What, then, were the central issues Lloyd George and Wilson had to tackle at Versailles? At the heart of the conference agenda lay the question what shape and place Germany was to have in the new international system. It was intricately bound up with the question of what price Germany would have to pay, both in terms of reparations and territory, for a war that in the eyes of the victors had been principally caused by its aggression. Around these questions, all wider challenges facing the peacemakers in Europe revolved – above all the paramount security question. What, if any, security architecture could bolster postwar stability? How far could Wilson’s vision of a League-based world order harmonise with Lloyd George’s bid for a new great-power directorate? How far, if at all, could both be reconciled with Clemenceau’s aspirations? As will be seen, the French premier wanted to ban the German threat through a settlement based on force, a firm victors’ alliance and an eastern neighbour stripped of much of its prewar territory, notably the Rhineland. Yet the German problem also underlay a second fundamental question – that of how to strike a balance between French security interests, the American championing of self-determination and the requirements of a stable international order. These particularly clashed in one area: eastern central Europe. Here, the interests of the defeated power stood against Polish, Czech and Slovak claims for nation-states of their own. That these would have to be established in part on heretofore German territories threatened to create new and acute seedbeds of international conflict.

Against this background, inter-allied controversies centred on four cardinal issues, which – unresolved at Versailles – would also remain the core issues of international politics up to the ‘Great Depression’: the Rhineland problem; inseparable from it, the future underpinnings of European security; the Polish–German border settlement; and the issue of reparations. Here, Wilson’s call for a peace not burdened by punitive indemnities stood against British and French claims for sizeable indemnities. And these claims could never be divorced from what was not even on the Versailles agenda but always on the minds of British and French delegates: Washington’s demands for a full repayment of its war loans. How to come to terms with the Russian question remained a further, and
most elusive, problem, with multiple ramifications for the future European order. Apart from seeking ways to oust the Bolshevik regime the Big Three never seriously approached a ‘resolution’ of this question at Versailles. Yet it should be emphasised again that they simply did not have it in their power to achieve this, to accomplish more than a basic containment of what they decried as the Bolshevik menace. This was to affect any subsequent attempts to stabilise Europe and particularly to recast the western powers’ relations with Germany, introducing an inherently unsettling element; but it never proved disastrously destabilising.¹

In sum, it was all but impossible for Wilson, Lloyd George or any other peacemaker to lay solid foundations for a new world order in 1919 – immediately after a conflagration on the scale of the Great War. But it was even more inconceivable to pacify postwar Europe, at least in the short and medium term, by profoundly altering its geo-political configuration. During the peace conference, no other than Wilson himself acknowledged the immense potential for conflict arising from the fact that, in his words, the victors were ‘compelled to change boundaries and national sovereignties’; for ‘these changes [ran] counter to long-established customs’. He did not ‘fear future wars brought about by the secret plotting of governments, but rather conflicts created by popular discontent’, adding that ‘(i)if we ourselves are guilty of injustice, such discontent is inevitable’.² Wilson believed that this could be forestalled by negotiating ‘with moderation and fairness’, particularly vis-à-vis Germany. In fact, however, reorganising Europe’s map on the basis of self-determination was bound to produce discord and competing claims, especially because it had to be accommodated with the victors’ security interests, notably those of France. And satisfying these interests, and their claims for reparations, was hardly conceivable without creating even more disputes – particularly if the new order was to be thrust upon the vanquished power without negotiations.³

In short, given the scope of the problems and forces profondes they had to grapple with, the utmost Versailles could achieve was to lay the basic groundwork for a European peace order. The peacemakers’ critical task was to agree on rules and mechanisms enabling them to manage the conflicts arising not only at but also after the conference – conflicts that were simply unavoidable. For only thus could they hope to pave the way for what was crucial but not yet achievable in 1919: to strike the essential bargain agreements with Germany that were imperative to stabilise both its republican order and the international system as a whole.⁴ Yet, as will be shown, the victors failed to meet this task.

⁴ Council of Four, 5–6 May 1919, Mantoux (1992), I, pp. 442–89.
What immensely complicated any attempt to settle the German question, and to agree on ground-rules to this end, was the fact that policymakers on all sides had to ensure that whatever they decided would enjoy not only international but also domestic legitimacy. As Harold Nicolson stressed in defending Lloyd George, the latter was as little a free agent at Versailles as his principal interlocutors. Being democratically ‘chosen delegates’, it was ‘wholly impossible’ for the ‘plenipotentiaries’ to act ‘in flagrant violation’ of the public opinion in their respective countries, which equally applied to those representing Germany’s interests.\(^5\) In other words, Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau not only had to hammer out an agreement at the negotiating-table. They also each had to placate very different primary concerns among their domestic audiences, voiced by increasingly influential public opinion-makers and pressure-groups – be they security, reparations or the avoidance of entangling commitments. *Mutatis mutandis*, the same was of course true for the new and embattled leaders of what in January 1919 became the Republic of Weimar, who clamoured to be represented at the peace conference in the first place. Indeed, in an era of uneven yet spreading democratisation, the new relevance of domestic politics created an array of constraints unprecedented in the history of modern peacemaking. Versailles was thus far removed from the comparatively arcane proceedings of the Congress of Vienna.\(^6\)

It is hard to understate the scale and radical nature of the changes that Wilson demanded on the basis of the Fourteen Points. The peace conference had to reveal how far European governments were prepared, after the experiences of 1914–18, to base their security and prosperity on entirely new foundations – how far they would be willing to accept, and able to justify domestically, that these should hence be guaranteed by a League regime of collective security and a new covenant of international law. And it also remained to be seen how far they would be willing to rely on guarantees that would ultimately have to be upheld not only by Britain and France but also by a power that had never taken on such commitments before, the United States.

**Clemenceau and the French search for sécurité**

While by no means posing the most radical demands within the French spectrum, what Clemenceau presented as his country’s agenda at Versailles went against the grain of the British and American peace programmes. In many ways, both in his aims and the methods he proposed, Clemenceau’s approach to peacemaking was even diametrically opposed to what Lloyd George and

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\(^5\) Nicolson (1931), pp. 89–90.

Wilson sought. But it also stood *pars pro toto* for the wider anxieties and interests of Germany’s neighbours that the Anglo-American powers had to address. Foremost among the French premier’s concerns was not revenge or retribution. Rather, it was the search for *sécurité*, the aim to ensure that France would never again be threatened by a superior German power. This governed all other French demands, and Clemenceau doubtless reckoned that it also was what French public opinion chiefly demanded.  

In short, Clemenceau did not believe that lasting security could be achieved either through a lenient, ‘equitable’ settlement with Germany or by relying on Wilson’s abstract notions of collective security. The conclusions he had drawn from the war’s carnage were fundamentally different from those shaping Wilson’s or even Lloyd George’s policy. He presented a peace programme informed by the experience of decades, if not centuries, of intermittent yet constantly widening European hostilities that, particularly since the Franco-Prussian war, had pitted France against its eastern neighbour. He also did so in view of the harsh settlement that the newly united Germany had imposed on France in 1871 and the latter’s blood-letting, deeply exhausting victory in 1918. And he did so, finally, in the face of what he and other French decisionmakers perceived as a defeated power deeply resenting its capitulation and waiting to seize the first opportunity to right this wrong.  

On these premises, Clemenceau envisaged a peace settlement that, on one level, relied on classic balance-of-power prescriptions yet also went far beyond nineteenth-century *realpolitik* in order to contain Germany. On the one hand, he sought from Britain and America the firmest possible alliance guarantees against future German attacks. These could be supplemented, but not replaced, by the League’s collective-security provisions. When meeting Wilson in Paris in mid-December 1918, the French premier had already voiced his doubts about the prospects of making the League ‘workable’ as the postwar order’s central security mechanism. As Colonel House put it, Clemenceau ‘believe[d] in war’ rather than American visions of peace. By the end of December, Clemenceau felt obliged to assure the French *Chambre* that he was still ‘faithful’ to an ‘old system which appears to be discredited today’, which he defined as a ‘system of alliances’. This faith would also inform his positions at the peace conference.  

The second and far more radical agenda that France pursued had been hammered out following the armistice but was not fully disclosed to Wilson.


9 House diary, 19 December 1918, *PWW*, LIII, p. 448; Clemenceau speech, 29 December 1918, in *The Times*, 31 December 1918.
and Lloyd George until the conference opened. It hinged on imposing far-reaching territorial, economic and security restrictions on Germany, designed to pre-empt its resurgence not just in the short term. Essentially, Clemenceau’s was the attempt to redress the imbalance of economic and demographic potentials between France and Germany that had emerged since 1870 and was bound to grow wider unless altered by force.10 In 1919, a French nation-state of 40 million faced a neighbour of more than 60 million inhabitants and a gross domestic product more than one-and-a-half times that of France.

Apart from insisting that Alsace-Lorraine should be returned to France without a plebiscite, Clemenceau demanded that Germany be stripped of its military might and settled with punitive indemnities. The wider French aim was to weaken Germany’s economic potential, or at least its command over it.11 Beyond this, Clemenceau and his principal advisers, André Tardieu and Léon Bourgeois, intended to dismember Germany. While not aiming to undo Bismarck’s work completely, their goal was to deprive the voisin d’outre-Rhin of its most critical strategic assets. Although this clashed with self-determination, France thus supported Poland’s claims to be reconstituted in the ‘historical’ frontiers of 1772, including all of Upper Silesia, what became known as the ‘Polish Corridor’ and Danzig. Against US opposition, Paris equally championed Czech claims for the Sudetenland.

Chiefly, however, French policymakers sought to gain control over the Rhineland. Tardieu envisaged severing all territories on the left bank of the Rhine from Germany and organising them into neutral, disarmed states. Nominally independent, these would in practice fall under French tutelage, not least as part of a ‘Western European Customs Union’. Further, the Rhineland and all bridgeheads across the Rhine were to be occupied indefinitely by the Allies. At Versailles, Tardieu insisted that France required Germany’s dismemberment as an essential foundation of its postwar security. Just like Britain and America, it needed a ‘zone of safety’. While, as naval powers, the latter had created such a zone by wrecking Germany’s fleet, France, ‘unprotected by the ocean, unable to eliminate the millions of Germans trained to war’, had to establish it on the Rhine.12

The French delegation pursued its territorial aims in part to increase its bargaining power vis-à-vis Wilson and Lloyd George and to obtain satisfactory security guarantees. Fundamentally, though, France desired both: maximal Anglo-American commitments and a materially reduced German threat. What

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10 Clemenceau (1930), pp. 22ff; Tardieu (1921a), pp. 768ff.
11 Cf. Soutou (1989), pp. 780ff. This was also sought through mandatory coal-deliveries and controlling the Saar region. See the different interpretation in Trachtenberg (1980).
Clemenceau and his advisers envisaged was undoubtedly the harshest version of an intentionally defensive but effectively punitive peace advanced at Versailles. It foreshadowed what the French premier at the time, Raymond Poincaré, would later seek to achieve by invading the Ruhr area. In 1919, French policy not only threatened to undermine Wilson’s vision of a ‘peace to end all wars’. It also thwarted any prospects of approaching a settlement with Germany.

The German dilemma in 1919 – no prospects for a sustainable peace with or without Germany

De facto, though it would be raised time and again during the Versailles conference, one of the most critical procedural questions of peacemaking was thus answered before it even began: the defeated power would not be represented at the negotiating-table. Wilson had originally intended to invite not only German but also Russian representatives to Versailles. Yet neither he nor Lloyd George could overcome France’s veto. At the same time, both came to espouse the view that, given the virulence of the Franco-German antagonism, it would be impossible to forge a settlement with the Germans. Instead, the ‘Big Three’ agreed that Berlin would merely be allowed to respond to allied proposals in written form. This the new German foreign minister Ulrich von Brockdorff-Rantzau did in March 1919, with some impact especially on British public opinion, yet to little effect at the conference itself.¹³

The new centre-left government under Philipp Scheidemann essentially argued that Germany’s new western orientation and anti-Bolshevik course could only be sustained through a lenient peace settlement, essentially on the basis of Wilson’s Fourteen Points.¹⁴ The underlying aim of the spiritus rector behind this approach, Brockdorff-Rantzau, was that of every German foreign minister of the 1920s: to restore Germany’s great-power status as swiftly as possible. Backed by Germany’s provisional president Friedrich Ebert, he thus demanded Germany’s immediate admission to the League’s Executive Council.¹⁵

Brockdorff-Rantzau’s tactic was to present counterproposals designed to show that the victors’ peace plans were not only inconsistent with Wilson’s Fourteen Points and the professed allied aim to foster German democratisation but also impracticable. He argued that their implementation would damage the

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victors’ own best interests – they would destabilise Germany, open the gates to Bolshevik infiltration and undermine Europe’s economic reconstruction. Hoping to prepare the ground for actual negotiations, Brockdorff-Rantzau’s appeal was especially directed at America and Britain. To start a bargaining process, the German foreign minister underscored Berlin’s readiness to trade long-term financial obligations for moderate territorial provisions. On the advice of the German bankers Carl Melchior and Max Warburg, he in February 1919 made an offer of 100 billion *Goldmark* as compensation for war damages. In return, Germany was to retain its territorial integrity in the borders of 1914.16 But there were to be no negotiations. Any German hopes finally came to nought in early May.

Dismayed, the German delegation condemned the ensuing treaty as ‘the last dreadful triumph’ of old-style power politics, an attempt to punish Germany betraying a ‘moribund conception of the world, imperialist and capitalist in tendency’.17 Brockdorff-Rantzau even recommended that his government should refuse to sign the treaty. Yet, rather than risk an allied occupation, Germany eventually did sign it. In a wider perspective, his futile endeavours merely highlight one fundamental dilemma marring all peacemaking efforts at Versailles. Even if Wilson and Lloyd George had been able to persuade Clemenceau to admit Germany to the talks, it would have been exceedingly difficult to agree on anything close to a mutually acceptable settlement. Conflicting peace aims and the domestic pressures weighing on all sides, yet especially on the leaders of France and a German republic whose very survival still hung in the balance, would have left very little room for compromise. Thus, not only would a participation of German representatives have produced deadlock and most likely a breakdown of the negotiations. They would also have been in far too weak a position – internationally, as the vanquished, domestically, because of unrealistic expectations – to attain a satisfactory agreement, one that, in Wilson’s words, did not furnish Germany ‘with powerful reasons for seeking revenge at some future time’.18

But it was not possible either, and certainly not achieved at Versailles, to mould without German representatives a ‘moderate’ and ‘fair’ settlement acceptable to Berlin.19 Lloyd George’s exhortations notwithstanding, it was simply beyond the victors to lay down peace terms as if they were ‘impartial arbiters’; and the fact that they ultimately imposed them had to erode their legitimacy in Germany from the start.20 Any peace decreed by the victors could

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20 Fountainebleau memorandum, Lloyd George (1938), I, p. 408.
be presented by German propaganda as a ‘dictated’, ‘shameful’ peace. As it turned out, Versailles would indeed be perceived as such, rejected by a vast majority of Germans, including the old and new elites of what would become the Weimar Republic.

The tenuous compromises of the victors: the Rhineland settlement and the short-lived security arrangements of 1919

Thus, the Paris Peace Conference remained a gathering of the victors. All in all twenty-seven powers were called on to participate, but not the mightiest vanquished power, nor the Soviet pariah. In their absence, the Supreme Council made up of the Britain, the United States, France and Italy soon became the central decisionmaking body. There were also the Council of Five, which in addition included Japan, and the Council of Ten, which also comprised smaller powers. But all major decisions affecting Europe’s future were made between the ‘Big Three’, Wilson, Lloyd George and Clemenceau.\(^{21}\)

In fact, both the American president and the British prime minister came to act as advocates of what they perceived as German interests vis-à-vis France (with the notable exception of Britain’s stance on reparations). By virtue of the political and financial leverage he commanded, Wilson was poised to become the conference’s main arbiter. And this is certainly how he saw himself.\(^{22}\) But, pursuing his more general priorities, he was not able to fulfil this role. Neither he nor Lloyd George could forge a peace acceptable to all sides. The longer the deliberations lasted, the more palpable it became that this was and remained an elusive prospect.

Once the conference had opened on 12 January 1919, it soon became clear that, amongst themselves, the victors faced one paramount challenge: how to square the circle between Wilson’s ideals and Clemenceau’s essentials. Arguably, the only power capable of mediating between French and American conceptions of peace was Britain. And Lloyd George indeed regarded himself as the ‘master politician’ who could achieve this, guiding the first bid to establish a Euro-Atlantic peace order.\(^{23}\) Yet he was unable to accomplish his self-chosen mission, both because essential aspects of what Wilson and Clemenceau sought remained irreconcilable and because British interests, certainly those touching reparations, were incompatible with the position of an ‘impartial’ umpire.


In the conference’s opening stages, inter-allied fault-lines first emerged, not surprisingly, when it came to discussing the League and foundations of post-war security. Clemenceau’s key aide, Léon Bourgeois, affirmed that France would only endorse a robust *société des nations*. In his design, the League was a mechanism that enforced the peace settlement, kept Germany in check and oversaw the fulfilment of its disarmament obligations. As such, it had to be endowed with its own international forces to reinforce sanctions and act against aggressors. At the same time, it was to be a framework for the victors’ continued co-operation, ensuring their postwar control and the Anglo-American commitment to French security. By contrast, Germany’s accession to the League had to be ruled out, even at a later stage. France threatened to shun the League unless Britain and America met these demands. Yet what Bourgeois outlined of course conflicted with core premises of both American and British League policy. Although Wilson was prepared to go to great lengths in accommodating France to realise his peace programme, he felt he had no mandate to endorse such far-reaching proposals. At bottom, French plans threatened to undercut what he envisaged the League to become: not an institution enforcing peace by military might but a ‘universal association’ relying on collective security and ‘world opinion’ – and seeking to integrate the vanquished power. Albeit remaining a less ardent believer in the League, Lloyd George strongly supported Wilson. He adhered to Cecil’s rationale that this offered the only prospect for establishing a great-power concert incorporating America; and he insisted that the door for drawing Germany into the new organisation had to be kept open.

When its hopes of obtaining a ‘muscular’ League vanished, the French delegation shifted to emphasising the more draconian side of its peace aims. Above all, it accentuated what Clemenceau had contemplated from the outset: the demand for a Rhenish buffer state. In late February, with Wilson absent from Versailles, Colonel House all but ceded to French pressure for the creation of an independent Rhenish republic *de facto* controlled by Paris. House noted that he had come ‘to recognise the force and unanimity of French feeling that future invasions by Germany must be made absolutely impossible’. Soon thereafter, however, French aspirations encountered staunch Anglo-American opposition. For they threatened to erode what Lloyd George and Wilson regarded as the minimal requirements for stabilising Europe on the basis of the Versailles settlement, yet also eventually *with* Germany. Back at

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Versailles in March, Wilson overruled his chargé d’affaires, re-affirming his rejection of any French schemes that blatantly contradicted his aspirations for a peace without annexations.²⁷

The British position on the Rhineland was unequivocal and would remain so throughout the 1920s. British decisionmakers regarded a semi-independent Rhineland under French control as a recipe for constant instability. And as one British delegate, Philip Kerr, remarked, France’s excessive claims would also counteract allied ‘solidarity’, undercutting the willingness of Britain and its Dominions to come to France’s aid once again should another war with Germany erupt.²⁸ Confronted with what he saw as Clemenceau’s dangerous aspirations, Lloyd George in late March withdrew to Fontainebleau, accompanied by his key advisers.²⁹ There, he produced his widely noted yet ambivalent call for a moderate peace. The Fontainebleau memorandum sprang from profound concerns that the British premier shared with Wilson, namely that Germany would succumb to Bolshevism, and Europe to widespread disorder, unless Britain and America could mitigate French demands. Lloyd George argued that the Allies should avoid as far as possible ‘transferring’ German populations to other states. And he insisted above all that there must be ‘no attempt to separate the Rhenish Provinces from the rest of Germany’. Fundamentally, he declared, a stable peace depended on eliminating ‘causes of exasperation constantly stirring up the spirits of patriotism’ and ‘fairplay’ in Germany (and among the victors).³⁰

During the Council of Four’s subsequent deliberations Wilson endorsed Lloyd George’s plea. If he ever wanted to realise his peace aims, the allies had to show ‘moderation’ towards Germany. And they had to ensure that its new leaders would not be swept from power either by old-guard forces or the looming Bolshevik threat. As Wilson argued on 27 March, the ‘greatest mistake’ the victors could make was to ‘furnish [Germany] with powerful reasons for seeking revenge at some future time’ – to give ‘even an impression of injustice’. But this mistake could simply not be avoided in the constellation of 1919.³¹

Predictably, Clemenceau came out strongly against what he considered Lloyd’s George’s ‘illusory’ design. In his verdict, the British premier sought to appease Germany at its neighbours’ expense. As he also – rightly – remarked, Lloyd George based his call for conciliation on a distinct double-standard. He was not prepared to offer any concessions harming cardinal British interests –

²⁸ Tardieu (1921b), p. 173.
²⁹ These included the conference’s influential secretary, Maurice Hankey, Kerr and the chief of the General Staff, Sir Henry Wilson.
³⁰ Fontainebleau memorandum, 22 March 1919, Lloyd George (1938), I, pp. 403–16; see also PWW, LVI, pp. 259–70.
interests that were financial and imperial. Clemenceau thus insisted that if it was indeed ‘necessary’ to placate Germany, ‘she should be offered colonial satisfaction, naval satisfaction, or [commercial] satisfaction’. It indeed seems revealing that, while warning not to overburden Germany, Lloyd George reiterated that the defeated power owed the allies ‘full reparation’. Similarly, Wilson, who rightly feared Congressional opposition, rejected any compromise on what affected tangible US interests, namely the repayment of French and British war-debts, to encourage a lenient treatment of Germany. At bottom, though, Clemenceau rejected the entire rationale of what Wilson and Lloyd George envisaged. In his eyes, the victors’ main obligation was ‘to do something to spare the world from German aggression for a long time’. And this meant enforcing the peace without half-hearted concessions that would not appease the vanquished anyway.

Ultimately, these differences could not be resolved at Versailles. What the ‘triumvirate’ did manage, yet only after a bitter struggle in the conference’s final phase (March–June 1919), was to forge – tenuous – compromises on two of the thorniest issues: the Rhineland and the Polish border. On the third, reparations, not even this proved possible. In Nicolson’s judgement, it was only because of the Fontainebleau memorandum’s ‘fiery stimulus’ that ‘the rulers of the world really concentrated on making peace with Germany’. In fact, however, the political skills of Lloyd George, who changed fronts between Wilson and Clemenceau, siding with the former on security and the latter on reparations, only played one part in this process. The other, essential, part was played by Wilson, even though his influence was waning towards the end.

Already before Lloyd George’s retreat to Fontainebleau, he and Wilson had rallied to a common approach to counter Clemenceau’s Rhineland agenda. It led to a bargain between the three principal powers that avoided dismantling Germany while seeking to address French security concerns in a new way. This bargain rested on two main pillars. One of them, however, was temporary from the start and the other would crumble when Wilson lost the ‘treaty fight’ in 1920. The first was a concession to French demands for a buffer zone. In return for France’s abandoning its claim for a ‘free Rhine state’, the Rhineland was to be jointly occupied for a period of fifteen years to ensure German compliance with the peace treaty. And it was to be permanently demilitarised (i.e. Germany was prohibited from maintaining any ‘military installation’ not only on the Rhine’s left bank but also within a zone of fifty kilometres on its right bank).
In response to the criticism that German protests had sparked among liberal and Labour opinion in Britain, Lloyd George subsequently demanded a drastic curtailment of the occupation. He raised the stakes by insisting that unless Germany was appeased the Allies would have to invade it. Following Britain’s last-minute intervention in early June, Clemenceau conceded that the Rhineland could be evacuated before the fifteen-year deadline if Germany fulfilled its treaty obligations. The second pillar of the inter-allied settlement emerged in response to French demands for more ‘tangible’ security guarantees. Britain and the United States finally agreed to offer Paris an explicit guarantee that, ‘acting under the authority of the League’, they would ‘come to the immediate assistance . . . of France in case of unprovoked aggression of Germany’. Considering even these overtures insufficient, Clemenceau only accepted them for lack of better alternatives.

On the basis of these understandings, France agreed to join the League, but only on condition that Germany would remain excluded for the foreseeable future. Both Wilson and Lloyd George had pressed for making Germany’s admission a clear provision of the treaty. In early June, the British premier even threatened to withdraw from the conference unless this was conceded. Yet, although Wilson backed his demand, Clemenceau did not budge. The formula finally enshrined in the treaty centred on the pledge that Germany could join the organisation in the near future – if it showed good faith in fulfilling the peace terms. This left France with ample leverage to block Berlin’s entry in accordance with its security interests.

The British government did not offer its commitment lightly – and made it dependent on an American ratification of the treaty. Lloyd George sought to satisfy Clemenceau’s security demands precisely because London wanted to avoid having to ‘rescue’ France should draconian French policies provoke renewed German attacks. Yet nor did Britain desire to become France’s main protector and guarantor of the European status quo. That is why, from the British perspective, engaging the United States remained imperative. But the American attitude towards the guarantee agreement was highly ambivalent from the start. For its provisions contradicted the very principles of collective security that Wilson had sought to implement. As House noted on 27 March, the agreement would ‘be looked upon as a direct blow to the League of Nations’, because there was no reason for any such old-style alliances ‘if the League did what it was supposed to do’. It was thus all the more remarkable,
and evidence of his willingness to strike bargains with Clemenceau, that Wilson actually agreed to the treaty.\textsuperscript{40}

Cecil told Bourgeois that France was well advised to accept whatever guarantees Wilson had to offer, because any US commitment to European stability did not spring from strictly defined self-interest. As America could afford to ‘let European affairs go and take care of her own’ from the distance the ocean afforded, the treaty was a ‘present to France’.\textsuperscript{41} In fact, it would also have been a ‘present’ to Britain. Cecil here captured a general problem besetting transatlantic relations in the interwar period. There was no critical US security interest (yet) warranting far-reaching commitments to Wilson’s new world order and European stabilisation in particular. There was no tangible threat or reason why a majority in Congress and the wider American public should have supported such commitments. Overcoming isolationist opposition in attempts to foster peaceful change abroad remained a cardinal challenge for both Wilson and his Republican successors.

\textbf{The reparations ‘shambles’}

The dispute over reparations proved to be the most acrimonious and inconclusive of the peace conference, producing what Wilson rightly called a ‘shambles’.\textsuperscript{42} To fathom this acrimony, it is indispensable to put the reparations problem in its proper – transatlantic – context. At stake in 1919 and thereafter was not only how much and on what grounds Germany would have to pay for the war; it was also the question how and how far Britain and France would have to service their war-debt obligations to America.

Wilson had originally insisted that ‘no contributions, no punitive damages’ should be imposed on the vanquished. By November 1918, he had adopted the formula that Germany would have to compensate the victors ‘for all damage done to the civilian population of the Allies and their property by [its] aggression’. But, to Lloyd George’s dismay, the American president did not consider British indemnity claims on a par with French and Belgian demands for ‘pure reparation’ for war damages. And, more importantly, Wilson was adamant that there would be no American ‘peace dividend’ for its allies: they would have to repay their war-debts in full.\textsuperscript{43}

\begin{enumerate}
\item House diary, 27 March 1919, Seymour (1926–8), IV, p. 395.
\item Cecil statement, quoted after Miller (1928), I, p. 216.
\end{enumerate}
Wilson never departed from these central premises at Versailles. Yet he also insisted that in settling reparations Britain and France had to consider overriding ‘political necessities’; they must ‘do nothing which would have the consequence of completely destroying Germany’. Wilson reminded Clemenceau that the Allies could not base their calculations on assessments of ‘prewar Germany’, whose government had been ‘determined to lead the country to economic mastery of the world’. Postwar Germany was ‘disorganised and demoralised’, its ‘capacity to pay’ much ‘reduced’. He thus argued against ‘pushing’ demands ‘to a point which would allow no German government to sign the peace’ and plunge Germany into Bolshevism.44 To prevent this, the American president proposed fixing a definite reparations sum – $30 billion – and to make businesslike arrangements allowing Germany to transfer it without ruining its economy.45 But, though threatening financial sanctions, he could not ‘convince’ Clemenceau and Lloyd George to adopt his scheme. With a common interest in avoiding a premature curtailment of reparations, the two indebted victors even joined forces against him.

As noted, Lloyd George shared Wilson’s political concerns. But in practice he could not extricate himself from the constraints partly stemming from his own promises. As he reminded Wilson in late March, it would be as difficult for him as for Clemenceau ‘to dispel the illusions which surround the subject of reparation’. He faced the calamity that ‘four hundred members of the British Parliament have sworn to extract from Germany the very last penny to which we are entitled’.46 To placate left-liberal opinion in Britain Lloyd George in June nevertheless called for a substantial reduction of German indemnities. Beyond such tactical oscillations, however, the British premier still had no doubt that Germany had to pay for a war which had originated with its prewar policies. Nor did he doubt that Britain had a just claim to its share of reparations. Deeming it impossible to reach a tenable compromise, he focused on prodding his counterparts to agree on a modus for settling the question after Versailles. He proposed establishing a reparations commission that would collaborate with German experts to determine the full reparations sum, Germany’s ‘capacity to pay’ and a schedule of payments.47

The French delegation outright refuted Wilson’s proposals, and it also raised numerous objections to the original British designs. But although he never fully agreed with Lloyd George Clemenceau finally accepted his overall

Despite this tentative accord, however, the net-result of the Big Three’s altercations was that the Versailles treaty did not include anything even approaching a conclusive reparations settlement. This question thus became the thorniest issue of the immediate postwar period. The treaty’s only unequivocal provision was the declaration of Germany’s war guilt in article 231 on which future payment demands were based. It is difficult to conceive of an outcome leaving more room for subsequent controversies.49

The creation of a new European fault-line: the Polish–German border settlement

What were the other main outcomes of the deliberations? Here it is only necessary to recapitulate those that were to be at the centre of European disputes in the 1920s and beyond. While stating that they should be the starting-point for general efforts to this end, the victors imposed drastic disarmament provisions on Germany, which were subsequently overseen by the Inter-Allied Military Commission of Control (IMCC). Losing its imperial status and fleet, the defeated power was only allowed to keep a professional army of 100,000 men. Yet while Germany was thus relegated from the ranks of military great powers, it retained all the war-making potential inherent in what remained Europe’s largest and most advanced industrial economy.50

More conflict-prone still were the treaty’s territorial provisions, those placing Germany’s former colonies under a League mandate system yet above all those delineating the new status quo in eastern Europe. Here, the predominantly German-speaking Sudeten area fell to newly created Czechoslovakia. Most importantly, however, Germany had to cede the ‘Polish Corridor’ (with the seaport of Danzig being made a ‘free city’ associated with Poland) and the Posen province to the new Polish nation-state.51

Throughout the negotiations, France had backed Polish claims for a state in the frontiers of 1772 and, in particular, the industrial and coal resources of Upper Silesia.52 This had also figured in early treaty drafts. In late March, however, Lloyd George had called for a readjustment of Poland’s preliminary western border in favour of Germany, seeking to minimise future German grievances. And, with an increasingly concerned Wilson backing his plea, the Big Three indeed agreed on several changes to this effect. Then, in June, Lloyd George pushed through a plebiscite to determine the future status of Upper

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51 In the west, Germany had to return Alsace-Lorraine and cede the Eupen and Malmedy provinces to Belgium. Its coal mines falling to France, the Saar region came under League supervision for fifteen years pending a plebiscite over its final status.
Silesia. But in the scheme of things these were minor adjustments. They did not solve the underlying problem. The plebiscite took place on 21 March 1921, and 60 per cent of those participating favoured remaining part of Germany. But, unable to reach an agreement, the Allied Supreme Council referred the decision to the League Council which, under French pressure, decreed demarcation-lines favouring Poland.

There is no way around concluding that, as this decision and the prohibition of Austria’s Anschluß with Germany demonstrated, the victors’ power-political considerations outweighed Wilsonian notions of self-determination when both came into conflict. In Germany, this served to discredit further not only the Versailles settlement but also its main institution, the League. The chief of the British Imperial Staff, General Wilson, thus identified a fundamental problem raised by the aspiration to base the peace on national self-determination when stating that in Europe ‘ethnographical claims [were] in distinct opposition to those of military security and defence’.54

But the problem reached even deeper. The core issue that particularly Wilson never managed to address was that on the historically evolved map of European geo-politics, so textured by centuries of international rivalry – in the widest sense – and the aforementioned nineteenth-century waves of nationalist mobilisation, there were rarely uncontested ‘national’ claims to a given territory. Instead, whether based on notions of ethnicity, language or political precedent, such claims were often, though not inexorably, in conflict with each other. Nowhere was this more entrenched than in central eastern Europe. Any attempt to redraw Europe’s political map by victors’ decree was thus prone to produce new or rekindle old conflicts. If this was nonetheless endeavoured, nothing was more imperative than the establishment of a forceful mediating agency that provided clear rules for an ‘equitable’ settlement of colliding interests. Required was an instrument permitting an actual negotiating-process, and all parties to make their case – the victors and the vanquished. In Wilson’s design, the League was to become this instrument. But it de facto never received the necessary mandate, at least where it was crucial: in Germany’s relations with Poland.55

In 1919, then, a structurally highly unstable constellation had been created. It was a constellation in which the – uneven – application of the self-determination principle clashed with the most basic requirements of European stability and the legitimacy of the Versailles system. For Versailles pitted continental

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54 Wilson to Drummond, 2 January 1919, FO 608/121, quoted after Dockrill and Goold (1981), p. 34.
Europe’s potentially still most powerful state, intent on revising a ‘shameful peace’ against smaller states to the east that comprised not only formerly German territories but also sizeable German minorities. To prevent this constellation from sparking not only incessant disputes but renewed war was a key challenge facing Anglo-American policymakers in the postwar era. And it placed a heavy burden on decisionmakers not only in Warsaw, Prague and Paris but also in Berlin.

**Versailles, the impossible peace**

With a view to the German question and the prospects of Europe’s stabilisation, the Rhineland compromise, the Polish–German border settlement and the reparations ‘shambles’ were the most consequential results of Versailles. No less important, albeit even more transient, was the Anglo-American guarantee for France and the basic inter-allied understanding establishing the League. All was enshrined in the Treaty of Versailles signed in the Hall of Mirrors on 28 June 1919. As is well documented, both Lloyd George and Wilson vigorously defended the treaty as the best outcome possible under the circumstances, one in the House of Commons, the other vis-à-vis the Congress. But already in May the French commentator Jacques Bainville had (in)famously predicted that the peace would be ‘too gentle for all that is in it which is harsh’. And Colonel House noted on 29 June that the treaty was ‘bad and should never have been made’; it would ‘involve Europe in infinite difficulties in its enforcement’. What does an appraisal from a distance of more than eighty years yield?

As we have seen, the Versailles settlement could be no more than an inherently brittle amalgamation of power-political interests, internationalist ideals and economic concerns. And it indeed ‘failed’ to establish a firm balance of power against Germany – while settling it with what, from a German perspective, had to be perceived as unjust, punitive terms. But given that any agreements reached in 1919 were premised on essentially irreconcilable conceptions of peace the outcome could hardly have been otherwise. Wilson indeed failed to ‘enforce his own prophecy’ of a peace to end all wars. It is in the nature of all international negotiations, yet particularly of negotiations on the scale of Versailles, that all protagonists have to compromise; and the American president indeed had to make undesirable compromises. Yet the

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same held for Clemenceau, who also obtained far less than what he had sought, a peace to end all German threats. As for Lloyd George, he may have taught the world, in Nicolson’s epithet, ‘that apparent opportunism was not always irreconcilable with vision’. But he could not make Versailles into a more ‘just’ and ‘reasonable’ treaty either. 59

Yet the main ‘flaw’ of the Versailles settlement was not that it was either too gentle for being so harsh or too harsh for being so gentle vis-à-vis Germany. Its main, and unavoidable, shortcomings were that it was an imposed peace and that it did not lay any solid foundations for a functioning postwar system of international politics, especially not in the crucial realm of security. It is highly doubtful that a settlement further fragmenting Germany would have produced greater European stability. As will be shown, all French attempts in the early 1920s to go beyond the limits of Versailles to realise this aim had the opposite effect. 60 In fact, Europe could only be stabilised, and the peace secured, if Germany could be accommodated. And that made it imperative to open avenues of co-operation with its new republican leaders – avenues that the already existing Versailles system did not provide. This was the crux of the postwar era, precisely because one of the settlement’s most ‘memorable’ results was, as Churchill noted, ‘the preservation of united Germany’. Versailles had indeed largely preserved the Bismarckian state, and with it Germany’s potentially overbearing power. 61

All in all, the vanquished power lost seven million inhabitants and more than 25,000 square miles of its prewar territory. But, due to the Anglo-American powers’ intervention, Versailles had borne out neither Germany’s worst fears nor France’s highest hopes. Although this was concealed to most observers in Berlin by the pressing hardships of 1919, it indeed provided Weimar Germany with a new opening. It has often been argued that it set the stage for the inevitable: Germany’s bid to overthrow the peace by force as soon as it had regained the means to do so. Yet, as will be shown, Versailles could also set the stage for a wholly different process. Albeit under very unfavourable conditions, Germany could embark on the stony path of orientating itself towards the west, of seeking a rapprochement with the victors – and of stabilising as a democratic state. As Weimar’s future foreign minister Gustav Stresemann concluded soon after the peace conference, this was in fact what Germany’s political and economic interests commanded. 62

Overwhelmingly, however, the German outcry over Versailles knew no bounds. Harsh criticism came not only from right-wing extremists and communists but also those supporting the governing Weimar Coalition, including Social Democrats. Under the thrall of relentless propaganda, most Germans, who had nourished high hopes for a lenient peace following Wilson’s Fourteen Points, felt betrayed when the actual settlement was revealed. To many who felt that Germany had not really been defeated but ‘stabbed in the back’ by left-wing revolutionaries and Weimar republicans the treaty appeared all the more unjust. Casting off ‘the yoke of Versailles’ became the most formative premise of German postwar policy. Yet how to achieve this – through negotiations or, ultimately, through war – remained highly unclear as the Weimar Republic struggled into existence. How far such a transformation process could even begin depended on whether the republic would put down any roots. Most of all, however, it depended on the victors’ policies after Versailles. And those of the Anglo-American powers held the key.

The Versailles system undermined – the consequences of Wilson’s defeat

In fact, neither Wilson nor Lloyd George were oblivious to the fact that, in cardinal respects, the peace remained deplorably unfinished. In Wilson’s view, the key to remedying its deficiencies – to reassure France, reconcile Germany and ensure Europe’s reconstruction – lay in establishing the League as the postwar order’s essential ‘clearing-house’. It was to serve as the mechanism to adjudicate and settle all conflicts caused by the war and not yet resolved at the peace conference.\(^\text{64}\) In December 1918, one of Wilson’s principal advisers, Isaiah Bowman, had proposed that the League’s main function should be to guarantee ‘territorial integrity plus later alteration of terms and alteration of boundaries if it could be shown that injustice had been done or that conditions had changed’. As Bowman saw it, this would become easier once the ‘passion’ of the war ‘subsided’.\(^\text{65}\) After the Paris conference, Wilson re-accentuated this message. He asserted that the League was more critical than ever to bolster the peaceful change he envisaged. But to achieve this it had to become an institution in which all ‘the right-thinking nations’ could ‘concert their purpose and their power’, not only the victors but also Germany. Likewise, the American president believed that only the League could stabilise German democracy and ultimately also lead Bolshevik Russia on this path.\(^\text{66}\)


\(^{64}\) Wilson speech in San Diego, 19 September 1919, in Shaw (1924), II, p. 1017.

\(^{65}\) Bowman memorandum, 10 December 1918, in Seymour (1926–8), IV, pp. 280–1.

Still no ardent believer in the League, Lloyd George by and large pursued the same post-Versailles aims as Wilson but he adopted a different approach. In his Fontainebleau memorandum Lloyd George had repeated that it was essential to establish the League ‘as the effective guardian of international right and international liberty’, above all in Europe. And in his defence of Versailles in parliament he stressed that it could serve to redress any ‘crudities, irregularities, and injustices’ the treaty still contained.\(^67\) Essentially, though, he still pinned his hopes on the League becoming an instrument for close co-operation with the United States. To limit British commitments at a time when domestic reforms were imperative and resources scarce, the British premier was keenly interested in assuring continued US engagement in Europe. Britain’s guarantee to France hinged on this. Although it still irked him to deal with a man of Wilson’s worldview, Lloyd George reckoned that only American help would allow him to shape postwar politics, assuage French security concerns and, on this basis, draw Germany into the new peace order.\(^68\)

Thus, realising Lloyd George’s aspirations and Wilson’s vision of ‘a permanent concert of power’ required more than anything else that the latter won his ‘treaty fight’ against the Republican Senate majority at home. This fight, and Republican opposition to the League Covenant, centred on two issues: article X and US sovereignty. It reached its climax when hearings on the treaty began in the Senate’s Foreign Relations Committee in July 1919. To ensure ratification, Wilson – whose health was failing – not only sought to win over Congress. He also embarked on an unprecedented tour of the Mid-West and the western states to make his case for US engagement in his new world order.\(^69\) But his was to be a futile endeavour.

In a widely noted speech on 28 February 1919, the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, Republican Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, staked out the Republican case against Wilson’s design. Lodge voiced caveats that would remain critical for US foreign policy in the interwar period. He argued that creating a League of Nations was not necessarily harmful; but creating it in Wilson’s manner, as a kind of new ‘international state’ would be a grave mistake. It would curtail US sovereignty and freedom of action, particularly in the western hemisphere. In his view, subscribing to the Covenant’s article X would thus completely reverse US foreign policy as defined by the Monroe Doctrine. To commit Washington to guaranteeing ‘the territorial integrity or political independence’ of all League members, as prescribed by it, would


\(^{68}\) Lloyd George speech in the Commons, 3 July 1919, _Hansard_, 5th series, vol. 117, cols. 1211–32.

\(^{69}\) _PWW_, LXIII, pp. 180–453.
create unbearable obligations. Above all, it would sooner or later enmesh the
United States in perilous inner-European rivalries. Lodge warned that League-
style collective security thus threatened to replace ‘Americanism’ with inher-
ently undesirable ‘internationalism’.  

Subsequently, those soon called the ‘irreconcilable’ treaty opponents formu-
lated a catalogue of fourteen reservations, which reflected Lodge’s concerns.
They insisted that it had to remain a Congressional prerogative to make
far-reaching commitments of the kind article X denoted. The most vocal
‘irreconcilable’, Senator William Borah of Idaho, suspected Wilson of having
made secret alliance deals with Britain and France to realise his League plans.

While the common ground between Wilson and his opponents was scarce to
begin with, his response to their concerns left little leeway for compromise.
Wilson stressed that while America would indeed have to make ‘very grave and
solemn’ commitments to collective security, article X entailed a ‘moral, not a
legal obligation’. Sanctions could only be passed by a unanimous decision of
the Executive Council. And finally Congress would have to determine the
practical consequences of a ‘call for action’. Ultimately, however, the presi-
dent could not accept Lodge’s core proposal, namely that the United States
should ratify the treaty but not article X. He maintained that this would
exempt Washington from ‘all responsibility for the preservation of peace’ and
amount to a ‘rejection of the covenant’. On 2 October, having just returned
from his exhausting engagements in the American West, Wilson suffered a
severe stroke. Yet even without this handicap he could not have won the ‘treaty
fight’. The Senate finally rejected the Versailles treaty in March 1920.

The Republican veto reflected fundamental American reservations towards
potentially costly commitments in Europe. This became a cardinal reference-
point for all subsequent bids to fashion a US stabilisation policy in the post-
World War I era. Wilson’s defeat let not only his but also Lloyd George’s
hopes founder. It largely eroded any prospects of furthering peaceful change
through the mechanisms of 1919; and it undermined the Versailles system’s
security framework, which hit France hardest.

It has been claimed that if America had joined the League the German problem
could have been solved even without stabilising Germany as a republic – by

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70 Lodge, Senate speech, 28 February 1919, Congressional Record, 65th Record, 3rd session,
71 Wilson meeting with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 19 August 1919, PWW, LXII,
172–206.
72 Wilson meeting with the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, 19 August 1919, PWW, LXII,
‘automatically’ involving Washington in the ‘European balance of power’ and thus containing German ambitions.74 This seems misleading. In all likelihood, as French anxieties at Versailles underlined, even with British and American support the League would have been too feeble and inflexible an institution to serve its central purpose: to furnish a robust security architecture for consolidating war-ravaged Europe. It would have required an extensive probationary period – to prove that its principal powers were willing to enforce its covenant – before gaining legitimacy. Moreover, critical post-Versailles questions, above all the reparations problem, did not fall under its ‘jurisdiction’. Crucially, the League’s key members had to pave the way for Germany’s admission and ensure the institution’s workability thereafter. As it came into being, the League could not be the postwar world’s key instrument of security.

The Anglo-American guarantee for France might have compensated for some of these constraints. It may have contained German revisionism and given Paris the requisite reassurance for shifting from coercive to conciliatory policies vis-à-vis its neighbour. Yet this remains a speculative scenario. Not least, a victors’ alliance would of course have been perceived as antagonistic by German leaders, whether nationalist or moderate. This in turn would have made any German rapprochement with the west far more difficult. Thus, an Anglo-American alliance with France might have been a precursor for, but could not replace, what was essentially required: a new regional concert integrating not only America but also, eventually, Germany. This was also a precondition for stabilising eastern Europe – for pacifying Polish–German relations and for eventually finding what the Big Three deemed so undesirable: a modus of ‘peaceful coexistence’ with Bolshevik Russia.

As will be shown, the successors of Wilson and Lloyd George began to create such a system – on distinctly different premises from what any of the Big Three had sought. Stabilising postwar Europe indeed required a new form of great-power co-operation. But this would gain momentum outside the League – and outside formal alliance structures. Following the Ruhr crisis, it would take more than two years of arduous negotiations between the western powers and Germany to forge the first veritable peace settlement after 1918, and recast the international system.