

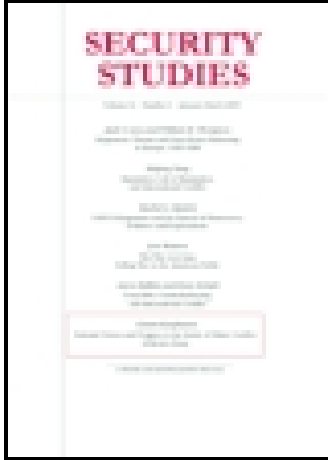
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Versailles revisited

Marc Trachtenberg ^a

^a Professor of history , University of Pennsylvania ,
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REVIEW ESSAY

VERSAILLES REVISITED

Manfred Boemeke, Gerald Feldman, and Elisabeth Glaser, *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment after 75 Years* (New York: Cambridge University Press; and Washington, D.C.: German Historical Institute, 1998).

MARC TRACHTENBERG

THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES was imposed on Germany by the three great western democracies after their victory in the First World War. That treaty, to put it mildly, did not lay the basis for a stable peace in Europe. The signing of the treaty in 1919 was followed by a series of political and economic crises in the early 1920s, and then, after a brief period of relative stabilization in the latter part of that decade, by the great disasters of the 1930s. Both parts of the Versailles settlement—the territorial provisions and the economic and financial clauses—were, as Gerald Feldman writes, “horrendous failures by any standard one wishes to employ.” This point is true, as he says, no matter what “position one takes on the historical debates surrounding them.”¹

Those historical debates naturally focused on the question of what had gone wrong. Did the problem lie with the treaty settlement itself? Was it really a “Carthaginian” peace, as so many writers had claimed? If the treaty was so bad, who was to blame? How were the policies of the major governments involved with the making of the Versailles settlement to be assessed? What, in general, are the lessons we should draw from the whole story?

A few years ago, a number of historians felt that it was important to take a fresh look at this whole complex of issues: a good deal of archivally based work had been done on Versailles over the past twenty or thirty years, and the time had come to stand back and figure out what all this new work had

Marc Trachtenberg is professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania

1. Gerald D. Feldman, “A Comment,” 441–47; the quotation appears at 441.

amounted to. A conference was held in Berkeley in 1994; the volume under discussion contains the papers presented at that conference. These papers present the views of some of the best scholars working in this area—indeed, of some of the best historians in the business, including people who have been studying Versailles and related subjects intensively for more than thirty years.

What is to be taken away from this collection of articles? How has our understanding of the peace conference period changed in recent decades? What, in particular, should we make of the different policies pursued by the three main western governments in 1919, and by the German government as well?

FRENCH POLICY AFTER THE FIRST WORLD WAR

ONE CAN begin with French policy in 1919. For years, the consensus judgment was quite negative. The French were commonly portrayed as harsh and vindictive; they were blamed, in large measure, for the supposedly “Carthaginian” peace terms imposed on their neighbor across the Rhine.

Judging from the contributions in this volume, little of that traditional view remains intact among serious scholars, although there are still a few echoes of it here and there. In fact, a number of the contributors—Elisabeth Glaser, for example, and William Keylor and Sally Marks—explicitly reject the idea that Versailles was a “Carthaginian” peace.²

French policy itself is also now viewed in a relatively charitable light. It is not that the current tendency is to claim that the French had purely defensive goals. The argument that France had a harsh policy in 1919 traditionally focused on what the French wanted to do with the Rhineland: to cut it off from the rest of Germany, to occupy it militarily, to tie it to France economically and perhaps in other ways as well. In some major ways, this argument remains intact: no one today claims that the French had no real interest in the Rhineland. The authors who deal most directly with these questions—David Stevenson, Georges Soutou and especially Stephen Schuker—take France’s Rhenish policy very seriously indeed.³ The issue, however, is, in a sense, relativized: in each case, certain dissonant notes are

2. Elisabeth Glaser, “The Making of the Economic Peace,” 371–99; William Keylor, “Versailles and International Diplomacy,” 469–505; and Sally Marks, “Smoke and Mirrors: In Smoke-Filled Rooms and the Galerie des Glaces,” 337–70; the quotations appear at 398, 505, and 359, respectively.

3. David Stevenson, “French War Aims and Peace Planning,” 87–109, esp. 99–107; Georges-Henri Soutou, “The French Peacemakers and Their Home Front,” 167–88, esp. 172–77; and Stephen Schuker, “The Rhineland Question: West European Security at the Paris Peace Conference of 1919,” 275–312.

struck and countervailing factors are stressed. Stevenson, for example, points out that "there was only limited support" in French public opinion and even at the top level of the French government, for an annexationist policy in 1919 (94). Schuker notes that key French leaders (like Prime Minister Georges Clemenceau's main advisor on these matters, André Tardieu) understood the weakness of the Rhenish separatist movement and were aware of the economic problems annexation would cause (289-90). The key point for both Stevenson and Schuker is that while Rhenish ambitions were real, they took a back seat to the main goal of French policy during the peace conference period: the preservation of the alliance with Britain and America (97, 282).

For Soutou also, the alliance with the Anglo-Saxons was of fundamental importance, although he stresses the point that France did not sacrifice her Rhenish goals on the altar of allied unity to quite the extent that some scholars have claimed (170-72). If a Rhenish policy of a certain sort remained intact, however, it was, he argues, counterbalanced by yet a third strand of French policy, one which looked toward a possible accommodation with the Germans (179-81). Soutou, in fact, sees this "third tier" of policy as rooted in the thinking of certain groups in France even during the war. In 1917, he writes, key political leaders like Briand and Painlevé thought "it might not be in France's interest to reduce German power too drastically in face of the Russian Revolution and the evident ascendancy of England and the United States" (168); in some "conservative circles," people were thinking along similar lines; the large banks and major industrial firms wanted to resume their prewar relations with Germany, and were thus not in favor of a punitive peace (168-69). Clemenceau, he says, to a certain extent "discreetly took these views into account" (169). In fact, during and immediately after the peace conference the French did engage in economic talks with the Germans. This sort of policy had major sources of support within France. "An important segment" of the French industrial and economic élite, he notes in this context, was "fully prepared to rebuild Europe's economy on the basis of Franco-German cooperation and in competition with America and England" (180).

Soutou's point is not that this was the dominant strand in French policy, let alone that Rhenish ambitions ultimately counted for very little. His basic claim is that Clemenceau was pursuing a complex, "three-tiered" policy in which allied unity, Rhenish goals and the hope of a kind of understanding with Germany all played a role. There may have been three very different types of policy in play, but this does not mean, he says, that Clemenceau's basic policy was incoherent or haphazard. The French leader knew what he was doing; Clemenceau's strategy had a "profound inner logic" (170, 181).

How seriously are the French overtures to Germany in 1919 to be taken? This issue is obviously central to the interpretation of French policy in this

period. Antony Lentin, judging from his comment on Soutou's article, does not think this "third tier" was very important (232–33), and Stevenson also plays down the importance of what he calls the "one-sided and limited" overtures to Germany (96). Glaser, however, thinks the overtures were quite significant and blames the Germans for deliberately refusing to enter into constructive negotiations.⁴

To my mind, the French approaches deserve to be taken very seriously indeed, and in fact I think that Soutou does not go far enough in making the case for the importance of this very moderate strand in French policy in 1919. Soutou thinks the talks with the Germans "were thought necessary in order to encourage Germany to sign the treaty and accept its reduced status," and adds as a kind of secondary consideration that "France would have to live with Germany even after the peace treaty and could not expect to rely entirely on Anglo-American support, especially in economic matters" (170). My own view is that the French were trying to explore the prospects for a more far-reaching accommodation between the two countries—an accommodation which implied, certainly in the long run, a very fundamental recasting of political relations between the two countries; I do not think the negotiations were essentially a device to get the Germans to sign the treaty and accept forever a position of inferiority vis-à-vis France.

What is the basis for these conclusions about the relative moderation of French policy in 1919? These claims rest essentially on a detailed analysis of the reparation issue in 1919 and 1920. What that analysis shows, first of all, is that the French did not dig in their heels and try to get as harsh a settlement as their allies would permit. Instead, it was the British who pressed for a heavy indemnity, and the French essentially aligned themselves with the Americans in calling for a relatively moderate fixed sum of about \$30 billion. The French, like the Americans, did go along with the inclusion of pensions in the reparation bill, something which in theory greatly increased its size, but they did this only as a concession to Britain. They also made it very clear that they would have been quite happy to do away with the pensions entirely and go back to a strict interpretation of the Fourteen Points, which, given their own figures, meant that they were willing to accept a very moderate fixed sum of less than \$23 billion. In this, however, they were opposed not just by the British but by the Americans as well! The French leaders were the only ones who wanted to discuss these issues with the Germans. When Clemenceau, and again when Louis Loucheur, his main advisor on economic questions, proposed meeting with the Germans to talk about these matters,

4. See Glaser's comments at 393–96; and also Keylor's comment, 499 n.

both the U.S. president, Woodrow Wilson, and the British prime minister, David Lloyd George, simply ignored the suggestion.⁵

What this shows is that the moderation of French policy in this area was not simply a result of Clemenceau's desire to preserve the alliance with the Anglo-Saxons. If anything, we can say quite the opposite: the French (like the Americans) went along with a harsher reparation settlement than they would have liked out of deference to the British. In other words, the Stevenson argument (96–97) that Clemenceau sought to go as far with a policy of coercion (even in the economic area) “as was compatible with keeping the alliances in being” is mistaken, at least as far as the reparation provisions were concerned.

This issue is also important in the present context because of what it implies about how the overtures to Germany are to be taken. If the French wanted a workable reparation settlement in the treaty, then it is also likely that they were serious in pressing for a workable arrangement in their talks with the Germans.

The argument about the importance of the French overtures to Germany in 1919, however, does not have to rest exclusively on a study of what was going on during the peace conference period proper. These overtures are to be taken very seriously, I think, because they were not just a flash in the pan, having to do mainly, for example, with the need to get the Germans to sign the treaty. The French tried hard to reach a workable arrangement in the postconference period as well—in the Loucheur negotiations with the Germans in late 1919 and during the Millerand period in 1920. The climax came at the end of 1920, with the Seydoux Plan negotiations for a reparation arrangement based on a revolving fund of paper marks.⁶

Was all this based on the assumption that the Germans would be kept down forever politically, or that Germany would be put in a permanent position of economic inferiority? The French leaders were too realistic to think that they could ever achieve a position of economic superiority; and I think some of the authors here are correct in viewing the argument that the French were aiming at a radical shift in the balance of economic power in

5. I did my dissertation on this subject, and first presented these findings in my article “Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference,” *Journal of Modern History* 51, no. 1 (March 1979): 24–55; see esp. 40–41. For a fuller discussion, see the second chapter in my book *Reparation in World Politics: France and European Economic Diplomacy, 1916–1923* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

6. Soutou refers to the Loucheur talks in late 1919 in his article here (180). For a fuller discussion of the issue of Franco-German economic collaboration and its implications, see Trachtenberg, *Reparation*, 86–87, 110–16, 118–21, 158–191, and the sources—especially the articles by Soutou and the book by Krüger—cited in those passages. Perhaps the key point to make here is that the more moderate Germans, including even Walter Simons, the foreign minister in 1920, took these overtures very seriously indeed. See esp. *ibid.*, 178.

western Europe with more than a touch of skepticism.⁷ In fact, at least as I see it, their real hope was more modest: the French aim was to use the political trump cards that had resulted from the allied victory to redress their economic inferiority vis-à-vis Germany and to try to work out arrangements that would allow them to deal with their great neighbor across the Rhine on a more equal basis. It was understood, I think, that an economic entente would have major political implications as well, especially in the long run.

Why is all this worth emphasizing? First, it helps us understand that what happened in 1919 was not “overdetermined” (as Feldman says it was in passing on p. 441). Given how much France had suffered in the war, one would expect that here, if anywhere, policy would be driven by a spirit of nationalistic vengefulness. What is surprising is how little of that one finds when one looks at the evidence. This should make us wonder about the way the policies of the other major powers are normally treated; it should make us question the easy assumptions we tend to make about the absolute constraints imposed by public opinion on British and German and American policymakers. If we are not justified in any of those assumptions, how then can we take a fatalistic view of the Versailles settlement as a whole?

The second point has to do with what this whole business tells us about the general forces shaping foreign policy—and in particular about the way power political interest can override sentiment. What is striking here is the way disillusionment with the Anglo-Saxons led the French, even in 1919, to begin feeling their way toward an accommodation with Germany, which is exactly what neorealist theory would predict. So the point has a certain bearing on contemporary debates in international relations theory: score one for Waltz!

Beyond that, it throws a certain light on what happened after the Second World War. Indeed, it points to a certain continuity in French policy in this century, a continuity due to the persistence of powerful structural factors shaping policy. France is basically a weaker country than Germany; the French are therefore dependent on the Anglo-Saxons to redress the balance; but they do not want to be too dependent on Britain and America, and a link with Germany might help dilute their dependence on those powers; so the idea of an accommodation with Germany is therefore bound to be an attractive option, provided the terms are reasonable. Since the French have but limited control over the policies of those other major powers, however, their best course is to explore all their options and try to feel their way through what could at times be a difficult and uncertain situation. This is a key to understanding French policy after the Second World War; but the same factors were at work after the First World War as well.

7. See esp. Glaser, “Making of the Economic Peace,” 384 n.

Finally, this whole issue of a Franco-German accommodation—of the meaning of Soutou’s “third tier” of French policy—relates to the fundamental question of how French policy during the Versailles period is to be judged. My own view is that the French in 1919 come out rather well, especially in comparison with the British, the Americans and the Germans. The French government wanted a workable, businesslike settlement of the reparation question, and they wanted to keep the door open for a real accommodation with Germany—not on any terms, of course, but on terms that the Germans, to my mind, should have been willing to accept. This is the policy, it seems to me, that one would have wanted the French to pursue—one that looked to the future and not to the past; one that aimed at a kind of understanding with Germany; one that was rational in power political terms. The French obviously did not abandon the very idea of reparations, but in moral terms there was no reason why they should: the war in the west had been fought mainly in France, and it would have been wrong to expect the whole burden of reconstruction to fall on the victim. In political terms, there was no reason to assume that France, as a victorious power, should have to bear the entire burden while the defeated power got off scot free.

There remains, of course, the question of the Rhenish policy. The threat of an active Rhenish policy could serve as a means of putting pressure on Germany; as long as it remained just that, as long as it did not become a kind of end in itself (as it did, unfortunately, in mid-1923, if not earlier), it is hard to condemn the French for not abandoning it entirely. Given the German attitude, one could hardly expect the French to rely totally on Germany’s goodwill, so one can understand why they would want to keep some instruments of pressure intact.

If the French, however, come out fairly well, the source of the problem must lie elsewhere. Things obviously did go wrong, in 1919 and after. The reasons for that, however, mainly have to do with the policies of the other main actors in the story.

THE POLICY OF THE “ANGLO-SAXONS”

WHAT SHOULD Britain and America have done in 1919? The answer, I think, is very simple. First, they should have negotiated a formal military alliance with France, and, even more important than that, they should have agreed to maintain a substantial military force in France for an indefinite period. Second, they should have agreed to a financial settlement based on the principle of “equality and community of sacrifice.” They should have cancelled the interallied war debts and have agreed to bear a substantial

share of the costs of reconstruction; they should have supported an arrangement whereby the financial burden of reconstruction was borne equally by all the major nations party to the peace, including Germany.

Why would such a policy have made sense? An allied military presence on French soil would have solved France's security problem, and thus would have made it easier for the French to pursue an accommodation with Germany; it would have created a strong bloc of power in the West which the Germans, for their part, would have had to respect, and thus would have given the Germans an incentive to pursue a policy of accommodation with the western powers, France included. As for a generous financial settlement, the main point here is that it would have meant that reparation would not have been a problem—that it would not have been a source of political tension, and would not have been a major factor aggravating the enormous economic problems of the postwar period. For the Anglo-Saxons to accept a settlement based on the principle of "equality of sacrifice," moreover, would be to give an important political message about the meaning of their participation in the war, about the depth of their commitment to France and to allied union, and about their own lack of selfishness. A generous policy on the part of Britain and America would also have put pressure on the Germans to accept their fair share of the burden of reconstructing the devastated areas: a German effort of this sort, based on the idea that all the major countries had a common interest in healing the wounds of the war, would have had enormous political and moral significance—very different from a reparation liability rooted explicitly in the idea that Germany was morally responsible for the war.

The problem was that this sort of policy cut very much against the grain of British and American thinking. On the economic issues, neither Britain nor the United States would accept anything like a generous policy. The British would go along with such a policy only if the Americans essentially carried the costs, and the U.S. government had absolutely no intention of doing so. The French, Wilson thought in 1919, were ingrates, given what America had already done for them, and he resented the fact that they actually wanted more help.⁸

The political issues were perhaps even more important. Neither Wilson nor Lloyd George was primarily concerned with the question of what it would take to establish a stable structure of power. The whole idea that there had to be an effective counterweight to German power in western Europe, that France alone could not provide it, that Britain and America had to come in and redress the balance—that indeed this was the only alternative, short of

8. Trachtenberg, *Reparation*, 24–27, 32–38, 54–55; Grayson diary, 2 May 1919, *Papers of Woodrow Wilson* [PWW], 58:332.

accepting Germany as the dominant force in Europe, to a system of constraints on German power that the Germans were sure to resent and to resist—never lay at the heart of either American or British thinking.

Wilson, in fact, was hostile to the very notion of the balance of power. The goal of the war, he said in December 1918, was to “do away with an old order and to establish a new one, and the center and characteristic of the old order was that unstable thing which we used to call the ‘balance of power’”; that old system had to “end now and forever.”⁹ He, of course, finally did agree to give France a Treaty of Guarantee, but his basic feeling was that “special and limited alliances” were inconsistent with the whole idea of a League of Nations, and when the League of Nations went down, the Treaty of Guarantee went down with it.¹⁰ The key to a stable peace, in his view, was to base the settlement on principles of justice. Such a peace, he thought, would satisfy everyone; insofar as there was an enforcement problem, that would be handled through the establishment of a League of Nations.¹¹

The problem was, as Manfred Boemeke notes in his contribution to the volume, that Wilson’s concept of justice required that “the Germans be punished for their crimes.”¹² Wilson indeed took it for granted that Germany had started the war and deserved to be punished for that offense. This, as he said over and over again in 1919, is what justified the harshness of the peace settlement. “The treaty which ends so terrible a war,” he wrote in April 1919, “must unavoidably seem harsh toward the outlaw who started the war.” The peace terms, he said at the end of the peace conference, were “very hard, it is true, but at the same time every one must realize that the Germans themselves had brought on this horrible war, and that they had violated all ethics of international law and international procedure, and had created a series of crimes that had amazed and shocked beyond belief all the people of the world.”¹³

For Wilson, it was all so simple. He knew what was just. He knew that “the war was started by Germany.” He did not need to wait for historians to go through the documents. He was certain that the “verdict of history” would sustain his judgment.¹⁴ That judgment, however, heavily conditioned his approach to peacemaking. His own sense of justice meant that Germany

9. Guildhall address, 28 December 1918, PWW 53: 532.

10. See, for example, his “Five Particulars” speech of 27 September 1918, PWW, 51: 130–131.

11. Metropolitan Opera House (Five Particulars) address, 27 September 1918, PWW 51: 129. Note also the reference to this passage in Lamont-Wilson conversation, 4 October 1918, PWW, 51: 221–222.

12. Manfred Boemeke, “Woodrow Wilson’s Image of Germany, the War-Guilt Question, and the Treaty of Versailles,” 603–14, esp. 611–13.

13. Wilson to Herron, 28 April 1919, PWW, 58: 205; Grayson Diary, 13 June 1919, PWW, 60: 488.

14. Speech of 12 November 1917, PWW, 45: 12.

should make amends for her crimes. It was no accident that Wilson, literally expressing his contempt for logic, supported the inclusion of pensions in the bill, or that he had no problem with the war guilt clause.¹⁵ These provisions of the peace treaty, so disastrous in the postwar period, were not out of keeping with Wilson's basic moralistic approach to peacemaking. This, however, was an approach that looked to the past—toward punishing the Germans for their crimes in 1914 and after—and not to the future: the focus was not on the problem of how to construct a stable peace. Yet the future was the only thing that should have mattered, and the real issue for Wilson should have been what America could do to bring a stable peace into being.

As if this were not bad enough, there were also a number of problems having to do with the question of enforcement. How was a peace of the sort Wilson had in mind supposed to work? It could scarcely be self-enforcing. The Germans could scarcely be expected to accept blame for the war, to recognize that a peace that punished them for their crimes was just, and to comply with its terms voluntarily. Indeed, Wilson agreed, as he said, that the peace could not rest “upon the word of outlaws.” Germany could not simply be trusted to be a normal, law-abiding nation—not for the time being, at any rate—but rather would “have to redeem her character, not by what happens at the peace table but by what follows.”¹⁶ How then would the Germans be made to comply with the peace terms? His answer was that the new order would be upheld by the “organized moral force of mankind.” “The only effective force in the world,” he declared, was “the force of opinion.”¹⁷

Did Wilson really believe this sort of thing? If he did, he was appallingly naive. Wilson, however, had just fought a major war, and it is hard to imagine that he actually thought that military power was as unimportant as these statements implied. The real difficulty lay elsewhere: the use of this sort of rhetoric meant that Wilson was not coming to grips with the central issues. His whole way of thinking—that Germany had caused the war, and that a just peace was one that took Germany's responsibility into account—should have implied that the problem of enforcement would be fundamental, but he simply could not bring himself to face up to that problem.

15. When it was argued by a member of the American delegation that the inclusion of pensions would violate the pre-armistice agreement with Germany, and that the same logic that had ruled out war costs would also rule out pensions, Wilson exclaimed: “Logic! Logic! I don't give a damn for logic. I am going to include pension!” Thomas Lamont, “Reparations,” in *What Really Happened at Paris*, ed. Edward House and Charles Seymour (New York: Scribner, 1921), 272.

16. PWW, 51:129.

17. Antony Lentin, *Lloyd George, Woodrow Wilson and the Guilt of Germany: An Essay in the Pre-History of Appeasement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 72; Wilson speech of 18 September 1919, PWW, 63:345.

LLOYD GEORGE REAPPRAISED

AT LEAST WILSON was trying to do what he felt was the right thing, but the same cannot be said of Lloyd George. Like Wilson, he did not face up to the most important issues. He did not think seriously about the problem of enforcement, nor did he think deeply about the central political problems, especially the core problem of what relations between France and Germany should be like. In his case, however, this had to do more with a moral than an intellectual failing. The British prime minister reached constantly for immediate advantage, especially domestic political advantage; his tactical virtuosity operated at a relatively superficial level; under Lloyd George, Britain achieved most of her goals, but the gains he won would now strike us as trivial. "Lloyd George had no inner compass," Schuker says. "That was his fatal flaw" (300). Michael Fry, another contributor to the volume, refers to Lloyd George's "sheer flippancy."¹⁸ Judgments of this sort were also quite common at the time.¹⁹

This was important because it meant that the policy of one very important country was not sufficiently targeted on the solution of central problems. To be sure, Lloyd George opposed the French on the Rhineland issue: he did not, he said, want to create a new Alsace-Lorraine to poison the peace of Europe. He was certainly right about that, but the problem was that that was where he stopped. He did not go further and actually face up to the issue of how the German problem should be dealt with— or, in other words, to the problem of how a stable political structure in western Europe could be brought into being.

In the postconference period, the key issue here was how to bring about a reasonable settlement of the reparation question—that is, a settlement both France and Germany could live with. The British certainly did not want France to use force against Germany; the problem was that they did not want relations between those two countries to be too good either. They were obviously not happy with Loucheur's negotiations with the Germans in August 1919. Listen to the tone, for example, of a note to Lloyd George from Philip Kerr, one of his main personal advisors. The British representative in those talks, Kerr reported, was "hanging things up as much as he can, but with an active and able man like Loucheur pressing things forward with all his might and supported by a very active Belgian delegate it is not at all

18. Michael Fry, "British Revisionism," 565–601; the quotation is at 574.

19. Trachtenberg, *Reparation*, 93; Lentin, *Guilt of Germany*, 27, 119–20.

easy.”²⁰ In retrospect, practically everyone would agree that a workable settlement between France and Germany should have been Britain’s (as well as everyone else’s) top priority. The whole effect of Lloyd George’s policy, however, was to block a real settlement. By far the most important example here is his torpedoing of the Seydoux Plan negotiations of late 1920—talks that might very well have led to a reparations arrangement that both Germany and France could have accepted. Whether this was done deliberately or because Lloyd George did not understand what was at stake is still not clear; in either case, the policy simply does not measure up to what the situation called for.

Then, of course, there is Lloyd George’s reparation policy at the peace conference itself. British reparation demands at Paris were very high—consistently much higher than the corresponding French figures, for example—and the failure of the treaty to include a fixed sum resulted from the simple fact that the British refused to accept the relatively moderate figure of \$30 billion that the French and the Americans had agreed upon. Lloyd George felt unable to go along with that figure, not because he honestly felt it was too low, but because he had taken a harsh line in the indemnity question in the British elections at the end of 1918, and was worried that he would pay too big a political price at home if he now took a more moderate line.

Did this mean that he was so hemmed in by domestic political considerations that he could not have taken a moderate stance on this issue at the peace conference even if he had wanted to? Lentin, in a very effective passage in his contribution to the Versailles book, argues to the contrary that Lloyd George was politically strong enough “to bring home whatever settlement he thought fit,” and if he refused to go along with a moderate settlement, this was because, as he himself said, he did not think “that the time had quite come for letting Germany off anything.”²¹

It was Lloyd George, in fact, who insisted on the inclusion of pensions in the bill—a disaster, because this was clearly a violation of the pre-armistice agreement and thus inevitably undermined the moral validity of the settlement in the eyes not just of the Germans but of many people in the allied countries as well. What was disgraceful here is that Lloyd George knew that the pre-armistice agreement with Germany had ruled out anything of the sort.²² Indeed, that agreement had ruled out the very idea of a large indemnity to Britain, and to press for anything along these lines was certainly a grave political error: the democracies had made a promise in November 1918 and

20. Kerr to Lloyd George, 16 August 1919, F/89/4/11, Lloyd George Papers, House of Lords Record Office, London.

21. Antony Lentin, “A Comment,” 222, 225–27. See also Lentin, *Guilt of Germany*, 96, 115–16.

22. See Lentin, *Guilt of Germany*, 12, 14, 28.

on that basis the Germans had laid down their arms. Now Lloyd George had in effect decided to renege on that promise for short-sighted and ultimately trivial domestic political reasons, without worrying at all about the effect that that would have on the whole international situation.

The basic issue here has to do not so much with honesty as an end in itself, but rather with the long-term political effect of a dishonest policy. The British certainly were dishonest in the way they managed their policy during the Lloyd George period. Schuker, for example, shows Lord Curzon talking at the peace conference about how the British could “safely profess interest in the idea of a left-bank buffer state,” which they very much opposed, because they knew the Americans would block the proposal; he notes in passing that a day earlier, a member of the U.S. delegation had wondered about how American misconceptions about the “Machiavellian cunning of secret British diplomacy” might be corrected! (294, 294 n). Piotr Wandycz, in his piece on the Polish question at the peace conference, shows Lloyd George pressing for a plebiscite in Upper Silesia with the argument that the people there “would vote in favor of Poland”—having already told the British delegates exactly the opposite.²³

Even if the British were right on the substantive issues (and I personally think they were, in both cases), and even if these tactics helped them get their way in the short run, there is always a price to be paid for behaving in this way. The trust of foreign governments and the respect they have for the sincerity and decency of one’s own government once lost are hard to regain; and these imponderables can have a major effect on one’s own ability to pursue a constructive policy.

All this may perhaps sound cold and academic, but when you study British policy after the war, you come away thinking that something had gone terribly wrong. Lentin ends his book with a story about a high British official at his brother’s grave in France. “The endless rows of these cemeteries, so lovingly tended, stifled forgiveness. ‘We are the dead,’ said each stone, ‘and for what?’” It is hard to avoid thinking that the British nation deserved something better than what it got.

GERMAN POLICY AFTER THE WAR

FINALLY, WHAT about the Germans? How is their policy to be assessed? Klaus Schwabe says in his contribution to the book that “judged by its own standards”—that is, assuming that the overriding goal was to maintain “Germany’s status as a great power”—the strategy Germany pursued at the

23. Piotr Wandycz, “The Polish Question,” 313–35; the quotation is at 327.

peace conference was “successful in the long run.”²⁴ Well, perhaps, if the long run stops in 1929, or even 1939, but not if it goes past 1945. Whatever foreign policy benefits Germany drew from a policy of resistance, that policy, as Niall Ferguson argues in his contribution, led to economic and political disaster at home. Germany, Ferguson says, adopted a strategy of “revision through currency depreciation” (426)—a view which, by the way, would at one time have seemed extreme and Germanophobic, but which no longer seems controversial at all.²⁵ To overthrow the reparation settlement, Ferguson writes, the “budget deficit had to be maintained.” Diplomatic considerations of a similar sort also helped shape German fiscal and monetary policy during the Brüning period a decade later, albeit in a deflationary direction. In neither case, however, were the diplomatic gains worth the enormous domestic price Germany ended up paying—and this is a conclusion that few people would now dispute (426–27, 440).

So once again it seems that something had gone terribly wrong, and one has to ask about alternatives. What should the Germans have done, even from the point of view of their own interests? Many of the writers here talk about the German people living in a “dreamworld” and not facing reality; they refer to emotional reactions “far exceeding the bounds of rationality,” of “a purely emotional nationalism obsessed especially with points of honor,” and so on.²⁶ Were the Germans so irrational, however, that there was never any real chance that a reasonable accommodation could be worked out?

Schwabe considers the question of alternatives at the end of his paper and essentially reaches the conclusion that things pretty much had to be as they were. The only alternative he considers was a policy of admitting Germany’s “war guilt” and “supinely accepting a victor’s peace,” which of course was virtually inconceivable (67). Was this, however, the only possible alternative to the policy Germany actually pursued? Was it out of the question, for example, for the Germans simply to not make a big deal out of the war guilt issue? As Wolfgang Mommsen points out in his contribution here, the political leadership in Berlin did not want to raise this issue and the head of the German delegation at the peace conference, Brockdorff-Rantzau, had to

24. Klaus Schwabe, “Germany’s Peace Aims and the Domestic and International Constraints,” 37–67; the quotation is at 62.

25. Niall Ferguson, “The Balance of Payments Question: Versailles and After,” 401–40. Ferguson (403) cites a number of sources bearing on this issue. For other views in this book on the foreign policy taproot of the German inflation, see Marks, “Smoke and Mirrors,” 361; and Diane Kunz, “A Comment,” 528. Even Feldman, who is more sympathetic to the German side than most of the writers in this book, seems to take it for granted that the Germans really did have a policy “of trying to use inflation to beat reparations” (447).

26. Schwabe, “Germany’s Peace Aims,” 42; Alan Sharp, “A Comment,” 140; Fritz Klein, “Between Compiègne and Versailles: The Germans on the Way from a Misunderstood Defeat to an Unwanted Peace,” 203–20 (esp. 205); Wolfgang Mommsen, “Max Weber and the Peace Treaty of Versailles,” 535–46 (esp. 545–46).

“disregard the repeated explicit decisions of the Reich cabinet” when he decided at the last minute to “launch a frontal attack” on the war guilt clause (537–38). Such choices were by no means inevitable. It is hard to see why the Germans could not have said that the war guilt clause was not to be taken too seriously, that it was silly to think that such an issue could ever be settled by a treaty, and that Germany’s acceptance of it really had no moral meaning, since her signature had been given under duress.

More generally, a policy of playing down differences and of trying to reach a real accommodation does not seem to me to have been entirely out of the question. Instead of a “let them choke on their minette” sort of policy—that is, a policy of refusing cooperation with the French except on the terms dictated by Germany’s own industrial leaders—it is not hard to imagine the Germans responding more positively to the overtures coming from France. There certainly were many Germans in influential positions who, to one degree or another, were capable of thinking in more positive terms—who understood, especially at the time of the Seydoux Plan negotiations in late 1920, that it was very much in Germany’s interest to respond positively to these French overtures, and who believed strongly, as one of them wrote, that Germany “should not reject the outstretched hand.”²⁷ Who can say for sure that those elements in Germany would not have prevailed if the policy of the western powers had been a little different, and in particular if the Seydoux policy had not been sabotaged by the British in January 1921?

So things probably could have, and certainly should have, been a lot different after the war. What happened at Versailles and after was by no means “overdetermined.” As many of the contributors here point out, the situation was actually quite fluid, both at the peace conference and after. The great disasters of the interwar period did not need to happen. With a little more honesty, a little more courage, a little more generosity, and above all a little more brains, the story might have been very different indeed.

27. Bergmann to Simons, 17 December 1920, quoted in Trachtenberg, *Reparation*, 178.