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Kommentar zu I. Kriegsziele und Friedensschluß, 1914–1919

The three papers by David Stevenson, Elisabeth Glaser, and Gerald Feldman are valuable in two ways. They offer focal points for a discussion of West European security at the end of the First World War, and they introduce themes vital to the broader discussions of that security – economic cooperation or economic hegemony; the relationship between the more overt signs of security like territorial possession or military restriction and the less obvious commercial and financial aspects; the elusive but crucial question of perception – when, why, and whether states decide that cooperation is more fruitful than confrontation. There were hints of such perceptions – David Stevenson reminds us of the pre-1914 Franco-German cooperation in coal and steel, Elisabeth Glaser illustrates the development of rival plans for customs unions and economic blocs, whilst Gerald Feldman offers insights into the grandiose but frustrated post-war visions of Hugo Stinnes. All these strands had some part to play in Jean Monnet's later ideas after another titanic struggle. But perhaps crucially in the period around the First World War, there was no consensus favouring European cooperation – the climate remained competitive.

The three papers fit well together. Stevenson offers a magisterial overview tracing Franco-German relations from the 1890s into the post-1919 era. His discussion of the evolution of French war aims illustrates that international politics is the art of what is perceived to be possible. His overall conclusion is challenging: the French, he claims, approached the peace conference with clearer ideas on their desiderata than their Anglo-Saxon allies, and they achieved much of what they wanted. The Treaty of Versailles was a French document (Wilson's League and the British imperial and naval clauses apart), and that set the agenda for the next twenty years in western European politics. Well ... perhaps!

Glaser argues convincingly that Germany's refusal to contemplate a return to the economic and commercial status quo of 1914 forced its friends and enemies alike to reconsider their own policies and strategies. Her conclusion that France's main commercial war aim was to create a balance of economic power to prevent German hegemony raises interesting considerations. In terms of trade and the control of vital raw materials, the American approach of President Woodrow Wilson smacked more of rugged individualism than of collective security, and French

Commerce Secretary Etienne Clémentel's attempts to create an economic alliance to control scarce resources foundered on American refusal and British reluctance. This failure, according to Marc Trachtenberg, was the key to later French 'intransigence' in the reparations debates in Paris as France tried to find alternative ways to finance reconstruction and industrial growth¹. The neat paradox with which Glaser concludes certainly challenges Stevenson's claims. France was a military winner – at a terrible cost – but Germany remained the economic giant, the power that Wilson wished to be the dynamo of European recovery and the model for the new democratic and peaceful world. Even when the war in the west was lost, the Germans were still pursuing hegemony in the east in the crumbling Austrian and Russian empires, forcing the Bolsheviks to sign a treaty offering economic advantage and future insurance against Clémentel's schemes.

Feldman's perspective introduces the important element of the role of personalities. Hugo Stinnes, a capitalist with an eye both for the broad canvas and the main chance, was involved with various open or more secretive pre-war schemes to exploit the resources of France, Belgium, and Germany. During the war, like Stresemann, he became an advocate of German expansion and control. Most fascinatingly, he found it very difficult to accept that Germany's defeat was real. Indeed much of his behaviour and plans seem to have rested on an inner confidence in Germany's capacity to dominate the future, preferably by peaceful means, but if necessary by military conquest – it was the latter view that he seemed to be espousing, in some despair, at the time of his final illness. He was not the most tactful of men. His belligerent and provocative foray into the postwar world of conference diplomacy at Spa in July 1920 began with his declaration that he would address the delegates standing, "as he wished to look the meeting in the face ... Anyone not sick beyond recovery with the disease of victory". Here the chairman intervened, forcing Stinnes to calm himself and to deliver an effectively argued plea in a more restrained manner. The British premier, David Lloyd George, might well feel "that for the first time he had met a real Hun", but he was also inclined to accept that Stinnes did have a strong case – "very insolent but able" was the verdict of his private secretary, Philip Kerr². Stinnes's performance during the conference, when he referred pointedly to the French use of black troops, and his disappointment with the eventual outcome of the conference, which provoked him into unfortunate references to the influence of a "foreign psyche", emphasised the strength of racism and anti-Semitism in the make-up of certain sections of the German elite.

Nonetheless, for all his unattractive qualities, he was obviously a dominant personality with the aspiration and ability to lead at a time of low ebb in Germany's

¹ *Marc Trachtenberg, Reparation in World Politics: France and European Economic Diplomacy, 1916–1923* (New York 1980) 38–46.

² *W. N. Medlicott, D. Dakin* (eds.), *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919–1939* (London 1947 onwards) First Series Vol. VIII, 519–20, 531–33. Hereafter DBFP. Kerr to Bonar Law 11.7.20, Bonar Law Papers, House of Lords Record Office, 99/3/16.

fortunes, capable of envisioning arrangements that would benefit both the wider cause of Germany and do no damage to the Stinnes empire – Pan-German *and* Pan-Stinnes. His attempts to contribute toward reconstruction in France in partnership with the French industrialist Guy de Lubersac are an interesting illustration of both aspects. His plan for European reconstruction in 1921 was utterly impractical at that time and yet exciting in its concepts. His arrogance and his capacity for self-delusion are breathtaking and serve as a useful reminder that the “dream world” of 1918 of which Klaus Schwabe has written did not necessarily evaporate when the extent of Germany’s defeat and isolation became clearer³.

What represented real security in 1919, who defined it, and in what terms was it defined? Much of the emphasis in Glaser and Feldman is on the economic and commercial aspects of the question, though always with a proviso about the importance of territorial and pragmatic assessments. Yet both in Paris and in the subsequent post-war negotiations to enforce the peace settlement, it was issues like territorial transfer, alliances, and disarmament that dominated high-level international discussions. The Allied leaders were less confident when discussing major economic, financial, and commercial matters though they were forced to take some responsibility for the negotiations on reparations and inter-allied debts. To what extent did the top people think about economic and commercial considerations? Was this for them “real security”? And who constituted what threat to whom? Was Germany the main problem, or Bolshevik Russia, or the newly emerging powers of the United States and Japan? Those are all important questions and the answers are by no means clear-cut – it depended on who you were and where you stood – but there can be no doubt that Great Britain represented a key factor in the West European security equation and that the focus of these three papers does rather neglect the British perspective and perceptions.

Having faced challenges before 1914 from Germany and Russia, the British elite now shared doubts about French motives and ambitions. “I am seriously afraid”, George Curzon told the Eastern Committee on 2 December 1918, “that the great power from whom we have the most to fear in future is France”⁴. The British elite were suspicious of France because they perceived it to be ambitious, to have the means to translate those ambitions into reality, and to be without a genuine continental rival. Curzon, by now the Foreign Secretary, told the assembled delegates to the Imperial Conference in London in June 1921: “There has never disappeared from [France’s] imagination the lure of the Ruhr Valley, and one of the objects for which we here, and especially the Prime Minister, have successfully struggled, has been to prevent her from carrying out this occupation of German territory which her military advisers have always had in view. The Ministers present will see at once what her object is – with Lorraine, the Saar Valley and the Ruhr in her occu-

³ Klaus Schwabe’s chapter in *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years*, ed. M. F. Boemeke, G. D. Feldman, and E. Glaser (New York 1998) 37–67.

⁴ Public Record Office, Kew. I am grateful to the Controller for permission to publish Crown Copyright material. Hereafter PRO, CAB 24/27.

pation, she becomes the mistress of Europe in respect of coal, iron, and steel, and with those countries under her military command she would also become the military monarch. Those quite frankly are the ambitions lurking, I will not say in the minds of the French Government, but of a large section of French opinion, with which we are confronted.”⁵ This suspicion was encouraged by the almost inevitable French demand that each and every German infraction of the Treaty should be punished by an occupation of the Ruhr. Captain Georgi, a British adviser on coal and steel matters, offered an interesting economic explanation of the “lure of the Ruhr” asserting that occupation was “inevitable not because they, the French, by doing so wish to cripple Germany, this latter consideration is really to my mind a subsidiary one, but because present schemes of industrialising France on a large scale can only assume a concrete form if the Ruhr, wholly or partly, comes under French control”. As Sidney Waterlow, a clerk in the Foreign Office Central Department commented, 25 November 1920, “If he is right...we cannot expect the danger to diminish with the return of political tranquility or the lapse of time.”⁶ Although Lloyd George did acquiesce in an actual extension of the occupied area of Germany in March 1921 and agreed to the threat of a further extension in April 1921, thus making it more difficult for Britain to protest when the French, in association with the Belgians, occupied the whole of the Ruhr in 1923, the more usual British reaction was to resist such demands⁷. As Curzon declared: “We are at the present moment ... the only moderating influence in respect of France. We go about arm in arm with her, but with one of our hands on her collar, and if we relax that control I myself should be very much alarmed at the consequences that would ensue.”⁸

Many British decision-makers in the immediate postwar era believed that the French had designs on German territory. There had been a formidable French campaign during the Paris peace conference to detach the Rhineland from Germany and to obtain the Saar in absolute sovereignty, in short to reverse the provisions of the 1815 peace settlement in this area. British observers did not believe that this policy had been abandoned with the signature of the Treaty⁹. “The French are determined to get Rhineland [sic]”, minuted Hardinge in February 1920¹⁰. But what motivated such attempts to make territorial gains? Was it to provide defensive barriers? To deprive the other state of resources or to gain them for oneself? Were such demands rational and calculated or atavistic and driven by emotion? For Jacques Bariéty the French demand for the Saar was part of “a vast

⁵ PRO, CAB 32/2/E4, Meeting 22.6.21.

⁶ *Ibid.*, FO 371/4775: C12185/192/18, paper by Georgi and minute by Waterlow, both 25.11.20.

⁷ See the helpful commentary in *S. Crowe, E. Corp*, *Our Ablest Public Servant: Sir Eyre Crowe 1864–1925* (Braunton 1993) 430–33.

⁸ PRO, CAB 32/2/E4, Meeting 22.6.21.

⁹ See *J. C. King*, *Foch versus Clemenceau: France and German Dismemberment, 1918–1919* (Harvard 1960) 73–112. *R. McCrum*, *French Rhineland Policy at the Paris Peace Conference, 1919*, in: *Historical Journal* 21 (1978) 623–48.

¹⁰ Despatch 16.2.20 DBFP vol. IX, 71 and 71n3.

project seeking to slow and restrain German industrial development, and ... to facilitate that of France, Belgium, Italy, and Poland. At the heart of this plan, there appears to be the ambition to alter profoundly the balance of European industrial power." Yet for Stevenson "The Saar claim, with its flimsy economic and still more flimsy ethnographic base, was the closest to a French demand of sheer unreason, unsupported either by convincing arguments from national self-determination or by the logic of a broader strategic design."¹¹

Security could mean alliances. Accepting the defensive, or possibly imperialistic, motivations behind Clemenceau's peace, Stevenson re-emphasises Clemenceau's own preoccupation with the need to preserve the wartime alliance with Britain and the United States – a preoccupation that Lloyd George unscrupulously exploited¹². France might have assembled, or chanced upon, a combination of powers that left it victorious in 1918, but the long-term demographic and resource trends suggested that its continuing status as a great power required allies and the creation of a customs union and a cartel to control vital raw materials. There was more than a hint of truth in British Foreign Secretary, Arthur Balfour's rather harsh assessment: "It is quite certain that no manipulation of the Rhine frontier is going to make France anything more than a second-rate Power, trembling at the nod of its great neighbours on the East, and depending from day to day on the changes and chances of a shifting diplomacy and uncertain alliances."¹³ For Clemenceau guaranteed Anglo-American support was worth more than the Rhineland, though he was careful to offer his successors the chance to have both. The aftermath of the abortive guarantee left Britain with a moral obligation that successive governments did not rush to meet.

One of their reasons was because, in a quest for tangible assurances, the French turned to the new states of eastern Europe in the hope of discovering a substitute for Russia, now crippled by Bolshevism and civil war. In the short term Poland might deter Germany, indeed Hitler's first major foreign policy initiative was the attempt to nullify the Polish threat by a non-aggression pact. But in the longer term, when Germany (and/or Russia) revived, France's eastern alliances were hostages to fortune, their inherent weakness exacerbated by the deep-rooted disputes between the supposed partners. Despite French exasperation with British myopia, eastern Europe remained an area that British governments did not see as a vital national interest. Any offers that Britain made to guarantee French integrity or to join an alliance were predicated upon the exclusion of eastern Europe from their terms of reference, yet for France European security was threatened not in the west but in the east – before any new Sedan the French feared a new Sadowa.

¹¹ *Jacques Bariéty*, *Les Relations franco-allemandes après la Première Guerre Mondiale: 10 novembre 1918 – 10 janvier 1925. De l'exécution à la négociation* (Paris 1977) 139; *David Stevenson*, *French War Aims against Germany, 1914–1919* (Oxford 1982) 179.

¹² *A. Lentin*, *The Treaty That Never Was: Lloyd George and the Abortive Anglo-French Alliance of 1919*, in: *Judith Loades* (ed), *The Life and Times of David Lloyd George* (Bangor 1991) 115–128.

¹³ *Arthur Balfour Papers*, British Library, Add MSS 49751, Memorandum 18.3.19.

Stinnes and Rathenau believed Russia and eastern Europe were the key to economic revival, and Rathenau managed to persuade Lloyd George that the entire tangled legacy of the First World War might be resolved by a conference to foster an economic and commercial cooperation between east and west. The price the British were prepared to pay for French participation in such a conference, particularly in terms of a new guarantee or an alliance, formed the subject of much debate and diplomatic correspondence in late 1921 and early 1922. There was certainly no justification in all the ensuing horsetrading for Curzon's concern of December 1921 – "I earnestly hope it will not be proposed to give the guarantee for nothing." The Genoa Conference produced a different outcome from that Rathenau or Lloyd George expected, but it emphasised the question whether the geopolitics of the interwar period ever made it possible to try to create genuine west European security in isolation from all the frustrated national ambitions and the economic deprivations in the east – a theme with much resonance in a contemporary Europe that shares more characteristics with the aftermath of 1918 than with that of 1945.

The American president, Woodrow Wilson, wanted to change the whole nature of international relations. Total war brought a demand for total security. But how far could the president's revolutionary notions of collective security be relied upon? During the debate on Article 10 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, Wilson insisted that without the active obligation of all members "to preserve us against external aggression [other members'] territorial integrity and existing political independence" the League would be "hardly more than an influential debating society". "Yes", remarked Robert Cecil, "but do any of us mean it?"¹⁴ This telling question haunted the 1920s before receiving a brutal and decisive answer in Abyssinia in 1935. Meanwhile it created a dangerous divergence between public opinion, particularly in Britain, which believed in the League as a guarantor of security, and successive governments that did not share their scepticism about collective security with their electorates.

All this suggests that security is a multi-layered and multi-faceted concept whose definition depends very much on the perspective of the observer. Even within the elite groups of the same country there will be more or less fundamental differences at the very least of emphasis, sometimes of objectives. Bullitt Lowry has recently reminded us that the Allied military and naval leaders, despite clear differences between the British commander Douglas Haig and the French generalissimo Ferdinand Foch, still took a more optimistic view than the politicians of the German request for an armistice in October/November 1918. Foch's draft conditions, which became the Allied terms, were considerably more demanding than those originally proposed by Georges Clemenceau, the French premier¹⁵.

¹⁴ S. P. Tillman, *Anglo-American Relations at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919* (Princeton 1961) 125–126; George Egerton, *Great Britain and the Creation of the League of Nations: Strategy, Politics and International Organization, 1914–1919* (London 1979) 131–132; Lord Percy of Newcastle, *Some Memories* (London 1958) 69.

¹⁵ Bullitt Lowry, *Armistice 1918* (Kent, Ohio 1996) 39–76.

One final point may prove of interest. How do ideas become part of the international agenda? How does that agenda become established? All three papers shed light on the question how much each side, especially during the war, knew of the other's thought processes and demands and how far this, in turn, helped to create the framework of their own debates. But to create a new set of questions or perceptions does it require the intervention of a visionary (or lucky) individual to identify new themes that in turn create a new climate and agenda of debate – Aristide Briand or Etienne Clémentel in France during the war; Hugo Stinnes, Walther Rathenau, Gustav Stresemann, and Briand again in its aftermath?

Thus the questions that have most interested me in these three papers are the definition of security; the links between the underlying economic and commercial questions, and the more conventional political issues that dominated discussion at the top tables in the negotiations after the First World War; the “far away country” question, namely whether western Europe could be secure in isolation; and the creation of climates of opinion. What the contributors have ensured is that there is no shortage of valuable and stimulating material for an informed and lively debate.