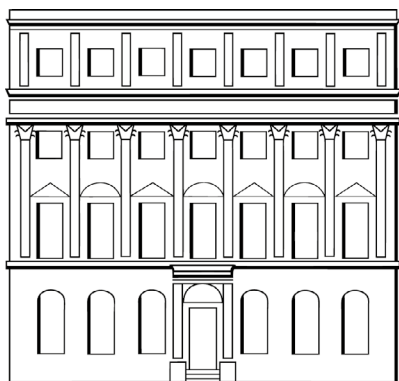


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Gustav Stresemann: the Revision of  
Versailles and the Weimar  
Parliamentary System

*by*

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## **Gustav Stresemann: the Revision of Versailles and the Weimar Parliamentary System**

In the course of German history the short-lived period of the Weimar Republic, from 1919 to 1933, is of particular significance. It was the first experiment in democracy in Germany, a period of hope and of failure, and it was uncertain which course the future would take. Between the first troubled years of the new republic and the later years of the presidential regime, when the parliamentary system had already ceased to function, there was a stretch of some five years of apparent stabilisation. This period could be called the era of Stresemann, who was a key figure at this time, not only from the point of view of foreign policy, but also from that of the functioning of the parliamentary system. In 1923 he was Chancellor for 100 days as well as Foreign Minister. After that in all subsequent cabinets he remained head of the German Foreign Office until his death in 1929. At the same time he played a key role in parliamentary politics<sup>1</sup>.

Who was Stresemann? Coming from a lower middle class family, he forged a brilliant career in industry and became a member of the imperial Reichstag as deputy for the National Liberal Party. During the First World War he was an admirer of Ludendorff and stood for extensive annexations in East and West in the event of a German victory, in which he firmly believed virtually to the last. At the same time he advocated a strengthening of parliamentary power within the imperial constitution. After the German defeat and the revolution of 1918 he founded the right-wing liberal German People's Party (Deutsche Volkspartei), whose deputies in the National Assembly of Weimar voted against the Constitution. Stresemann, though decidedly against revolution and revolt and notwithstanding his enduring monarchist convictions and his attachment to the former glory of imperial Germany, was quick to realise that a restoration of the monarchy had no chance whatsoever, and he saw that any such attempt was bound to end in civil war. His main argument, however, against the revival of the monarchy derived from his concept of the nation.

The unification of Austria with Germany, the dream of the 1848 revolutionaries of the greater German nation, the most fervent protagonists of which were now the Austromarxists, was unthinkable under the Hohenzollern dynasty. All this accounts for Stresemann turning into what was called a *Vernunftrepublikaner*, a republican for pragmatic reasons rather than by theoretical conviction. For the rest of his life Stresemann the monarchist stood for the republic as its loyal defender against slander and calumny.

It was this pragmatic approach to the republic which led the implacable enemy of socialism to the conviction that it was necessary to bridge the gulf between his own right-wing liberal party and the Social Democratic Party, the two parties representing the conflicting social and economic interests of industry and working class, of capital and labour. Thus Stresemann gained the reputation of being a "fanatic of the Great Coalition"<sup>2</sup>. When he was appointed Chancellor, it was because he was regarded as the man best suited to lead so disparate a coalition – comprising as it did Social Democrats, Democrats, the Catholic Centre and the German People's Party – and yet a coalition to which there was no alternative. The Stresemann government was formed in one of the darkest hours in Germany's post-war years.

Let me briefly recall the main elements of the situation at that time. In January 1923 the French army had occupied the Ruhr area, the industrial heartland of Germany, which they claimed as security for Germany's outstanding reparation debts. Germany had responded to this challenge with passive resistance. To a large extent the iron and coal-mining industry in this area had come to a standstill, with the population now dependent on financial support from the government. In consequence the German Mark, in decline ever since the war, fell into an abyss. Since mid-1923 it had been evident that resistance against the French invasion could no longer be maintained, since there was no chance of checking inflation until it was abandoned.

Both occupied and unoccupied Germany were afflicted by strikes, unrest and hunger revolts. This situation fostered political radicalism on the extreme right and left. Before the

end of the year the country was witness to two abortive attempts at rebellion – a communist insurrection and a national socialist march on Berlin. When the Stresemann government was formed it was confronted by the dual task of coming to terms with the French and of stabilising the currency, both essential pre-conditions of domestic recovery.

I intend to deal firstly with Stresemann's foreign policy in defence against the French, who wanted a revision of Versailles that would give them a hegemonial position on the Rhine and Ruhr; secondly with Stresemann's attempts to revise the Treaty of Versailles in the interest of Germany's recovery and national ascent; thirdly with the parliamentary basis of Stresemann's foreign policy and the political structure of the Weimar Republic. This will lead to some reflections on the interaction of foreign and domestic policy and on the reasons for the failure of the Republic.

## I

Stresemann regarded the occupation of the Ruhr as a violation of the Treaty of Versailles, and the Treaty itself as a breach of what has been called the *Vorfriedensvertrag* (preliminaries), i.e. the agreements resulting from an exchange of notes between the governments of Germany and the United States before the conclusion of the armistice, and being based on the 14 points and other proclamations of President Wilson. When the terms of peace were made known to Germany in May 1919 the unanimous reaction had been indignation and protest. It was generally felt that revision was necessary and that this was legitimate because, for instance, the inclusion of pensions for war victims in the reparation debt was in contradiction to the armistice agreement and because, to quote another example, in the case of German Austria and of Danzig the principle of national self-determination as proclaimed by Wilson was violated. The atmosphere was particularly embittered by certain stipulations which were regarded as discriminatory, such as part VII of the Versailles Treaty on penalties and the war

guilt clause. Whereas the latter was not officially withdrawn, but challenged by a revisionist trend in international historical research, the stipulations on penalties were never put into practice: neither did the government of the Netherlands deliver the Kaiser, who was to have been brought before an international court, nor did Germany deliver those persons who were to have been sentenced by the military courts of her former enemies. This was an early revision of the treaty.

Before turning to Stresemann's foreign policy, let us consider what the name of Versailles stands for. A distinction has to be made between the actual Treaty of Versailles and the 'system of Versailles' as it was originally conceived. The latter comprised three separate treaties, all signed on the same day, 28th June 1919, and complementing each other: the peace treaty with Germany, and two assistance treaties which France concluded with Great Britain and the United States. It is well known that the guarantees given by Britain and the United States to France against a German war of revenge had been the condition for Clemenceau's concessions in the Rhineland question. France had given up her original intention of pushing the German western border back to the Rhine and of gaining permanent military, political and economic control of the west bank. However, the two guarantee treaties were not sanctioned and never came into force. The cheque given to France was not honoured. Thus Versailles was a disappointment not only for Germany but for France as well.

However great the territorial, economic and financial losses which the peace treaty inflicted upon Germany after the First World War, she was still potentially a great power, superior to France in population, industrial productivity and the strength of her heavy industry. Without the Anglo-American guarantee and without a military border along the Rhine, French security interests were not satisfied and this created an element of unrest in post-war Europe. During the invasion of the Ruhr area, it soon became apparent that France's military action in the Rhineland was not motivated purely by her reparation claims. The decision to occupy the Ruhr was taken some months before the action started. A

certain delay in the delivery by Germany of sawn timber and telegraph poles – 58,000 out of 200,000 – served as the legal pretext. Sir John Bradbury, the British representative on the Reparation Commission, commented at the time: "The fact was that this trumped-up accusation was only before the Commission at the moment as a preparation for an offensive in other fields. Since, in the tenth year of the war, Troy fell to the stratagem of the wooden horse, history recorded no similar use of timber. The situation was at present somewhat different; it was the fifth year of the peace, and the city under attack was not Troy, but Essen"<sup>3</sup>. From recent German and French research, based on the papers of Tirard<sup>4</sup>, the French High Commissioner in the occupied Rhineland, and on French governmental documents<sup>5</sup>, it has become clear that the French Prime Minister Poincaré, who as President of the Republic during the Paris Peace Congress had strongly opposed Clemenceau because of the concessions made to the United States and Great Britain in the Rhineland question, intended now, during the Ruhr occupation, to gain control over German heavy industry and to create a new political entity in the Rhineland in the interests of French security. A separatist movement was encouraged and supported by the French occupation forces, and Poincaré placed the necessary funds at Tirard's disposal. When Tirard realised that this plan was strongly rejected by the German population, he tried to come to an arrangement with the leading political forces in the Rhineland.

The ultimate French objective in that year was to create a federation of three West German states loosely connected with the German Reich, but without representation in the Reichstag, and with their own diplomatic representatives in the capitals of Western Europe, as well as their own legislatures, their own currency, their own railway and their own economic policy. These satellite states were to give France the security she had sought in vain at Versailles, and at the same time French control of heavy industry in the Rhineland and Ruhr area was to reduce the economic strength of Germany. These plans, however, were not accepted by the economic and political leaders of Western Germany, for



example Hugo Stinnes, the key figure in the coal mining industry, and Konrad Adenauer, Lord Mayor of Cologne. The latter appears in Clemenceau's memoirs, *Misère et Grandeur d'une Victoire*, as the man who had thwarted the first separatist movement in 1919. Now, as the Tirard papers reveal, he was regarded in Paris as *persona non grata*. In particular he rejected Tirard's memorandum of 23rd November 1923, "Principles on which the Construction of a Rhenish State could be based"<sup>6</sup>. The essence of the French endeavours at that time amounted to what may be called a revision of Versailles – a revision in favour of France.

When Stresemann first took office<sup>7</sup> he did not recognise this ultimate aim of French policy. He tried to come to an agreement: the Germans, he proposed, would give up their passive resistance and resume reparation payments, provided the French were willing to leave the Ruhr and reestablish German control. But step by step he had to give way. He did not even succeed in extracting from the French an official promise that after cessation of the passive resistance the many thousands of Germans expelled or imprisoned in the course of the struggle should be allowed to return to their homes. Without being allowed to save face, Stresemann was forced into unreserved capitulation. But even then the French were not prepared to negotiate at government level; instead they entered into direct negotiations with the Ruhr industrialists. And again, step by step, Stresemann had to give in. At first he opposed these private negotiations. Then he agreed that they should take place – since it seemed the only way of bringing the Ruhr industry back to work – but on condition that all payments and deliveries of coal and industrial goods extracted in the Ruhr by the French should be credited to the German reparation accounts. Finally, however, Stresemann's government agreed to a later reimbursement of the industrial deliveries to the French without any clear agreement having been reached regarding the extent to which these should be acknowledged as payment of the reparation debts. Thus, the political capitulation was followed by an economic surrender: after much hesitation Stresemann agreed to the so-called MICUM treaties between

the *Mission Interalliée de Contrôle des Usines et des Mines* and the Industry. Thus, for the time being, West German heavy industry was brought under French control. Having finally recognised French Rhineland policy for what it was, Stresemann felt inclined, in a mood of despair, to give in to those of his ministerial colleagues who advocated a public declaration to the effect that since France had broken the Treaty of Versailles, Germany no longer considered herself bound by it. This would have meant at least the temporary abandonment of the Rhineland. It was a Rhenish delegation headed by Adenauer who dramatically protested against any such step and restrained Stresemann from this action of despair. Stresemann then returned to a strategic principle which he himself had repeatedly formulated: that Versailles had not only imposed obligations on Germany, but had also accorded her certain rights. What means, then, did the German government have at its disposal to oppose the revisionist Rhine and Ruhr policy of the French?

These were:

1. The appeal to the Reparation Commission to investigate Germany's paying capacity. This appeal had already been lodged on October 23rd.
2. Germany's offer to replace the regional securities accruing from the Ruhr area by guarantee based on German industry as a whole. This offer was made by Stresemann in September 1923.
3. The proposal that the borders between France and Belgium on the one side, and Germany on the other should be internationally guaranteed. The draft of such a treaty, which contained all the essential elements of the later Locarno Treaty, had already been prepared in the Wilhelmstraße in 1923, and an offer based on this draft was made by Stresemann in September of that year. This would have given the French exactly the degree of security they had failed to obtain in 1919 when the dual pact with the USA and Great Britain had fallen through. Stresemann's proposal reverted to an essential element of the original system of Versailles, though with one far-reaching difference. This

pact would have guaranteed Franco-German borders on a reciprocal basis, as in fact Locarno was later to do. It would give France security against any possible German revenge, and at the same time put a definite end to the French Rhineland policy.

An offer of this kind marked a significant development in Stresemann's political thought. When in 1919, shortly after the end of the war, Konrad Adenauer had pointed out that the French desire for security was by no means illegitimate, but a psychological reality that had to be recognised, Stresemann had reacted with an outburst of nationalistic anger. In 1923 he still did not think that France was in real need of security. But now he was prepared to accept this as a psychological reality which had to be taken into account.

Now what was the French reaction to Stresemann's unconditional capitulation in the Ruhr? At this stage Poincaré considered France to be firmly established in the Ruhr area and along the Rhine and saw no need to show any positive reaction to Stresemann's propositions. Recent research<sup>8</sup>, based on the evidence of French governmental papers, has shown that Poincaré only assented to the establishment of an expert committee on the German capacity to pay after reaching the conviction that together with the reparation issue the interallied war debts were going to be reconsidered. By the end of 1923 he envisaged an overall scheme to include reconsideration of the war debts, new regulations for the German reparation annuities, control over the Ruhr industry and the establishment of satellite states along the Rhine in the interests of France's security.

The attitude of France, however, gradually altered. In 1924 Poincaré accepted the Dawes Plan, which placed the reparations on a new non-territorial economic basis, and France finally gave up her hegemonial plans in the Rhineland. This was due to several factors: the French currency had faltered; Poincaré later confessed that his great plan failed because France lacked an adequate financial basis. Also, public opinion in France took a new turn. In the elections of May 1924 Poincaré lost his majority and was replaced by Herriot, a lover of German music and philoso-

phy, biographer of Beethoven and admirer of Immanuel Kant. A new era in Franco-German relations began.

But the main reason for this turn in German-French relations was perhaps that after the German capitulation in the Ruhr France came under strong pressure from Great Britain and the United States. Both were interested in reestablishing a functioning German economy and in preventing France from gaining permanent control over Germany's industry. Therefore Britain protested against all French moves to support separatist putsches in October 1923, against Poincaré's and Tirard's plea for the creation of a group of autonomous states along the Rhine in November 1923, and, at the beginning of 1924, rejected the French plan to replace the existing Rhineland statute by one which would legitimise French economic control over German heavy industry. Stresemann had pinned his hopes on Britain and the United States. He certainly had no opportunity of playing the British card against the French, but had to wait and be patient. His policy could, in fact, be called the art of active waiting. He was in permanent close touch with the British Ambassador, Lord d'Abernon, and tried, not without success, to establish contact with General Smuts, the South African Premier, who in October 1923 mobilised the opinion of the British Empire Conference against the economic and political plans of France in Germany. On balance one can say that the nationalist Stresemann, after courageously accepting the humiliation of unconditional surrender, and by adhering to the original Versailles system (treaty with Germany and guarantee treaties), paved the way for the interventions of Great Britain and the United States in the reparation question. This resulted in the Dawes Plan. It left the total reparation debt imposed on Germany by the London ultimatum of 1921 unaltered, but provided a "productive pledge" to guarantee the payments. Though this corresponded with the French intention of preventing Germany from getting round her obligations, it referred – contrary to Poincaré's original intentions – to assets of a general character, such as German railway and industry. Once the Dawes Plan had been accepted at the London Conference of 1924 as a negotiated

agreement between creditors and debtors, there was no further justification for continued military control of the Ruhr. Within a year the evacuation was completed.

## II

The result of the first phase of Stresemann's foreign policy could be regarded as the reenactment of the Versailles Treaty against French revisionist policy. At the same time it was the starting point for Stresemann's own policy of revision in favour of Germany. The main aspects of this policy were:

1. Continued revision of the reparations;
2. The reestablishment of Germany as an independent power between East and West, drawing into her political orbit the Soviet Union, which was not part of the Versailles system;
3. Revision of Germany's territorial settlement as laid down by the Treaty of Versailles.

1) The reparation issue arose again when it became apparent that the annuities Germany had to pay according to the Dawes Plan were beyond her economic capacity. The subsequent Young Plan, which was worked out in 1929 and accepted at the Hague international conference in the same year, reduced the annuities as well as the total sum of the debt. More important from the revisionist point of view than the alleviation of the burden of payments was the abolition of the Reparation Commission. This commission had exercised considerable control over Germany's financial affairs. It was the intention of the Young Plan, according to its own wording, to liquidate political control and replace it by an apparatus which was essentially financial and commercial in character (Bank for International Settlements). It was in keeping with this transfer of the reparation debts to the commercial sphere that the military occupation of the Rhineland, established by the Treaty of Versailles as a means of pressurising the German government into paying, came to an end. One of the considerable successes of Stresemann's pol-

icy was that, interallied military control having ended by 1927, the last French troops left the Rhineland in 1930 – five years before the date envisaged by the Treaty of Versailles.

2) Stresemann's success must be seen in the context of a new development within the system of European states. In the period of apparent consolidation between the Dawes Plan and the Young Plan, Stresemann built up a sophisticated network of treaties. Its main components were Locarno in 1925, the German-Russian friendship treaty of Berlin 1926, and in the same year Germany's entry into the League of Nations.

The intricacies of Stresemann's complicated network of treaties require closer investigation if we want to discover what he really had in mind<sup>9</sup>. The most important feature of Locarno was that the German borders in the East and the West were not to be treated in the same way. In the West they were placed under the guarantee of third powers – Italy and Great Britain – who pledged to come to the aid of the attacked country, be it France or Germany. In the East, however, Stresemann rejected the French proposal that the German-Polish border be similarly guaranteed. Here he was not prepared to go beyond arbitration treaties with Poland and Czechoslovakia. He did not accept the idea of an East-Locarno. It was his intention to allow the borders in the East to appear less definite than those in the West. These different approaches to the West and East were designed, as he put it, to protect the Rhineland against a revival of French aspirations and at the same time to leave open the chance of regaining lost territory in the East. However, he strongly rejected all speculations about winning back Danzig, Western Prussia and Upper Silesia by force. At one stage he was presented with the draft of a war game in the general staff (*Truppenamt*). Colonel von Blomberg, later Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces under Hitler, had worked on the assumption that there would be a localised war between Germany and Poland. He imagined, on the one hand, that Germany's relations with France had become so stable that there was no likelihood of intervention from the West. On the other hand, Russia was supposed to be so pre-occupied

with interior unrest as to be no threat to Poland. Stresemann added in his own handwriting some ironical marginal remarks to this political nonsense: "I suppose that it is further assumed that England has become the victim of a seaquake, America has been ruined by tornadoes and false speculations, while Czechoslovakia was absorbed in negotiations on a concordat"<sup>10</sup>. He confirmed his non-aggressive approach to revisionism by joining the Briand-Kellog Pact in 1928. There can be no doubt about the peaceful character of Stresemann's revisionist policy. His attitude was based on a realistic assessment of Germany's geographical position and her limited war potential. He had learned his lesson from Germany's defeat in the First World War.

Nevertheless military considerations did play a part in Stresemann's Locarno calculations. The fact that Germany's western border was guaranteed against a French attack was bound to diminish the importance of the well-established Franco-Polish alliance. Stresemann boasted that he had broken the back of this alliance, since France was now only in a position to come to the assistance of Poland if Germany were the aggressor. Thus Warsaw saw Locarno as a political defeat. At the same time Poland came under pressure from the Soviet Union. The Soviet government tried to persuade Stresemann to enter an alliance, with the object of reducing Poland to her ethnographical boundaries on both sides. Stresemann resisted such temptations, even though in the Berlin Treaty he conceded Germany's conditional neutrality in the event of a Soviet-Polish conflict. The question of how France and Germany would behave in such an event was, according to Briand, clearly the "pivot"<sup>11</sup> of all the problems that had been at issue in the Locarno negotiations. Failing an alliance the Soviet Union would have liked at least an unconditional promise of neutrality from Germany. But Stresemann refused. In the Berlin Treaty he limited the German promise of neutrality to the improbable event of Poland being an aggressor against the Soviet Union. The obligation to remain neutral was invalidated if Poland were the victim of Soviet aggression. Stresemann in no way wanted to encourage Soviet military action against her west-

ern neighbour. His promise of neutrality had to be conditional since, having joined the League of Nations of which Poland was also a member, Germany now had certain obligations to fulfil. This did not mean, however, that Stresemann was prepared to offer direct or indirect German assistance to Poland in the event of a Soviet attack, even though this could rightfully be expected of a member of the League of Nations. On the contrary, Stresemann managed to maintain certain reservations about the sanctions imposed by the League: Germany was only obliged to join forces with the League on behalf of a member to an extent compatible with her military and geographical situation. This meant that she was free to join economic sanctions against Russia or not, and to allow or refuse the passage of the French army through Germany to assist Poland.

Least of all was Stresemann willing to be the accomplice of the Soviet Union, as had been suggested by General von Seeckt, and as was later practised by Hitler. His letter to the former Crown Prince has an almost prophetic ring about it: "I warn against any flirtation with bolshevism. Once the Russians are in Berlin, the Red flag will be hoisted on the palace, and Russia, in pursuit of world revolution, will rejoice in having brought Germany up to the Elbe under Bolshevik rule and" – in words that reveal his anti-French sentiments – "leave the rest to the French vultures"<sup>22</sup>.

When Germany joined the League of Nations she was admitted as a permanent member of the League's Council. This was evidence of her political ascent. She was once again acknowledged as one of the leading powers in Europe. Stresemann and with him Briand and Chamberlain, his partners in Locarno, were honoured with the Nobel Peace Prize. This was in recognition of the diplomatic style of Stresemann who, as an admirer of Bismarck and a follower of his *Realpolitik*, had realized that the only chance for Germany's revival under the circumstances prevailing after Versailles lay in patience at the negotiating table and readiness to compromise.

3) Considerable as Stresemann's practical successes were, they lagged far behind his ultimate goals. These, as he



repeatedly declared to the Central Committee of his party or in his letter to the Crown Prince, were the return of Danzig and the Corridor, the unification of Austria with Germany, a revision of the border with Poland in Upper Silesia and with Belgium in Eupen Malmedy, and finally, if possible, the re-acquisition of former colonies. It is obvious that Stresemann's view of Germany's future was largely determined by the memory of her pre-war position. The means by which he hoped to reach his goals, even though this was somewhat contradictory to Germany's permanent reluctance to pay up the reparation debts, was to make use of her economic potential. As he put it to the Central Committee of his party: "The task is to regain our political position in the world from our newly acquired moral standing, using the weapon of such economic strength as we still possess"<sup>13</sup>.

But here Stresemann did not succeed. In vain he tried to buy back the German-speaking part of Eupen Malmedy from the Belgians, in vain he tried to mobilise the industrial obligations the Dawes Plan had placed on Germany's industry and railway, in order to obtain an early return of the Saar. Stresemann was also mistaken in his belief that he might be able to induce Poland to enter into negotiations on the question of Germany's Eastern borders by economic pressure. The path to Germany's reestablishment as a European power comparable to her pre-war position was blocked by the territorial stipulations of Versailles. In Stresemann's time the revision of Versailles, considerable as it was, remained limited.

There was no breakthrough as far as revisionism was concerned, nor had the time yet come for a European alternative to Stresemann's idea of complete national independence. Twice he was confronted with an alternative, and twice he rejected it. During the Ruhr crisis Adenauer and Hugo Stinnes proposed, as a solution to the Franco-German antagonism, the creation of an economic union between the heavy industry of Germany and that of her Western neighbours. They had in mind, for instance, the farsighted scheme of an extensive exchange of shares and permanent supply contracts for coal and machinery from Germany to France in

return for iron ore and semi-finished products from France to Germany. They planned to shift the emphasis of German politics away from the East to a Western German state within the Reich, which by its economic interests would lead the Reich towards a permanent and insoluble union with its Western neighbours.

This idea of a Franco-Belgian-German bloc was rejected by both Stresemann and Poincaré and met with clear disapproval from Great Britain. Six years later, in 1929, Aristide Briand launched his plan for a political federation of Europe based on common interests, to confront the impending world economic crisis. But again Stresemann, despite all his rhetoric in Geneva in favour of European cooperation, remained clearly opposed to the idea of economic integration and political federation. He, and later his successor Curtius, were strongly encouraged to reject a European federation by the British as well as the Soviet governments<sup>14</sup>. An East-Locarno in the guise of a European federation was not to Stresemann's liking, and he did not wish to stand alone in a federation with France and her Eastern allies which left Britain and the Soviet Union as hostile outsiders. The international situation at that time and the mentality of the European nations make it difficult to maintain that Stresemann missed a European chance here, since such a chance probably never existed. Moreover, the fact should be borne in mind that as long as he lived his foreign policy of peaceful revision within the pattern of the independent sovereign nation state was supported by the majority of the German people.

### III

This is a statement which needs some further explanation. Is not extreme governmental instability characteristic of the Weimar Republic? There were no less than twelve Chancellors and even more governments within fourteen years. Were there not the most vehement and vitriolic attacks against what was denounced as "fulfilment policy"? And finally was there not a public outburst of nationalistic fever against both

Versailles and Weimar? Has it not often been said of the Weimar Republic, both today and by contemporaries, that the state broke down under the weight of Versailles and that under the dark shadow of this treaty democratic life could not thrive?

At this stage a closer look into the political structure of this republic will lead us further. After the collapse of the monarchy Germany had, for a few months, been under the rule of the socialist government of the Council of People's Representatives. The elections to the National Constitutional Assembly of Weimar in 1919, however, did not produce a socialist majority. The Constitution was a compromise between Social Democrats, Democrats and Catholic Centre. When the first elections to the Reichstag took place in 1920 this coalition lost its majority and was never to regain it during the lifetime of the Republic. The subsequent governments of the Weimar Republic were either minority governments whose parliamentary majority had to be continuously fought for, or they were based on very broad parliamentary coalitions comprising political elements highly inhomogeneous in character. In both cases a functioning parliament could only be sustained by willingness and capacity to compromise.

From the beginning of the revolution the basis of this "republic of compromise" was the so-called "Zentrale Arbeitsgemeinschaft", a body formed by the trade unions and the employers' organisations to facilitate the transition from a war to a peace economy and to bring 6 million demobilised soldiers back to work. The cooperation between labour and capital led to essential social improvements, such as permanent workers' representation in industry, the 8-hour working day, unemployment benefit and the principle of collective bargaining. In parliament the Great Coalition fulfilled a function similar to the "Zentrale Arbeitsgemeinschaft". Here industry was represented mainly by Stresemann's German People's Party, and labour interests by the Social Democrats and the labour wing of the Catholic Centre. Twice a Great Coalition was formed, in 1923 under Stresemann, and again in 1928, through Stresemann's initia-

tive, under the Social Democratic Chancellor Hermann Müller. The former lasted only 2½ months, the latter not quite two years. In both cases they broke apart because the parties were no longer able to agree on social and economic issues and on problems of domestic policy. The first Great Coalition split over the problem of dealing with the Nationalists in Bavaria and the question of working hours. The second Great Coalition was unable to reach agreement on the question of the reform of unemployment insurance which had become necessary as a result of growing unemployment. The "Zentrale Arbeitsgemeinschaft" did not long outlive the first Great Coalition. The whole background to Stresemann's terms as Chancellor and Foreign Minister was intense class struggle. Thus, the Weimar Republic was built on extremely shaky social and political foundations.

In this unstable atmosphere Stresemann's foreign policy was one, and perhaps the most effective element of republican integration. The two essential decisions he had to take when he was called upon to form a Great Coalition government at the height of the Ruhr crisis were the capitulation to France and the currency reform, both of which were backed by all parties of the coalition. Even during the period between the two Great Coalition Governments when the Social Democrats played no part in governing the Reich, they were still the most loyal supporters of Stresemann's foreign policy. On one crucial occasion, however, the number of deputies from the Social Democrats to the DVP was not enough to reach the two thirds majority needed to ratify the Dawes Plan. It says much for the integrating effect of Stresemann's foreign policy that in this hour of need he was helped out by a sufficient number of votes coming from the right-wing German National Party (Deutschnationale Volkspartei).

When the second Great Coalition government was formed in 1928 it was again due to a crisis in foreign affairs. Revision of the reparation payments became an urgent necessity and this was to pave the way for the Young Plan and the Hague Conference. From the outset, however, the second Great Coalition government was torn by internal disputes on ques-

tions of taxation, budget balancing, and above all unemployment insurance. Stresemann literally used his last breath to induce his party not to wreck the Great Coalition, and died in October 1929, having once again succeeded in preventing disruptions by the integrating force of his foreign policy. Just how broad the approval of Stresemann's foreign policy was became apparent when his enemies from the right, Hugenberg's German National Party and Hitler's National Socialist Party, launched a joint plebiscite against the Young Plan, a few weeks after Stresemann's death. Outstanding representatives of all political tendencies in the spectrum of the Great Coalition, among many others Rudolf Hilferding, Konrad Adenauer, Hermann Dietrich and Julius Curtius, and famous names in the fields of science, art and literature such as Albert Einstein and Max Planck, Adolf von Harnack and Friedrich Meinecke, Max Liebermann, Gerhard Hauptmann and Thomas Mann, supported an appeal against what they called the "instigation of the people"<sup>15</sup>. They called upon the people to stand together for the continuation of a foreign policy guided by reason, which alone could reach "the goal of the liberation of Germany". And indeed, only 13.8 per cent of those entitled to vote could be mobilised by Hugenberg and Hitler against the Young Plan, i.e. against the methods Stresemann had employed in his revisionist policy. Nonetheless, a few months later, on March 27th, 1930 the Great Coalition broke apart over the social implications of unemployment insurance. This was a fatal date in German history. It is now generally accepted in German historiography that this day marks the definitive end of German democracy<sup>16</sup>. Henceforth parliament proved unable to form a government based on a majority. The way was cleared for presidential governments under Brüning, Papen and Schleicher, and finally for Hitler.

As far as the extreme left and right were concerned, the republican system seemed to be closely tied to the "Schandvertrag" as it was called, the shameful Treaty of Versailles. All their arguments against Versailles were turned against the democratic and capitalist republic. The ground taken by the extremists on both sides left little scope for the republi-

cans. Within this limited scope there was no possibility of alternation between democratic government and democratic opposition and thus compromise was a categorical imperative. As long as the priority of foreign policy prevailed in the interests of peaceful revision, the parliamentary system functioned despite all in-built tensions. But when the attitude of the parties which had formed the Great Coalition became primarily determined by their conflicting social and economic interests, the parliamentary system ceased to function. The dyke broke, and the Republic was swept away in a flood of revolutionary nationalism which ended in the catastrophe of the Second World War.

To sum up: the revision of Versailles was a permanent multi-lateral process from the time the Treaty was signed on 28th June 1919. The main steps in the sequence of revision are:

1. Non-ratification of the guarantees given to France by the United States and Great Britain.
2. Non-application of chapter VII on penalties, which meant that neither the Emperor nor other leading persons were brought before an international court.
3. The short-lived establishment of French hegemony in the Rhineland and control of industry in the Ruhr area.
4. This did not last, however. The validity of the Treaty of Versailles was reaffirmed by British and American intervention resulting from Stresemann's policy of surrender, by which he ended passive resistance and stabilised the currency.
5. On this basis Stresemann launched a policy of revision in favour of Germany. His successes were:
  - a) a repeated adjustment of the reparation debt;
  - b) the abolition of control instruments such as the Reparation Commission and the Military Control Commission;
  - c) the evacuation of the Rhineland after 10 instead of 15 years;
  - d) the construction of the political system of the Locarno and Berlin treaties, which expressed Germany's quest for a substantially independent position between East and West.
6. Stresemann failed, however, to obtain any territorial

revision. There was no decisive breakthrough.

7. There might have been a European alternative to the system of Versailles, but Briand's proposal for a federation of Europe had no chance since it was rejected by Great Britain, the Soviet Union and Germany alike.

8. After Stresemann's death the parties of the Great Coalition failed to meet the categorical imperative for compromise in the interests of peaceful revision along the lines of Stresemann's foreign and parliamentary policy.

9. The break-up of the Great Coalition and the end of Stresemann's policy was the beginning of a new development which ended in war.

In conclusion, it seems appropriate to quote Gerhard Ritter, one of the leading historians of our time. After the Second World War he wrote in retrospect of the Treaty of Versailles: "A number of new states were placed between us and Russia. The Russian colossus in our neighbourhood, which since the 18th century had overshadowed all German life (similar to the Turkish threat in the 16th and 17th centuries), was pushed a considerable distance back to the East. In addition Russia was defeated. For a long time her domestic difficulties prevented her from pursuing her old imperialist aims. For the first time since the Middle Ages Germany was freed from the dual pressure from East and West. Eventually the smaller states in Eastern Central Europe were bound to turn to us for economic and political support against Bolshevist Russia . . . In the long run a reasonable and patient German policy striving for nothing else but to make Germany the peace-loving centre of Europe would have had great chances of success. That we missed these chances and in wreckless impatience and blind hatred against the so-called Versailles System threw ourselves into the arms of a violent adventurer is the greatest disaster and the most fatal blunder in our recent history"<sup>17</sup>.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> The main source material for a political biography of Gustav Stresemann is his private papers (Nachlaß) at the Politisches Archiv of the German Foreign Ministry in Bonn. Selected papers are published as *G. Stresemann, Vermächtnis*, 3 vols., ed. by H. Bernhard, Berlin 1932-33; *id.*, *Reden und Schriften*, 2 vols., Dresden 1926. Bibliographical survey in: *K. D. Erdmann, Die Zeit der Weltkriege*, Stuttgart 1973, p. 247. (Gebhardt Handbuch der Deutschen Geschichte, 9th edn., vol. IV/1). Recent biographies: *F. Hirsch, Stresemann. Ein Lebensbild*, Göttingen 1978; *W. Stresemann, Mein Vater Gustav Stresemann*, Munich 1979; *K. D. Erdmann, Gustav Stresemann. Sein Bild in der Geschichte*, *Historische Zeitschrift* 227 (1978), pp. 599-616.
- <sup>2</sup> *Stresemann, Vermächtnis*, vol. 1, p. 83.
- <sup>3</sup> Meeting 26th December 1922, quoted in: *A. J. Toynbee, Survey of International Affairs 1920-1923*, Part II, Western Europe, London 1925, p. 191 f.
- <sup>4</sup> *K. D. Erdmann, Adenauer in der Rheinlandpolitik nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, Stuttgart 1966; *id.*, *Stresemann und Adenauer, zwei Wege deutscher Politik*, in: *H. Fuhrmann, H. Mayer and K. Wriedt* (eds.), *Aus Reichsgeschichte und Nordischer Geschichte*, Festschrift für Karl Jordan, Stuttgart 1972, pp. 397-410.
- <sup>5</sup> *J. Bariéty, Les relations franco-allemandes après la première guerre mondiale*, 10 novembre 1918 – 10 janvier 1925, de l'exécution à la négociation, Paris 1977.
- <sup>6</sup> 'Principes sur lesquels pourrait être basée la constitution d'un état rhénan' (29th November 1923), published in: *Erdmann, Adenauer, Doc. 17*; Adenauer's counterproposals, *ibid.*, Doc. 20.
- <sup>7</sup> For Stresemann's policy as Chancellor of the Reich during the Ruhr Crisis see *K. D. Erdmann and M. Vogt* (eds.), *Die Kabinette Stresemann I und II*, 13. August bis 30. November 1923, 2 vols., Boppard 1978, in: *K. D. Erdmann and H. Booms* (series eds.), *Akten der Reichskanzlei Weimarer Republik*.
- <sup>8</sup> Bariéty, *Les relations franco-allemandes*.
- <sup>9</sup> Literature on Stresemann's foreign policy from the Dawes Plan to the Young Plan in: *Erdmann, Zeit der Weltkriege*, pp. 268-270.
- <sup>10</sup> "Ferner wird anscheinend angenommen, daß England das Opfer eines Seebebens wurde und Amerika teils durch Wirbelstürme, teils durch falsche Spekulationen dem Ruin anheimfiel, während die Tschechoslowakei vollständig mit dem Abschluß von Konkordatsverhandlungen beschäftigt war". *Stresemann, Nachlaß*, 14 verschiedene Vorgänge ("Ganz geheim"), 1924-1930.
- <sup>11</sup> Briand at the fourth meeting of the Locarno conference, 8th October 1925, in: *Stresemann, Nachlaß*, vol. 30 add., Konferenz von Locarno 5.-16. Oktober 1925. Cf. *K. D. Erdmann, Das Problem der Ost- oder Westorientierung in der Locarno-Politik Stresemanns*, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 6 (1955), pp. 133-162.
- <sup>12</sup> 7th September 1925, *Stresemann, Vermächtnis II*, p. 553 ff.
- <sup>13</sup> "Wenn Sie sich einmal geschichtlich vor Augen führen, wie wir 1919 dastanden – doch als die Parias der Welt, beinahe verachtet, kaum hineingelassen in die gute Stube irgendeiner Nation – und wie die ganzen Dinge sich in dieser Zeit gewandelt haben, dann glaube ich wiederholen zu können: es gibt kaum, geschichtlich gesehen, eine Periode der Entwicklung, in der ein Volk in so kurzer Zeit seine große moralische Stellung in der Welt wiedergewonnen hat. Aus dieser moralischen Stellung die politische wiederzugewinnen, und zwar mit



den Waffen, die die uns gebliebene wirtschaftliche Größe gibt, das ist die Aufgabe dieser Politik". Stresemann to the Central Committee of the DVP, 1st October 1926, Bundesarchiv Koblenz/ R 45 II/41, p. 41 f.

<sup>14</sup> *K. D. Erdmann*, Der Europaplan Briands im Licht der englischen Akten, in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 1 (1950); *Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939*, second series, vol. I, London 1946.

<sup>15</sup> "Versuch schlimmster Volksverhetzung". Circular to all households "An das Deutsche Volk", in private ownership.

<sup>16</sup> *K.D. Erdmann and H. Schulze* (eds.), Weimar. Selbstpreisgabe einer Demokratie Eine Bilanz heute. Kölner Kolloquium der Fritz Thyssen Stiftung, Juni 1979, Düsseldorf 1980.

<sup>17</sup> *G. Ritter*, Der Versailler Vertrag von 1919, in: *Festschrift des evangelischen Gymnasiums Gütersloh*, private publication 1951, pp. 1-8.