



Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference, and Political Economy versus National Sovereignty: Comment on Trachtenberg and McDougall

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Comment on Trachtenberg and McDougall*

Klaus Schwabe

The conventional historiographic view of the Weimar Republic has attributed much that went wrong with it to the Treaty of Versailles, and, in particular, to the French part in its preparation and execution. This view has been challenged in the two foregoing articles. Specifically, Trachtenberg and McDougall reject the traditional notion of a struggle between moderate progressivism, by and large represented by the Anglo-Saxon powers, and the vindictive conservatism that supposedly was characteristic of France's policy after 1918. Indeed, a revision of this cliché and a better understanding of the French position after World War I have been long overdue. In this connection, two questions seem critical. First, in attempting to present France's attitude in a new light, have the two authors used criteria sufficiently proven by documentary evidence? And second, is their interpretation based on a realistic appraisal of the contemporary diplomatic and domestic situation?

Let us first turn to Trachtenberg. He takes exception to the identification of America's stand as moderate, as opposed to the vindictive attitude of France. Trachtenberg's specific aim, moreover, is to prove the basically moderate character of France's reparation policy throughout the peace conference. At least once this moderation appeared to be even more Wilsonian than the American stance. The real villain in Trachtenberg's story, however, is Britain, which, according to him, clung to excessive reparation demands and thereby destroyed whatever chances existed for a reasonable solution of the reparation problem. This reinterpretation raises some critical questions. If England was the *only* stumbling block in the way of a moderate reparation settlement, why did combined Franco-American pressure fail to modify the British attitude? Did the general Anglo-American lineup during most of the conference prevent America from joining France in a common effort to upset the British position? Was it, in fact, the American refusal to renegotiate the inter-Allied war debts which resulted in an increased Allied dependence on German reparation payments to enable them

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to rebuild their economies and repay their American debts? Or was France's reparation policy, after all, not quite as moderate as Trachtenberg tries to depict it? It is true that France, as Trachtenberg shows, displayed a remarkable degree of self-restraint in late March 1919 when the proportional distribution of the expected reparation was discussed. At a critical moment before (in late February), the French generalissimo Foch hinted to the Americans at the possibility of a bargain, which included a downward modification of the French reparation claim in exchange for American support of France's territorial aims.¹ Foch's offer, whether fully authorized or not, indicated the inclination of the French government to consider the reparation question secondary and always subordinate to her major policy goal: security. Security, however, placed territorial claims at the top of the agenda. France, therefore, could afford to be flexible with regard to reparations, but this did not necessarily mean that she had principally given up the conception of a Carthaginian peace.²

In any event, a general judgment on French aims at the Paris Peace Conference only seems possible when the entire spectrum of topics raised there is kept in view. Trachtenberg, by isolating the reparation question, gets only a partial view and thus arrives at a somewhat one-sided conclusion. He overlooks the fact that reparations were only a function of France's peace policy: Initially they helped to cement Anglo-French cooperation; later in April they furnished the means to assure the longest possible Allied military occupation of the Rhineland. Clemenceau himself told Poincaré in a passage that has only recently become known: "We will have the right to reoccupy [the Rhineland] or to prolong [the occupation], if we are not paid. I make a prediction: Germany will go bankrupt and we will stay where we are, and will also have the [Anglo-American] alliance."³ France, in other words, had managed to establish the conjunction between the payment of reparations and the duration of the Rhineland occupation (arts. 428–430 of the Treaty of Versailles). From then on it would not have been in her interest to soften the reparation clauses of the treaty. In the final phase of the conference, as Germany pleaded for a modification of the draft treaty, France assumed what to me—and here I differ from Trachtenberg—appears to have been a fundamentally unyielding attitude. It is true that

¹ K. Schwabe, *Deutsche Revolution und Wilson-Frieden* (Düsseldorf, 1971), pp. 424–28.

² D. R. Watson, *Georges Clemenceau* (London, 1974), pp. 347–480.

³ J. Bariéty, *Les Relations franco-allemandes après la première guerre mondiale* (Paris, 1977), p. 62; Watson, p. 350.

Louis Loucheur, a more moderate member of the French delegation, proposed a reparation sum of 120 milliard gold marks, which coincided with the relatively moderate sum at which the American experts had also arrived. But the crucial point in the last-minute negotiations of May and June 1919 was that Clemenceau, in the face of repeated American representations, declined to have any fixed sum mentioned in the peace treaty. For the time being Germany was forced to assume an unlimited liability. My impression is that Clemenceau's attitude would not have been different even if the soundings of his emissary Haguenin in Berlin had been successful, not to mention the fact that to this day no one really knows to what degree they were authorized.⁴ It was, however, not only security interest that guided Clemenceau, but also the domestic situation. Trachtenberg is right in stressing Clemenceau's effective attempts to ignore parliament and press during the peace negotiations. The French premier could do so by pointing to his constitutional powers and by using press censorship.⁵ But, ultimately, he had to face the French deputies and senators, who would eventually have to ratify the treaty. This requirement forced him to take into consideration the sentiments of the French public, which, in its majority, favored a victor's peace (and may even have been confirmed in this attitude by Clemenceau's own influence on the French press). It was during the whole course of the conference, not only in its final stage, that Clemenceau had to keep in mind that he would have to defend the treaty against attacks not only from the left, but also from the right (and the military!).⁶ To gauge the impact of this consideration on Clemenceau's peace policy would require a much more thorough analysis of the domestic situation then prevailing in France than Trachtenberg could undertake in his article. As a result, probably, Clemenceau's stand would appear as a relatively moderate one, if seen only in the context of French politics.

While Trachtenberg adheres to the traditional view that the Treaty of Versailles comprised a basically harsh peace settlement, McDougall argues that in a way it was not harsh enough, or at least had not been carried out harshly enough, because it did not succeed in creating a viable balance of power and of economic potential between Germany and France. This cannot be denied, especially as France no longer could count on being backed by Russia. In addi-

⁴ Bariéty, p. 214.

⁵ P. Miquel, *La Paix de Versailles et l'opinion publique française* (Paris, 1972), pp. 419 ff., 473–74, 563 ff.

⁶ Watson, p. 351; Miquel, pp. 473 ff.

tion, there can be no doubt as to McDougall's assertion that Germany's refusal—or at least partial inability—to pay her full reparations debts helped only to deepen French anxiety over a growing disparity between the two countries, although McDougall seems to exaggerate the strength of Germany's economy in the early twenties. Even so, what to the German public looked like French imperialism was in reality the outgrowth of a defensive mentality, which resorted only to imperialist means: the taking of "productive pawns."⁷

These means and the way McDougall views them call for a critical comment. McDougall implies that the establishment of a separate Rhenish Republic, apparently including the Ruhr District, combined with an integration of French and German key industries, would have created a balanced relationship between the two countries and that such an arrangement would also have solved the seemingly insoluble problem of how to assure adequate reparation payments from Germany and, at the same time, to guarantee French security. Ultimately, he asserts, the German people also would have become reconciled to it. In theory, this may be true; in practice, I would contend, this solution was impossible, because it combined two mutually exclusive policies and, in addition, was in total disharmony with the prevailing politico-psychological climate.

Poincaré did not aim at a Franco-German economic integration—at least not on the basis of equality—when he occupied the Ruhr.⁸ Rather, this had been the goal of industrialists like Loucheur, Rathenau, Reckberg, and, in 1923, even Stinnes.⁹ Poincaré, however, cannot be regarded as a typical exponent of French industrial interests, but far more as a representative of the middle classes. What Poincaré was interested in when he occupied the Ruhr has been shown in J. Bariéty's recent study of Franco-German relations: Primarily, he intended to obtain an instrument to assure German reparations payments. In addition, he hoped to enhance his bargaining position vis-à-vis Germany and the Anglo-Saxon powers. This would have helped him, among other things, to secure an agreement to a separation of the Rhineland from Germany.¹⁰ Poincaré, however, at no time seems to have considered a permanent separation of both the Ruhr district and the Rhineland, which alone could have created a true economic balance of power between Germany and

⁷ "Gages productifs"; see Bariéty, p. 102.

⁸ Bariéty, p. 170; K. D. Erdmann, *Adenauer in der Rheinpolitik nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart, 1966), p. 161.

⁹ Erdmann, pp. 156 ff.

¹⁰ Bariéty, pp. 109–15, 119–20.

France.¹¹ But even this limited objective—the possibility of establishing an independent republic on the left bank of the Rhine—was enough to arouse deep national resentment in Germany. Taking the Rhineland *and* the Ruhr would not only have intensified these emotions, it would also have weakened Germany to such an extent that reparation payments from the remaining rump Germany would have become even less likely, nor would there have remained any willingness to enter bilateral industrial arrangements with France. The cession of territory by Germany and voluntary economic cooperation, not to speak of integration between Germany and France, were not complementary, but alternative policies.¹²

The major weakness in McDougall's argument, therefore, lies in an underestimation of the contemporary psychological climate. In France the social strata which stood behind Poincaré were emotionally unprepared to support any kind of a supranational solution of the Franco-German problem.¹³ In Germany the nationalist Right adamantly rejected the idea of a Franco-German understanding before, and even more so after, the occupation of the Ruhr. These radical nationalists received support not so much from "aggressive business elites"—after all, Stresemann himself belonged to these elites and as such was regarded as fairly moderate in Paris¹⁴—but from the middle class, whose social position was not so different from that of Poincaré's supporters. At the time of the Ruhr occupation political conditions on both sides of the Rhine were not ripe for the solution of the Franco-German antagonism suggested by McDougall.¹⁵

For this reason, the analogy he draws with the situation after 1945 appears unconvincing, too. Germany, after 1945, gradually became willing to espouse the cause of economic, and even political, integration with France, because the force that threatened and finally disrupted the national unity of the German people no longer seemed to be France but the Soviet Union, the power which in many ways has since slipped into the role France played after World War I.

¹¹ In speaking of the Rhineland as Germany's "richest province," McDougall creates some ambiguity as to what he means. The Rhineland left of the Rhine certainly was not the richest province of Germany, it became so only when one added the Ruhr district, which partially belonged to the province of Westphalia.

¹² Stinnes at once cancelled his agreements with Lubersac after the Ruhr occupation had taken place (Bariéty, p. 110); when he returned to such projects later in 1923 he did so with the hope of shortening French occupation of the Ruhr (Erdmann, pp. 159 ff.).

¹³ Erdmann, p. 184.

¹⁴ M.-O. Mixelon, *Stresemann und Frankreich* (Düsseldorf, 1972), p. 135.

¹⁵ Bilateral economic cooperation between Germany's and France's industries also always created the danger of British protests, as Poincaré himself knew very well (Bariéty, p. 170).

In explaining the reasons for the failure in 1919 and afterward to create a durable peace settlement, both authors place a major responsibility on the Anglo-Saxon powers. Leaving aside the difficult question of who was or who was not progressive in those days, I think one has to agree with this view. The unwillingness of the United States to subscribe to a global solution to the problem of inter-Allied debts and German reparations, and the reluctance of Great Britain to guarantee France's security, added much, if not a decisive measure, to the feeling of weakness and exposure motivating the policy of "productive pawns," and both McDougall and Bariéty convincingly argue that the occupation of the Ruhr was designed by Poincaré to pressure the Anglo-Saxon powers into a closer cooperation with France in the attempt to solve the German problem.¹⁶

And yet, again the question arises whether the psychological and domestic situation in Great Britain and especially in the United States would have permitted an unconditional involvement in the continental situation on the part of the two English-speaking nations. In the end, only an intimate combination of diplomatic history and the analysis of domestic factors, political and social, can furnish a satisfying answer to these complex questions.

¹⁶ Bariéty, p. 120; for the United States; see W. Link, *Die amerikanische Stabilisierungspolitik in Deutschland* (Düsseldorf, 1970), pp. 170 ff.; Erdmann, pp. 159. The hope for an Anglo-American intervention in the reparations dispute ultimately leading to an Anglo-Saxon guarantee of both reparations and French security was one of the fundamental assumptions on which the German foreign policy at that time was based (Maxelon, pp. 131, 138, 154). Hoesch, the German ambassador in Paris, believed that Poincaré himself had decided to occupy the Ruhr in order to force the Anglo-Saxon powers to renegotiate France's debts with them (Maxelon, pp. 138 ff.).