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A Step-by-Step Revision of the Treaty of Versailles? Gustav Stresemann's Eastern Policy

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Abstract

Gustav Stresemann, Nobel Peace Prize laureate and German Foreign Minister of the 1920s, is well-known for the international cooperation of the Weimar Republic with Europe's great powers. He simultaneously pursued a peaceful modification of the eastern boundaries of Germany, while accepting the reality of the Versailles system. This paper analyses the change in Germany's relations with her eastern neighbours, as well as Stresemann's intentions to achieve border revisions and to support German minorities abroad. It is especially exciting to consider the purposes of the German approach to the Soviet Union in Stresemann's program, and if this could have been used to force concessions from the West. The study also sheds light on why Stresemann overestimated the revisionist potential of the Locarno Treaties, and on the remaining possibilities of border revisions that existed at the end of his six-year tenure as Foreign Minister.

Keywords: Gustav Stresemann, Weimar Republic, Treaty of Versailles, revision, Locarno Treaties

Introduction

Gustav Stresemann recently became the focus of attention of the German press when the political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) named its party foundation after him, resulting in a legal dispute with the grandsons of the late foreign minister (cf. Spiegel 2018). According to the heirs, the views of their grandfather were far from everything the AfD represents. This brought forward the whole question of what the legacy of Stresemann means for Germany, for Europe and for history.

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During the days of the Second World War, and especially after the founding of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), Stresemann became a popular "what would have happened if" personality of the Weimar era – a defender of the Republic, who, had he not died too early, could have averted the rise of National Socialism and Adolf Hitler (Zimmermann, 1958),[2] and who was also a prominent supporter of Franco-German rapprochement (Krüger, 1985) and a true European (Weidenfeld, 1973: 740–750). In other words, almost an "early Konrad Adenauer," who struggled with similar foreign policy challenges, albeit under different cicumstances. (Interestingly, Stresemann was two years younger than Adenauer, and had a lot of disagreements with the Lord Mayor of Cologne.) As an answer to this West German nostalgia, several were published in the 1950s and 1960s whose argument was precisely the opposite: Stresemann was neither a democrat, nor a politican of peace, and even less the precursor of integration – rather, he was a cunning and pragmatic politician who fought for territorial revisions with no military means and diplomatic elbow-room available (Thimme, 1956: 288; Turner, 1968; Koszyk, 1989). Partly due to this debate, a more balanced picture of Stresemann's aims and role, and of the German foreign policy environment of the 1920s at large, ultimately formed in the ensuing years.

The early years

There largely is consensus, historically, about Stresemann's viewpoint on the First World War. A politician of the national liberals already well-known before 1914, Stresemann was an ardent proponent of political and economic expansion, who even laid serious territorial claims after the July Crisis of 1914 (Baechler, 2002: 75). Among these, the one concerning the issue of Eastern borders of Germany was not even moderate, in fact: it called for ceding most Polish territories under Russian control at the time (including Warsaw) and the Baltics as far as the Narva Bay to Germany. German economic expansionism was to be strengthened by a Central European customs union (*Notizen für einen Vortrag Stresemanns in Chemnitz am 28. August 1914*, qtd. in Maxelon, 1972: 38.). Although he was personally surprised by the prolongation of war, he never ceased to support it until September 1918 – from which point on he trusted the goodwill of the Entente, and, most of all, the goodwill of President Wilson (Arnold 2000: 26). The desired mild peace was not forthcoming, however, and the *Reich* lost 70 000 km^2 of territory.

[2] According to son Wolfgang, his father became a convinced democrat in the first half of the 1920s (Stresemann, 1979).

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Germany had to cede the Memel to Lithuania, Posen, West Prussia and some parts of Upper Silesia to Poland, the Hultschin territory to Czechoslovakia, while Danzig came under the protectorate of the League of Nations as a 'free city.' Exacerbated, Stresemann prompted the refusal of the signing of the pact only to face some years later as chancellor of the Weimar Republic the length to which the French were willing to go in defense of the system, and what the possible consequences were for Germany.

By 1923, the Republic was on the edge of the abyss. In the first days of the new year, French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr. The official motive was Germany's failure to meet French demands for coal delivery, but it was rather a warning and a punitive reaction to the signing of the Rapallo Treaty of 1922: the most powerful continental power, France, could not tolerate the rapprochement of Germany and Soviet-Russia, the two most powerful discontents of the Versailles system. The occupation brought about serious consequences: the announced passive resistance caused hyperinflation and separatist movements were mushrooming throughout the country. Stresemann thus inherited a country in serious economic and political upheaval – and he, by and large, managed to steer through the storm. While the resistance of the Social Democrats caused his downfall as chancellor in November 1923, he continued as Minister of Foreign Affairs – a position he held up until his death in 1929. It was an era during the course of which the German foreign ministry was in the hands of an experienced person who brought the formative experience of the year 1923 to the job.

The realization of the possible consequences of Berlin's disregarding its own defeated status and the realities of the new European power relations was traumatic for many in the German establishment. Germany's hardships in 1923 have shown that the emancipation of the defeated country could not come at the expense of French security. Stresemann therefore started to look for peaceful means of conflict resolution – in a framework that for him involved not the giving up of any portion of national sovereignty in a supranational framework but an enhanced form international cooperation, rather. This conception of his falls far from the nature of the post-WWII European integration efforts. Upon learning of Stresemann's earlier positions and the so-called "Letter to the Crown Prince" of 1925,[3] many subsequently questioned the sincerity of Stresemann's politics. It

[3] The letter was published in the early 1930s and led to a revision of the previously one-sidedly positive image of Stresemann in Western European countries. The document was drafted in September 1925, shortly after the Locarno talks and it contains references to revisionist plans of the foreign minister. Some of its phrases may be interpreted as suggesting that Stresemann, with an eye to Germany's weakness, was playing to allaying the victorious powers and was only waiting for the right moment to set aside the Treaty of

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is very likely that he has never been a pacifist, but he certainly did adapt to the existing realities: Germany was not in a military, economic, and, above all, geopolitical position to advance its goals with means of power to change the most hurting points of the Versailles Treaty. In terms of goals, he had many, however – the nature of these and the priorities therein are worth examining.

Although Stresemann labeled the revision of Germany's Eastern borders as the priority of his foreign policy (April 19, 1925 qtd. in Gratwohl 1982: 240), he considered the country's emancipation and the recovery of its sovereignty as the real first step.[4] Of all the lost Eastern territories, the Polish Corridor was the most irritating to him – the area which permanently cut Eastern Prussia from the rest of the *Reich*. Stresemann called this the "greatest mistake" of the Versailles Treaty, a dead-end (Stresemann, 1979: 492) which poisons the European peace in the long run.[5] The Sudetenland, involving the problem of the more than three million ethnic Germans stuck in Czechoslovakia, was another serious issue, but it did not evoke emotions of such intensity as did the Polish Corridor. Lastly, one should always keep in mind the issue of the *Anschluß*, the union of Germany and Austria, which was a lingering issue since the end of WWI, and would have resulted in a German–Italian border greatly desired by Stresemann himself (Wright, 2006: 270). The goals were thus more or less fixed for Stresemann, the only question was how to reach them.

A promising approach

As stated above, the critical experience of 1923 established the idea that Germany has to normalize relations with the Western powers before focusing on territorial revision in the East. In this, Stresemann was eventually aided by political changes in West Europe. The British grew anxious of French hegemonistic attempts and the slow shift of the European balance of power, so London – together with Washington – put pressure on Paris to

Versailles. Stresemann was especially criticised in France, for his alleged insincerity, as having misled British and French politicians in Locarno (Kolb, 2003: 107).

[4] Primary objectives, such as the solution of Germany's reparation payments, withdrawal of the Inter-Allied Military Control Commission, end of the Allied Rhineland occupation, an early return to the Saar and Germany's entry into the League of Nations (which would also serve the support of German minorities abroad).

[5] *Aufzeichnung Stresemanns, 12. Februar 1924*, in: ADAP, Serie A, Bd. 9, Dokument 148. Cited by Wright, 2006: 271. According to a document sent to German Ambassador to Warsaw Ulrich Rauscher, the Wilhelmstrasse considered possible the recovery of Danzig, the corridor, and the northern part of Upper Silesia. On the other hand, Poland would have been allowed to retain the Posen region as well as special transit rights and free ports in Danzig. *Runderlass vom 30. Juni 1925*, in: ADAP, Serie A, Bd. 13, Dokument 177. Cited by Wright, 2006: 314–315.

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implement revisions in the German reparations issue.[6] Meanwhile, the French, in the wake of the occupation of the Ruhr, have realized that the collapse of Germany would bring about serious consequences for themselves as well. All of the above resulted in the pro-rapprochement forces gaining strength in Paris in opposition to Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré.

The most spectacular event of the Franco-German rapprochement was the conclusion of the Locarno Treaties. The treaties signed in October 1925 constituted a mutual sanctification of the Frenco–German and Belgian–German borders guaranteed by Italy and Britain. Though Stresemann came under attack in Germany for having renounced the possibility to recover lost territories in the West, the foreign minister aptly pointed out the other side of the coin in one of his speeches: the prohibition of offensive war "involves French statesmen at least as much as it does us, since they are facing a feeble country with all their land armies, and there are just enough people in their own countries who demand the borders to push to the Rhine" (Stresemann, 2008: 213). In other words, while solidifying Germany's Western borders may have come at a cost, it nevertheless significantly decreased the vulnerability of the country. The real German bravado of the negotiation was the achievement that the great power guarantee did not come to cover Germany's Eastern borders – Poland and Czechoslovakia only signed bilateral treaties with Germany on the one hand, and France on the other. The Eastern borders were thus not sanctified and left a door open to revision. And even though Czechoslovakian Prime Minister Eduard Beneš officially welcomed the treaties and called them "an intelligent effort" of Germany "to recover its lost power" (qtd in. Gratwohl, 1973: 58), it was still not only a failure for him, but also a pronouncedly humilitating one.[7]

Germany's accession to the League of Nations is usually considered as the other peak of Stresemann's achivements. This move was, however, often criticized at home (e.g. President of the German *Reich* Paul von Hindenburg had his objections, too) and it even ran the risk of souring the otherwise blooming German–Soviet relations. Germany and Soviet-Russia, effectively excluded from the negotiations at Versailles, were

[6] The fact that Austen Chamberlain became foreign minister in 1924, who had met with Bismarck during his youth, and considered rapprochement with Germany a priority, certainly played a part in it (Chamberlain, 1938: 82).

[7] According to Paul Schmidt, the interpreter taking part at the negotiations, the Czechoslovakian foreign minister and his Polish colleague Alexander Skrzyński were compelled to sit in their hotel rooms while the 'big guys' were talking, and it was only in the final phase that they were allowed to take part in the talks. Cf. Elz, 2007: 118.

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gravitating towards one another in the early 1920s. Booming economic relations, the signing of the Rapallo Treaty, and the cooperation between the Red Army and the Reichswehr were indicative of this rapprochement. The Germans thought it a good device to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the winners of the World War amidst their international isolation, while in Moscow they wanted to use this connection to thwart the emergence of a dreaded unified anti-Soviet front in the West. However, in the eyes of the Soviets, Germany was treading tratcherous waters by joining the League of Nations.[8] Stresemann mollified Soviet objections with the argument that Germany as a permanent member of the Council of the League of Nations could effectively veto the implementation of sanctions against the Soviet Union (Stresemann, 1937: 477).

Western powers were watching the Soviet–German rapprochement with increasing anxiety since Rapallo, given that a fourth partition of Poland, stuck between the two major states, was in the interest of both of them (Niedhart, 2006: 22). The so-called Treaty of Berlin, signed on April 24, 1926, created yet another source of anxiety: it not only promised mutual neutrality in the event of an outside attack, but excluded any participation in an economic or financial boycott against the other country. Further, there were many supporters in both countries of the broadening of military cooperation,[9] an eventuality that generated almost hysterical reactions in the French press. It is the reason why Stresemann rushed to clarify that this move would be "irreconcilable with the whole line of our policy" (Arnold, 2000: 107). Indeed, the aggravated fear of a possible Soviet–German military alliance was, even as it was understandable, ultimately unfounded.

Stresemann expressed a certain principled reticence regarding Bolshevism but, more importantly, he did not want to risk the blooming relationship between his country and France and Britain with the Soviet connection. As chancellor, he made stepts to cut back cooperation between the Reichswehr and the Red Army, and cautiously let the Soviets know that Berlin would not support common attempts at revision at the expense

[8] The Soviets were afraid that Germany, under Article 16 of the Covenant, would be compelled to let through French troops on its territory towards the Soviet Union; or be compelled to take part in economic sanctions against the Soviet Union.

[9] A note by Stresemann in his diaries on the 27th April 1926: *„The Soviet Government had asked that at least a part of the Rheinische Metallwerke in Düsseldorf, a part of the Deutsche Werke, the Rheinmetallwerke, a part of the Siemens-Schuckert-Werke, and the Krupp-Werke in Essen, should be transferred to the Donetz [sic!] basin in Russia. I had asked for time to think this over, and through the agency of Lord D'Abernon and Sthamer I had got into touch with the English Government. London's answer had been unfavourable. In the meantime, the German Nationals and military circles had warned me to accept the Soviet offer, as this would lead to a sort of military alliance between the two Powers, and the Donetz basin would become a Russo-German arsenal."* In: Stresemann, 1937 (vol. 2.): 490.

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of Poland. He did not want to burn that bridge, either, nonetheless, so both parties signed the Treaty of Berlin in order to satisfy the Soviets to a certain extent. Thus Stresemann killed two birds with one stone: he turned down the voice of the right opposition at the Reichstag, while he kept the Soviets close enough to keep them from're-joining' the Entente.[10] It is important to note that Western orientation was more important for Stresemann than German–Soviet relations were. The latter figured in his thinking merely as a lever in negotiations with the Western powers.

Due to the German foreign policy successes in 1925 and 1926, the career of Gustav Stresemann was at its peak and for a moment it seemed that his strategy would work and he would eventually secure revision of the Eastern borders with the consent of the Western powers. He was more and more convinced that Germany would not need war, since it could use its economic leverage in Central and Eastern Europe to further German interests in a peaceful way (Baechler 2002: 78).

German economic pressure was offensive in character mostly in Poland. From June 1925 they imposed heavy tariffs on Polish goods which bore serious consequences for their Eastern neighbor. Stresemann's admitted goal was to bring Poland to its heels. He wrote that the peaceful resolution of the border issue, one that fits to Germany's demands "cannot be reached until Poland's economic and financial distress has reached an extreme stage and reduced the entire Polish body politic to a state of powerlessness" (Arnold, 2000: 88). The tariff war was waged with determination by the foreign minister, while Poland's international position was weakening due to the consequences of the Locarno treaties and its failure to reach the ardently desired permanent seat at the Council of the League of Nations.

Due to German ascendancy, the revision of the Treaty of Versailles was no longer a taboo among some Western politicians and public opinion. French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand talked about a possible peaceful modification of the Polish–German border in August 1925 with the German ambassador to Paris, assuring the legate that "France certainly will not stand in the way" (Gratwohl, 1973: 53). British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and Foreign Minister Austen Chamberlain likewise recognized Germany's right to revision. According to Chamberlain, German success needed patience and a continuation of its existing foreign policy. Moreover, he stated in the House of

[10] Stresemann's statement to the press on April 26th, 1926: *„*[…] *Germany* […] *was the bridge that should bring together East and West in the development of Europe."* In: Stresemann, 1937 (vol. 2.): 464.

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Commons that Poland would make a great service to European peace if it would start negotiations about the border issue (Gratwohl, 1973: 54).

All quiet on the Eastern front

Notwithstanding the promising beginning, the limits of peaceful revisionism were becoming evermore apparent from 1926 on, and Stresemann's elbow-room was shrinking. At the peak of the Polish crisis, in May 1926, Józef Piłsudski took power in Warsaw and restored his country's stability. The marshal wanted to build better relations with Germany (Stresemann 1937: 500), and with the reforms he implemented, managed to stop the economic free fall of his country. In October 1927, Poland obtained loans from the U.S. and Great Britain, which made it clear that Poland could not be destroyed by German economic pressure (Arnold, 2000: 110). This signaled the failure of one of Stresemann's long-term goals, and accordingly, the diplomatic offensive against the Polish state was redirected to the field of minorities. As part of this newer strategy, they supported the organizations of Eastern European Germans as a means to stop assimilation and migration. In the League of Nations and the world press they made efforts to keep the issue on the agenda. In December 1928, Stresemann even got involved in a very sharp debate with Polish Foreign Minister August Zaleski during a sessions of the Council of the League.

Peaceful revision was not promising to deliver Stresemann's goals by this point, and neither was the Anschluß a prospect. During a meeting in March 1926, Stresemann and his Austrian colleague Rudolf Ramek agreed that the unification of the two countries is not timely, so the propaganda efforts directed towards this goal had to be scaled down (Wright, 2006, 363). Stresemann likewise suggested patience regarding the German–Czechoslovakian border correction which could not be addressed "in the foreseeable future." In a letter of June 1926, he foresaw that in 20 to 25 years Czechoslovakia would be ruled by the Czechs only and that the German minority there would be forced into the background. Assimilation, as he saw it, could not be thwarted by war. Instead, the Germans should organize themselves politically and culturally and be part of the government to reach a position where they would be able to effectively hinder the process of assimilation.[11] This was indeed what the German minority in Czechoslovakia did, and,

[11] *„The situation is not to be altered by war. In these circumstances in twenty to twenty-five years Czecho-Slovakia will be a State completely controlled by Czechs, in which the German element merely plays the part of serving-maid. On that account I put forward the question for consideration whether the formation*

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from 1926 on, the ethnic German parties took part in Czechoslovak coalition governments. The German foreign minister thus suggested from Berlin to renounce confrontational politics. His pessimistic prognosis regarding any alternative to this approach eventually proved correct: twenty years later the German minority did in fact stop playing any role in the life of Czechoslovakia – only, this was largely due to the war.

Stresemann's enthusiasm was cooled down by the shrinking volume of the previously supporting feedback from Western politicians. The two foreign ministers who went to some lengths to treat Germany as an equal partner, Aristide Briand and Austen Chamberlain, did not promote border revisions beyond mere words. Unwilling to take stands, they suggested to handle the border issues directly with the countries affected, i.e. that Stresemann should negotiate with Marshal Piłsudski. In the event of such a meeting, the German minister did not deem it opportune to bring up the question (Wright, 2006: 410). Furthermore, Briand and Chamberlain did not have domestic support for rethinking the Versailles system.[12] In spite of all this, Stresemann held on to the Western orientation. Since he thought that the Red Army was even weaker than the Polish Army, he was skeptical about the practicality of joining forces with the Soviets to reach treaty revisions. By 1928/1929, this resulted in a stalemate: Eastern revisions would have had to be achieved without war and with Western great power consent, but Germany was running out of peaceful means. This was also the time when the foreign minister's health began to decline. It is not by accident that his tone was so pessimistic in an interview of April 1929 with a British journalist: „It is five years since we signed Locarno. If you had given me one concession, I could have carried my people. I could still do it today, but you have given me nothing, and the trifling concessions which you have made have always come too late."[13]

His domestic support was also waning, as people were expecting spectacular successes and closer cooperation with the Soviet Union. A reorientation of foreign policy was evetually implemented not due to pressure from the political opposition, but due to the death of the foreign minister on October 3, 1929. Presidential cabinets launched policies with a new tone, took on a more confrontative posture, and sought partnership

of a Government in which the Germans were represented would be possible, on condition, of course, that safeguards were provided for the complete cultural autonomy of the Germans." *Stresemann's letter to Herr Schwager, June 9th, 1926*. In: Stresemann, 1937 (vol. 2.): 414.

[12] Prime Minister Poincaré warned Briand in a letter: *„The Reich tries to take advantage of the temporary financial difficulties of the Allies in order to demolish one by one all the conditions of the peace treaty. We should not tolerate it, and I am determined to oppose it most categorically."* Cited by Enssle, 1977: 943.

[13] Cited by Enssle, 1977: 944.

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with countries that were similarly unhappy with their position post-Versailles: Italy and Hungary.[14]

Conclusion

Among historians, the net assessment of Gustav Stresemann's Locarno policy is no more consensual than it was among his contemporaries. Many believe that Locarno raised overly high expectations regarding possible treaty revisions and was thus, ultimately, harmful to the Weimar Republic. Others point to the extraordinary successes he reached over the course of his tenure, from 1923 to 1929. Either way, the foundations of his policy were sound: he was aware that the great powers would not eventually sit idly by German revisionism, and that the Entente was in a position to defeat Germany in war. Since it was unthinkable in German politics to give up revisionist claims, and the patience of the German constituency was not unlimited, Stresemann chose peaceful means and slow compromises to achieve this end. The later abrupt revisions, in the 1930s, were only temporarily tolerated by the Western powers. This temporary toleration was, in fact, largely due to the trust accumulated during the Stresemann era. With the ultimate defeat of Nazi Germany in WWII, and after the expulsion of 14 million Central and Eastern European Germans in the late 1940s, it became apparent that Stresemann was undeniably right that Germany would have been immeasurably better off re-drawing Eastern Europe's borders with Western consent.

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[14] For example the Hungarian Ambassador to Berlin, Kálmán Kánya told Under-secretary Carl von Schubert that he would expect a more active general policy from Germany after the end of the Allied Rhineland occupation. Aufzeichnung Schubert, 27.5.1930; PA, R 74142. Cited by Graml, 2001: 28.

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