that Allied troops should occupy Alsace-Lorraine, the Saar, the left bank, and bridgeheads east of the Rhine, thereby establishing French forces in all the territories that had figured in French war aims. Although Clemenceau agreed in

⁵⁶ Pichon to Jusserand, 27 July 1918, MAE Série A-Paix (63).

⁵⁷ *Michael J. Carley*, *The Origins of French Intervention in the Russian Civil War: A Reappraisal*, in: JMH 42 (1976) 361–385.

⁵⁸ Pichon to Beneš, 29 June 1918, *Eduard Beneš*, *Souvenirs de guerre et de révolution*, Vol. 2 (2 vols., Paris 1928–9) 231–232.

⁵⁹ Clemenceau to Zamoyski, 5 Sept. 1918, MAE Série Z-Europe, 1918–29 Pologne (65).

⁶⁰ Clémentel to Clemenceau, 19 Sept., and meeting of 28 Sept. 1918, AN F128104.

⁶¹ *Poincaré*, *Au service*, Vol. 10, 335.

⁶² *Pedroncini*, *Pétain* 422–429.

⁶³ *Stevenson*, *War Aims* 122.

return that the peace settlement should be based on Wilson's principles, he regarded that concession as less significant than the military terms.

French pretensions to the Rhineland had resurfaced as soon as it became clear that Germany was beaten and would accept whatever the Allies imposed. Clemenceau agreed to halt the war in the knowledge that the longer it went on the less might be his leverage in Washington. Between the Armistice and the peace conference André Tardieu, who during the war had been the French high commissioner in the United States, supervised the preparation of a programme of French demands whose territorial, economic, and security elements had much in common with those of 1917. Alsace-Lorraine was to return to France with the 1814 frontier. France would occupy the portion of the Saar coalfield lying north of this line, and incorporate it into the French monetary and customs zone. The remainder of the left bank of the Rhine would be separated from Germany, disarmed, and neutralized. Germany should cede territory to Belgium and to Denmark, cede to Poland the 1772 frontier (including the port of Danzig) and the coalfield of Upper Silesia, and was to be forbidden to absorb the Germans of Austria and the Sudetenland. It should compensate France for damage, pay for French war pensions, and reimburse the entire cost of the war, as well as repaying the 1871 indemnity. It must make coal deliveries of up to 35 million tonnes annually for 25 years and concede preferential access to goods imported from Alsace-Lorraine and the Saar. Finally, the German army should be cut to 200,000 men and deprived of heavy weapons. A strong League of Nations from which Germany would be excluded must monitor German armaments, and the Allies should permanently occupy the left bank and the Rhine bridges⁶⁴.

This French programme would deprive Germany of little territory inhabited by ethnic Germans, but would drastically restrict its sovereignty. It represented a consensus view among the political elite, extending from Foch and Poincaré to Tardieu and Clemenceau, while most of French public opinion endorsed the key principles of exacting reparation and guaranteeing security. Clemenceau and Tardieu were unimpressed by the German revolution of November 1918 and unmoved by fears of Germany going Bolshevik. They started from the premises that Germany understood only force and was incorrigibly malevolent, but also that France was inherently weaker and needed the protection of a coercive treaty. The Rhineland occupation, Clemenceau told Lloyd George, was essential to restore his people's morale while they rebuilt their ruins: as a shield behind which their vital forces could revive⁶⁵.

This summary of French peace aims has stressed the defensive preoccupation with security. But three qualifications are needed. Clemenceau, like Briand and Painlevé during the war, kept open channels of communication with the enemy. Professor Emile Haguenin, an academic and secret service official, was stationed in Berlin from February 1919 onward and solicited German politicians' and busi-

⁶⁴ On the preparation of the French peace terms, *ibid.*, ch. 6.

⁶⁵ *Watson*, Clemenceau 352, 361.

nessmen's opinions on the treaty's commercial clauses and on reconstruction. The result may have been a tacit understanding that Germany would accept the settlement on its western borders in return for French concessions elsewhere, particularly over Silesia. Similarly, the diplomat René Massigli held secret conversations with the German delegation at Versailles in May-June 1919. Once having established a position of strength, Clemenceau was probably ready to be accommodating if thereby he could obtain economic benefits and facilitate treaty enforcement⁶⁶.

Second, however, Clemenceau's programme contained elements of imperialism and might be the basis for further expansion. The occupation forces in the Rhineland tried to seal the region off from Germany, and Clemenceau admitted privately that he hoped it could be persuaded to unite with France. In Luxemburg the French took possession of the railway system and wanted to install a francophile government, and they also hoped for a customs union and military convention with Belgium⁶⁷.

But third, and most important, as Clemenceau warned the Chamber of Deputies in December 1918, his "directing thought" in the peace negotiations was that "nothing must happen which might separate after the war the four Powers that were united during it. To this unity I will make every sacrifice."⁶⁸ Given the chaos in Russia and the likelihood that the emergent East European states would be strategic liabilities rather than assets, the future relationship with Britain and America was crucial. Clémentel's raw-materials plan would fail without Anglo-American co-operation, and British loans were essential to keep the French government solvent. Clemenceau pressed his buffer-state scheme in the knowledge that a Rhineland occupation would be expensive, might foment irredentism, and was of questionable military value, but at a moment when he had no future commitment from London or Washington. After Lloyd George and Wilson on 14 March 1919 offered France a guarantee, Clemenceau aimed to combine it with as much of his earlier programme as possible, thereby retaining the option of unilateral action to enhance French influence on the left bank⁶⁹.

Poincaré criticized Clemenceau for giving up too much too early at the peace conference in the hope of winning British goodwill, and the Premier himself came to regret trusting too much in Lloyd George. None the less, the French came to the conference with clearer goals for the German settlement than did either Anglo-Saxon power, they set the agenda on most of the issues, and they got much of what they wanted. French claims to Germany's African colonies were satisfied. Clémentel's raw-materials plan was dropped, but the commercial clauses of the Versailles treaty provided safeguards against overproduction and underpinned

⁶⁶ *Georges-Henri Soutou*, *The French Peacemakers and their Home Front*, in: *Manfred F. Boemeke et al., The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years* (New York 1998) 167–188.

⁶⁷ *Stevenson*, *War Aims* 138–141, 158.

⁶⁸ Clemenceau, 29 Dec. 1918, JO (Chambre), 1918, 3732–3733.

⁶⁹ *Stevenson*, *War Aims*, ch. 7.

French prosperity in the 1920s. The German army was reduced even more than Foch had envisaged, and the Rhineland demilitarized in perpetuity. Belgium and Denmark expanded at Germany's expense, if less than France had hoped; Czechoslovakia got the Sudetenland while Austro-German union was prohibited. Over Poland, Clemenceau failed to drive a wedge between Wilson and Lloyd George, and he accepted free-city status for Danzig and a plebiscite in Upper Silesia.

As regarded France's own objectives, however, he was more successful in dividing his partners. Thus Lloyd George failed to support Wilson's resistance to French claims to the Saar. The French won de facto control of the coalfield for fifteen years pending a plebiscite that they expected to win. They settled for the 1815–70 rather than the 1814 frontier for Alsace-Lorraine, but Tardieu (if not Clemenceau) believed the latter would have been a "third-rank gain" anyway⁷⁰. In contrast, over the Rhineland Clemenceau struck a deal with Wilson and isolated Lloyd George, obtaining a fifteen-year occupation "as a guarantee of the execution by Germany of the peace treaty"⁷¹. "Execution" referred primarily to reparations and, although in the financial negotiations the French dropped their demands for repayment of the 1871 indemnity and for war costs, they and Lloyd George won Wilson's agreement to doubling Germany's reparation liability by including war pensions as well as compensation for damage to property. Hence Clemenceau could predict to his ministers that Germany would default and France stay in the Rhineland indefinitely, while keeping the Anglo-American alliance⁷². He also gained a right to reoccupy, as well as the option to prolong the occupation if after fifteen years the Allied leaders still considered France inadequately safeguarded: a clause proposed specifically because he foresaw that the Anglo-American guarantee might fall through⁷³.

Once Clemenceau retreated from his initial programme, the unity of the French elite disintegrated, and he came under attack from Poincaré and Foch as well as in parliament. But Poincaré and Foch shifted their ground too, eventually pleading that the occupation should continue for as long as the treaty was being executed rather than for fifteen years, which differed little from the package Clemenceau accepted⁷⁴. In the crucial meeting of the Council of Ministers in April 1919 the Premier's critics failed to press their case; in August the parliamentary investigation committee into the peace negotiations reported that the government had done as well as could be expected⁷⁵; and the treaty was ratified with large majorities. It is doubtful whether Clemenceau could have held out for much more without a breakdown that would have left France isolated and deprived him of a settle-

⁷⁰ Tardieu, "Note sur la conversation du 14 mars", 15 March 1919, *Papiers d'Agents*, MAE Tardieu MSS (51).

⁷¹ Texts agreed by Wilson and Clemenceau on 20 April 1919, MAE Tardieu MSS (49).

⁷² *Stevenson*, *War Aims* 177.

⁷³ *André Tardieu*, *La Paix* (Paris 1921) 233–236.

⁷⁴ Poincaré to Clemenceau, 28 Apr. 1919, LGP F/51/1/20.

⁷⁵ Barthou Commission report in FO 608/125.

ment to present to his people after years of sacrifice. Instead he signed a treaty that was primarily French in inspiration, and set the mould of Western European politics for the next two decades.

Conclusion

France's aims in World War I had an impact on almost the entire course of Franco-German relations in the twentieth century. For their sake the French Government rejected German peace feelers in 1916 and 1917, and without French influence the Versailles Treaty would have been much milder. How appropriate were French solutions to the "German problem"? And did Clemenceau after the First World War miss an opportunity for a settlement more like the one that followed the Second?

A frequent starting point for discussion of Versailles is Jacques Bainville's aphorism that it was "*une paix trop douce pour ce qu'elle a de dur*" (a peace too gentle for what is in it that is harsh)⁷⁶. It was severe enough to inflame German nationalism, but not to protect the rest of Europe by containing the blaze. This appraisal provides a useful analytical framework, but is misleading. Clemenceau's conception of the settlement was flexible, and the treaty would permit either indefinite containment of Germany or a controlled relaxation. Both options, however, would require inter-Allied agreement, which after World War I was notoriously lacking.

Disarmament and the Rhineland occupation rendered Germany unable, for as long as they were implemented, to start a new war. Exactly when and how between the wars treaty enforcement failed (and who was responsible for that failure) remain debated, but it is hard to maintain that Germany's military renaissance was foreordained from 1919 onward. None the less, after its experience in the Ruhr occupation crisis of 1923–24, France was unlikely to act alone against Hitler's violations of the Versailles clauses, and the British Government shunned involvement. Unlike the Soviet Union after World War II, France was unwilling – and possibly unable – alone to keep Germany harmless. Already during the peace conference, Clemenceau had distanced himself from Foch's pleas to stay in the Rhineland indefinitely and from the support given by his generals to Rhenish separatists. Like Poincaré during the Ruhr occupation, he preferred a solution to the German question that enjoyed British and American sanction. The alternative of unilateral enforcement was theoretically available, but its costs were thought too high.

On the other hand, the Versailles provisions impeded Franco-German rapprochement. As A. J. P. Taylor once commented, Germany's superior power potential meant that the settlement must be discriminatory if France was to feel se-

⁷⁶ *Miquel*, *L'Opinion publique* 404.

cure⁷⁷: yet such discrimination ruled out a treaty based on voluntary compliance. The Briand-Stresemann detente of the later 1920s was an unstable arrangement that rested on French willingness to make concessions to earn goodwill. In contrast, after 1945, dictatorship and renewed defeat transformed German elite and popular mentalities in a way that Clemenceau and Tardieu correctly recognized had not happened in the Weimar Republic.

The settlement that emerged by the 1950s rested both on coercion (by the Soviet Union) and on conciliation (within the Western camp) of a Germany restored much closer to parity in strength with France. The Soviet presence in Eastern Europe encouraged Britain and America to adopt a role in West European stabilization that between the wars they had rejected. In 1919 the absence of such a transformation within Germany – and of a Soviet threat sufficient to overcome Anglo-Saxon wariness of a Continental European commitment – made it doubtful whether either coercion or conciliation were effective strategies for France alone⁷⁸. French aims in the World War I era therefore reflected the dilemma of how to choose between what Tardieu described as two systems of security: unilateral controls on Germany versus the maintenance or creation of an encircling alliance.

This analysis raises the final question of whether German reunification and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1990–91 will revive Anglo-American isolationism and destroy the post-1950 Franco-German axis. So far the answer has been no. There is little reason to expect a return to the balance-of-power relationship that preceded 1914. But less extreme varieties of antagonism are possible short of that, and rougher waters may yet lie ahead than we have known for the last forty years.

⁷⁷ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (Harmondsworth 1964) 54.

⁷⁸ Ludwig Dehio, *Germany and World Politics in the Twentieth Century* (English edn., London 1959) 109–123. Joseph Joffe, *Europe's American Pacifier*, in: *Foreign Policy* 54 (1984) 64–82.