

The Rhineland Republic:
An Economic Battlefield Between France and Germany

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Abstract

The Rhineland Republic was a short-lived attempt to separate from Germany. The movement was created out of frustration with economic and political circumstances that resulted from World War I. What started as a local movement to start a new state, evolved into an economic battle between France and the newly established German government. The separatists depended wholly on the French Government for military and financial support. France supported the separatists in order to secure material resources out of the Rhineland to cover the reparations costs that Germany refused to pay. The real battle of separatism was fought between Gustav Stresemann, the German Chancellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Raymond Poincaré, the French premier. Both of these men fought for Germany's future: Stresemann to strengthen it, and Poincaré to curtail it.

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Introduction

Rhenish separatism is often overlooked in German History. Two major reasons are it was a short lived movement that did not achieve any significant political changes in the Rhineland, and it happened at the same time as the separatist movement in Bavaria that eventually put Hitler in power. Hitler's infamy draws a lot of historical attention.

However, separatism in the Rhineland was also important due to the influence it had on the economic future of Germany. After World War I, the Allies occupied the Rhineland. France, in an effort to secure reparation payments that had not been made, invaded the Ruhr area, the most industrialized area inside the Rhineland. Gustav Stresemann, the German chancellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs, did all he politically could do to force France out of Germany. France supported and fought for the separatists in an effort to suppress the German economic power, while Stresemann fought to remove France, stabilize the currency, and the economic future of Germany. Separatism in the Rhineland gave France a means to physically take resources Germany had been denying them. Stresemann used the ensuing violence caused by separatism to blame France for hindering the German efforts to repay their war debts. Rhenish separatism became a proxy war between France and Stresemann, leader of the recently created Weimar Republic, for the future of the German economy.

Rhenish separatism occurred in an area of Germany called the Rhineland, after the Rhine River that runs through the area. The Rhineland occupation area, which is different than the current Rhineland-Palatinate, shared a border with France on the southwest, Belgium and Luxemburg on the west, and the Netherlands in the northwest.

It ran from the Ruhr valley in the north to Heidelberg in the south. This was the industrial center of Germany and the driving force of the German economy.

The separatists wanted to break free from the long-standing Prussian hegemony that had ruled the area for hundreds of years. Otto von Bismarck labored diligently from the mid 1860's until 1890 to expand and increase Prussian control and dominance. An idea of Bismarck's political methods and the political climate he created when he unified Germany in 1871 is vital to understanding why the Rhineland wanted to separate itself from Prussia. The first chapter focuses on Bismarck, the methods he used that unified Germany, but split the Germans, and the expansion of Prussian dominance.

World War I contributed to the separatist movement by creating the circumstances for Allied occupation. After the Allied victory, France, Belgium, Britain, and America occupied Germany in an attempt to force Germany to make reparation payments agreed upon in the Treaty of Versailles. The war also escalated the tensions between France and Germany. As the Germans retreated away from the front lines in France they destroyed the mines and infrastructure that the French would soon reclaim. Additionally most of the direct fighting in the war was between France and Germany.

The war, or more appropriately losing the war, left the Germans with a strong sense of frustration. Their leaders told them they were winning the war, when the opposite was true. They lost the war. The Treaty of Versailles blamed them for the war. 10 million German soldiers were now unemployed. Foreign troops patrolled the streets in the Rhineland. All these things increased German frustration and culminated

in the Rhineland in a separatist movement that briefly created an independent Rhineland Republic. The second chapter focuses on the aftermath of World War I, the ensuing regionalism, paramilitary groups, and most importantly the separatist movement. This follows the movement from the beginning of the movement in 1919 through the end of the Rhineland Republic in 1923. This explains the battlefield used by Raymond Poincaré, the French premiere, and Gustav Stresemann, the German chancellor, and how they battled for German resources.

Once the separatist movement has been explained it is easier to understand why and how France wanted to suppress the German economy. Chapter three expands on France's reasons for supporting the separatists and trying to limit the Germans in the future. Some of the aspects of World War I will be revisited from the French perspective, including the stubborn demands for reparation that seem unreasonable until further explanation.

Chapter four explains Gustav Stresemann's plan to protect Germany and the decisions he made in regard to French aggression. Some of the material in this chapter echoes that of earlier chapters, but with more emphasis on Stresemann's actions, intentions, and German outcomes. The first section deals with Stresemann's reputation before the war and how it changed after the war. Then, how Stresemann dealt with German passive resistance and the ensuing hyperinflation. The last section discusses Stresemann's resignation as chancellor and the Weimar Republic's victories over France.

The real importance of Rhineland separatism lies in the renegotiations of the reparations payments and the evacuation of the Allied forces. These two things may

have happened regardless of a separatist movement, but the problems created and exposed during this intense political conflict hastened the international actions.

Few studies have been written about the Rhineland Republic or Rhenish separatism. Margaret Pawley wrote about separatism in her book, *Watch on the Rhine: The Military Occupation of the Rhineland, 1918-1930*, but mostly how it pertained to the occupation and evacuation of the Allied forces in the Rhineland. However, she explained why France supported the separatists, and briefly explained the separatist movement. She did not cover Stresemann's role as much as other books, such as *Stresemann and the Revision of Versailles*, by Henry Bretton, but focused more on how France interacted with Rhineland locals. Bretton focused more on how Stresemann used separatism to convince the Allies to revise the Treaty of Versailles. Most of the sources used here come from articles or sections of books written mostly about other aspects of German history, that include Rhenish separatism to frame the context of their main topic.

CHAPTER 1: BISMARCK'S LEGACY

Bismarck's Goal

Otto von Bismarck was a staunch monarchist whose main goal was to empower the Prussian monarch and the Prussian state as much as possible. Bismarck was a member of the Prussian *Junker* class, a title given to the landed Prussian nobility. He was taught in his youth to accept orders and the idea that nobles had the privilege and responsibility to govern. He believed in strict obedience to the monarchy and the noblemen. They had earned the right to govern and must be respected.

As a *Junker* Bismarck had two opportunities for a career: he could join the military or become a public administrator. He chose the latter, and as a prerequisite was required to attain a law degree. He easily earned this degree in spite of heavy drinking and seldom attending his classes. But also learned how to understand men and how they reasoned. This helped him immensely throughout the remainder of his political life.

Bismarck knew early on that he wanted to do things his way. He wrote to a friend, "the Prussian official is like a member of an orchestra, but *I* want to play only the music which I myself like, or no music at all."¹ He had a vision of what he wanted to accomplish and how to do it. Bismarck's desire to do things his way, along with his stubborn attitude, ability to read people and understand how they would respond to him, and absolute support of the monarchy made him a standout candidate for Chancellor of Prussia.

¹Erich Eyck, *Bismarck and the German Empire* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1964), 14. Emphasis on "I" is in the original.

At the end of 1861 liberal parties took control of the *Landtag*, the Prussian parliament, and tried to limit the King's power. The liberals wanted to impose limits on the King's authority, mainly through requiring *Landtag* consent on all governmental spending, especially in regards to the military. They wanted more participation in government. Naturally, Wilhelm did not want to give up any authority.

In 1862 the King of Prussia, Wilhelm II, appointed Bismarck Chancellor of Prussia. This was a controversial choice. Bismarck's devotion to Prussia bordered on extremism. As the Prussia ambassador to Russia, he had written a number of letters and proposals to limit the power of Austria in what he saw as Germany. He wanted Prussia, not Austria, to control the future German Empire.² Prussia was the most dominant kingdom in the Germanic empire. The Prussian military was second to none. Prussia was also geographically the largest state, and had the single strongest economy. Bismarck wanted to expand Prussia and the power of the King in every way possible.

Political Methods

Bismarck was appointed mainly because of his strong personality and strength of will.³ The King saw him as a man who could stand up to parliament without surrendering under pressure. Bismarck immediately began increasing the power of the Prussian monarchy. He played the liberal parties off of each other as often as possible to limit their majority, which kept them from passing any kind of legislation. If he could not drive a wedge between the parties he drafted bills in a way that would ensure they would not pass in the upper house, which was controlled entirely by *Junkers*.

² D.G. Williamson, *Bismarck and Germany 1862-1890*, second ed. (Longman: New York, 1998), 7

³ *Ibid.*

Bismarck found ways to curtail liberal power and give the King freedom to do as he pleased. In 1862 he justified unauthorized government spending by claiming a deadlock between the two houses of parliament created a constitutional hiatus, which gave the monarchy the right and responsibility to act as needed. This was legal and eliminated any type of liberal counteraction, because these types of problems were not addressed in the constitution. Bismarck was acutely aware of the political situations around him and the constraints set by the constitution and legal systems. Understanding the laws allowed him to manipulate politics and the system to achieve his goals.

The foundation of Bismarck's political practice was division and isolation. He constantly found a way to divide the different political parties in one way or another. Once he knew his enemy he would turn the other fractioned parties against his main opponents or make a law that directly affected his enemies. Examples of these practices included the *Kultur Kampf* (culture war), which was an attempt to make anti-Catholic laws and anti-Socialist laws when he needed to break their respective control. Bismarck attempted to discredit the Catholics and Socialists with laws that made their policies illegal. He understood politics, and the steps he needed to take to ensure that his agendas took precedence and were successful.

Bismarck was also more than willing to make compromises and take a loss in the short term for long-term gains. He understood that sometimes giving in to gain a majority was easier than fighting a popular movement. For instance, he was willing to pass labor laws that shortened the work day to eight hours, grant unemployment insurance, and a pension plan. These were all political platforms that were demanded

by the socialist party. By passing these laws Bismarck discredited the Socialists. Bismarck granted concessions to these parties in order to gain the support of their constituents. As long as Bismarck's ultimate goals benefitted Prussia and the Kaiser he was willing to side with any one. When he passed the legislation he wanted or achieved his goal, he was not opposed to going against his previous allies. In his mind his only true ally was the King of Prussia. All other political agreements were made in order to strengthen Prussia.

German Unification and Prussian Control

In 1864 Bismarck allied with Austria to take Schleswig-Holstein away from Denmark. As with most of Bismarck's political moves this helped him in two ways: first, it gave Prussia more political influence and land; secondly, it set the stage for a future conflict with Austria. Schleswig-Holstein was directly north of Prussian land. It was inhabited by groups of Germanic speakers alongside the Danes. It was also bordered by Prussia on all sides, a fact Bismarck later used to start a conflict with Austria.

The conflict moved so quickly it is hard to label it a war. The Danish King gave up Schleswig-Holstein. Bismarck split the land between Prussia and Austria. Schleswig, the northern section, went to Prussia. Holstein, in the south, went to Austria. This surrounded Holstein completely by Prussian lands.

At the Gastein Convention in 1865 Prussia and Austria agreed how to split the land and the responsibilities associated with it. The treaty favored Prussia more than Austria: Prussia was entitled to build canals and telegraph lines through Holstein, the Prussian military could pass into the Austrian section if it needed to get to Schleswig,

and Prussia was allowed to start a naval base in Kiel. The major function of the Gastein Treaty was it gave Bismarck an opportunity to set Prussia against Austria.



Map 1: The German Reich 1871-1918⁴

⁴ "The German Reich 1871-1918," Wikipedia for Schools, accessed May 13, 2015, <http://schools-wikipedia.org/images/2835/283551.png.htm>.

After defeating Denmark, Bismarck steered Prussia into a war with Austria, without fully committing himself to any course of action until 1866. This was another display of Bismarck's political talents: he made policies, laws, and treaties in such a way that many things were implied, but he was still free to act as he deemed fit. In 1866 Austria broke the Treaty of Gastein, which gave the Prussia the chance to take Holstein. The short war pitted Prussia against Austria, Bavaria, and some of the other southern German states. Prussia easily defeated Austria, but Bismarck restrained the King and generals from completely destroying the Austrian army. Prussia had already won control of Holstein; allowing the enemy to retreat ended further conflict until Bismarck had formulated another plan. It also made future alliances with Austria easier to facilitate. The Austro-Prussian War consolidated Prussian supremacy in the north. After the war the North German Confederation was created. This excluded Bavaria, the southern German states, and Austria. More importantly for Bismarck, it increased the power of the Prussian King. It also showed the southern Germanic countries that Prussia could defeat them if the need arose.

After the Austro-Prussian War the German Empire enjoyed a period of relative stability. The domestic political landscape was calm and Imperial German was at peace with its neighbors. The funding Bismarck had earlier won for the military was almost spent. He realized it would be difficult to win more money for the army and Prussia if the situation in the German Empire continued as it was. It would be hard for him to demand money for the military from the *Landtag* in a time of peace. The conflict with Austria was over, and the political climate in Europe was relatively stable. He realized

he “needed to give Germany a new dose of national enthusiasm.”⁵ Bismarck chose a method that had worked well for him in the past. He indirectly started a war, this time with France.

The official reason for the war was Prussian insistence that Prince Leopold, a member of the Hohenzollern/Habsburg family, take control of the Spanish throne. Prior to 1868 the Bourbon family held the Spanish throne. Bismarck’s plan nearly backfired when his intentions of a French-Prussian conflict were revealed in Paris, but he was still able to goad Napoleon III into declaring war on the German Empire.

In 1870 the Franco-Prussian War started. Again it was a quick war, lasting less than a year. Prussia defeated France. As a prize the Prussians took Alsace-Lorraine and demanded reparations payments from France; neither of these were forgotten by France and came into play after World War I. More importantly Bismarck used this war to consolidate German nationalism and officially create the German Empire, with Prussia squarely in control. Kaiser Wilhelm, with Bismarck in control of politics, ruled the new German Empire.

⁵ A.J.P. Taylor, *Bismarck: The Man and the Statesman* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 115.

CHAPTER 2: THE RHINELAND REPUBLIC

Postwar Frustration

In late 1918 the German military was losing World War I. The economy driving the war effort was broken. The United States had joined the war a year earlier with huge resources, both in manpower and in materials. In addition to America's reinforcements to the Allied Forces, the German Empire's Spring Offensive failed to achieve decisive results. The Spring Offensive was supposed to punch holes in the Allied lines, giving the Germans access to the interior of France. The Allied forces were much stronger than the Germans anticipated. When the Germans attacked the lines held, and the German army retreated.



Map 2: Armistice and Occupation of Germany.⁶ The red area marks what the German Empire lost during the Spring Offensive. Gray indicates areas the German Empire evacuated after the Armistice. Yellow shows the occupied zones controlled by the Allies.

⁶ "Armistice and Occupation of Germany," *Ministry for Culture and Heritage*, accessed May 13, 2015, <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/media/photo/armistice-and-occupation-germany-map>.

Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff, both high-ranking military officers, banked on utterly defeating the Allies and then forcing them to accept a German dictated peace. However, the German Empire could no longer effectively fight the Allies. After the spring setbacks Hindenburg and Ludendorff realized Germany needed to end the war as soon as possible to avoid complete defeat. In October 1918 they told the Reichstag the war was lost, and the politicians now needed to clean up the army's mess. On November 11, 1918 a cease-fire was declared.

If the sudden German defeat came as a surprise to the Reichstag, it was utterly incomprehensible to the German people. All that they had heard was military success after success. After the armistice on November 11, 1918 the Germans had been led to believe they had won the war. The news sources covered the Eastern front where the Germans were successful against the Russians. The defeats and setbacks from the Western front were downplayed, not mentioned, or changed to reflect German victories. The German population expected a German dictated peace. According to what they had been told this should have been the natural progression of the peace talks. However, the situation was different than the public had been led to believe. The German Empire could not continue fighting, and the last months of the war were filled with German defeats. This did not leave the Germans in a situation where they could realistically negotiate.

The German leaders struggled to make peace with the Allied leaders, frustrating the German population. Naturally the German people wanted a favorable peace and believed the Allies would give in to their demands. As the Treaty of Versailles was

drafted and peace conferences continued the German leaders quickly realized they were in no position to make demands.

On the Allied side of the War people were also angry, France especially. France was in ruins in a number of ways. First, the war largely took place in France, destroying cities, villages, farms, and infrastructure. After the armistice, this increased the difficulty of feeding a war-ravaged population by limiting both supply and transportation of goods to destroyed areas. Secondly, France's population was distressed, due to massive war casualties, starvation, and disease. Finally, the French industrial areas in Northern France had been taken by Imperial Germany early in the war. When the German army realized France would reclaim these areas, Ludendorff ordered the army to destroy as many of the mines and industrial sites as possible. This further crippled France's economy. After the war in France these factors led to a strong desire for vengeance. France wanted the German Empire to pay for the damage done during the war and punish the Germans sufficiently enough to prevent them from attacking France again.⁷

Many scholars, from historians like Norman Graebner and Edward Bennett to economists like John Maynard Keynes, have argued endlessly about the economic effects of the Treaty of Versailles on Weimar Germany as a leading cause for World War II.⁸ The pendulum of thought has swung back and forth many times. Arguments directly blame the treaty for Hitler's rise to power and Nazi control. However, these

⁷ Norman Davies, *Europe: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 928.

⁸ For their contributions see: Norman Graebner and Edward M. Bennett, *The Versailles Treaty and Its Legacy: The Failure of the Wilsonian Vision* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and John Maynard Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920). These are only two examples of many more authors and books on the subject.

arguments are not entirely correct. The treaty's effects did increase nationalism throughout the country, but not as much as it increased regionalism. Regionalism was a factor in the Rhenish separatist movement. However, economics played a much clearer role. Economics was the driving force of France's invasion, the reason France supported the separatists, and a reason the Reichstag allowed the Rhineland officially separate from the Weimar Republic in 1923. Separatism, although it was a political movement inside Weimar Germany, morphed into a battlefield of a war over the German economy between France and the Weimar Republic.

Regionalism and Paramilitary Groups

At the War's end Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated the throne and moved to the Netherlands, creating a power vacuum in the defeated German Empire. Revolutions broke out at the end of October in 1918 starting in the north and spreading throughout the country. On November 7 Socialist revolutions erupted in Berlin and Munich. Politicians feared Soviet communists sponsored these uprisings. In an attempt to prevent communism from taking over in the German Empire on November 9, Phillip Sheidemann, a politician of the Social Democratic Party (SPD), proclaimed the German Republic. This hurried act set the stage for a national assembly that later voted to continue as a parliamentary democracy. On August 11, 1919 the Weimar Republic, the name given to the new German government, officially took control of Germany. The Weimar Republic drafted a constitution similar to that of the United States. The new Weimar Germany became a confederacy of states, under a theoretically stronger federal government. This was a change from the earlier Prussian dominated parliamentary monarchy. A president, who was elected for seven-year terms, replaced

the emperor. However, the chancellor still held most of the governmental power. Monarchists, who constantly undermined the power of the new government and repeatedly sabotaged the efforts to establish effective authority, held the other offices of the Weimar Republic. Each political group had its own agenda in mind and wanted to increase their political power instead of focusing on the good of the Weimar Republic.

The lack of unity in the government was reflected throughout the entire German population. James Diehl, a German historian, wrote, "Bismarck had united Germany, but not the German people."⁹ Geographically Germany was a unified land mass controlled by a single government, but that was largely the extent of German unity. The government was split into factions, largely created by Bismarck in the late 19th century. Bismarck used the disjointed parties against each other in order to maintain political control for him and the Prussian throne. After Bismarck left the political world in 1890, the rifts between the parties carried on.

The German population was also divided in many other ways. The northern states were mostly Protestant, while the south was typically Catholic. This was another split Bismarck magnified and used to his advantage. He created anti-Catholic laws in the 1880's, again to split the political realm into more manageable pieces. This created a religious awareness and type of schism. It made Germans more conscious of other religious groups and set them at odds.

Economics presented another division for the Weimar Republic. While much of Prussia was heavily industrialized, especially in the Ruhr area, southern Germany was

⁹ James Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1977), 5.

still agriculturally based. The industrialists were much wealthier, which later influenced the government's attempts to negotiate with France. Both the north and south wanted the government to implement taxes and tariffs that would be favorable to one side but not the other. This was one of the many domestic problems the Weimar Republic faced.

As a whole Weimar Germany did not possess a cohesive citizenry; instead, regionalism was much more concentrated and consolidated. Germany was a relatively new political entity, created in 1871, while many of its individual regions had existed since the Middle Ages. States like Bavaria, Thuringen, and Saxony had been ruled as separate kingdoms for centuries and were maintained under the new German Empire. Because people in each area had similar cultures, occupations, religions, customs, and languages, regionalism, not nationalism, was a more natural fit for most of the population.

After World War I regionalism also provided an escape from defeat. After all, the *German Empire* had lost the war. The *Imperial German* government surrendered. The individual regions could claim they had never given up, or accepted defeat. While it is mostly semantics, it did offer some relief to a people who had lost a war they were lead to believe was already won.

While regionalism and the other aspects of German disunity were pressing issues for the new government, the biggest domestic problem was the military. The Weimar Republic never gained control of the military. The military remained theoretically opposed to the new form of government. However, the new government needed the military to ensure the survival of the republic. Voluntary paramilitary

groups such as the *Freikorps*, who were former soldiers of the German Imperial Army, and the *Zeitfreiwilligenverbände*, a group that was strictly part-time and more of a reserve force to supplement the *Freikorps* than an actual military force, defended the Weimar Republic from the Communist revolutionaries. These groups were loyal to the Weimar Government for a short time, but the leaders in Berlin quickly lost control of the paramilitary groups. Political parties from the left and the right used loyal troops to force their political agendas. Socialist forces formed “workers’ and soldiers’ councils.”¹⁰ The Communists started their own Red Army, based on the Red Army controlled by the Communists in the Soviet Union. The Weimar Government military was still run by men like Johannes “Hans” von Seeckt, a long time general from the Imperial Army, who had been loyal to the monarchy. The majority of the officer corps was Prussian. Many still wanted the Kaiser in control. In other words, the only thing keeping the republican government in power was a military group opposed to any form of republican government.¹¹

Aside from depending on hostile elements in the military, there were deeper issues in the military the government needed to overcome. In World War I, 10 million men had been called to serve in some aspect of the military. After the war military groups and soldier councils continued to grow in popularity. The Army was limited to 100,000 men in the Treaty of Versailles, leaving everyone else suddenly unemployed. The ex-soldiers joined soldier councils and militaristic groups because they were one of the few options they had. The result was the formation of paramilitary groups who were not subordinate to any government or existing military structure. The *Freikorps*

¹⁰ Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics*, 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

morphed into one of these groups after it abandoned its loyalty to the Weimar Republic. In essence they became professionally trained mercenaries, obedient only to their commander.

The paramilitary organizations gave the men a familiar setting and a sense of belonging. It also gave them an outlet for their frustrations with the government. The nationalist parties formed their own military groups, followed by the socialist and communist parties. All of these were unregulated and uncontrolled. The paramilitary groups were described as “self-defense (*Selbstschutz*), self-help (*Selbsthilfe*) organizations” which practiced a form of social and political vigilantism.¹² Some of these groups were *Stahlhelm*, *Wehrwolf*, and *Jungdeutscher Orden*.¹³ After the Allied occupation the numbers of these groups began to swell tremendously, many of which operated loosely under the name of the *Schwarz Reichswehr*. The *Schwarz Reichswehr* was originally created with the permission of Von Seeckt to sabotage industrial areas in the Ruhr, but he quickly lost control of the men.

The Allied occupation, led by France, gave *Stahlhelm* the largest of the paramilitary groups the opportunity to mobilize to fulfill their objectives of “suppression of the internal enemy and conquest of the external enemy.”¹⁴ Fritz Kloppe formed *Wehrwolf* in Saxony the day France invaded the Ruhr. It quickly spread throughout Prussia and the central area of Weimar Germany. The socialist leaders in the *Reichstag* wanted to ban all nationalistic parties, which would include a number of the militant bands. The largest nationalistic military groups, *Vaterländische Verbände*,

¹² Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics*, 20-21.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 117.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 120.

located in Bavaria, were willing to fight the socialist backed forces, and if needed also the *Reichswehr*, although the *Reichswehr* declared it would remain neutral. The nationalist groups started focusing more on what was happening in Bavaria. This is also the time Hitler started his rise to power.

The Allies occupied the Rhineland in separate zones. As shown in Map 2, Belgium occupied the northern most section, then Britain, the United States, and France in the south. Map 3 below, shows the Ruhr area that was invaded later by France and Belgium. In protest of this aggressive move the United States withdrew its occupation forces from the Rhineland. France sent troops to fill the recently vacated area, which gave France control of more than the other Allies combined. German separatists used the geographical boundaries of the Allied occupied zone to create the Rhineland Republic, a short-lived autonomous area freed from Weimar Germany and Prussian control.



Occupation of the Ruhr Valley and the Rhineland¹⁵

¹⁵ "Occupation of the Ruhr Valley and the Rhineland," accessed May 12, 2015, <http://www.tomatobubble.com/id108.html>.

A paramilitary coalition under the name *Schwarz Reichwehr* and disenfranchised Germans of the Rhineland tried numerous times to secede from the Weimar Republic. Starting in 1919 different leaders and groups, most prominently Konrad Adenauer and the Catholic *Zentrum* Party, tried to gather enough political momentum to break away. None of these attempts amounted to much. Separatism, while always under the surface in the region, did not become a reality until 1923 when it was backed by wealthy industrialists, France, and the Government in Berlin. Each of these groups had their own economic self-interest in mind. The industrialists wanted more money, tax breaks, and less regulated work environment; France wanted resources to rebuild their country and punish Weimar Germany; Gustav Stresemann, the German Chancellor and Minister of Foreign Affairs during the secession period, wanted to stabilize the new German economy as much as possible. The economic reasons for separatism led to political action, while the paramilitary groups allowed the population to vent its frustrations.

Separatist Factions

Up to this point only the federal side of the argument has been presented. On the other side the separatists like Adenauer, Hans Dorten, and Josef Matthes had various reasons for splitting away from Germany or Prussia. Some of these motives have already been discussed. The industrial magnates, like Hugo Stinnes and August Thyssen, wanted freedom from Weimar Germany in order to exploit their workers more than German laws allowed. The first law they wanted to change was the length of the workday. Bismarck limited it at eight hours a day. The industrialists wanted at least 10 or 12 hours in a workday.

The politicians in the Rhineland wanted a free Rhenish state for different reasons; they claimed if they were independent from the Weimar Republic they could act as a buffer state between France and Weimar Germany. They believed the neutral role they could assume would smooth out relations between the two countries and allow the government in Berlin to regain control of its economy. The separatists acknowledged that France would most likely take control of the newly created state, at least in an economic sense, and hoped France would return sovereignty after the war debts were repaid. This plan aligned with what Stresemann and the others in the Weimar government. It reinforced the idea that a separate Rhineland would give the Weimar Republic a chance to stabilize the economy and the new *Rentenmark*.¹⁶

One of the more honest reasons was the *Zentrum* party wanted to strengthen its role as “the archenemy of Prussia” in all forms.¹⁷ They still saw the Weimar Republic as fundamentally a Prussian controlled state. Prussia was also a Protestant state, while the Rhineland identified more with the Catholics. The *Zentrum* Party was the main political party of the region and was also a Catholic political party. What they hoped to accomplish was independence from Prussian rule, Prussian Protestantism, and the shadow of Bismarck’s power politics.

Up to this point the separatists have been described mainly as a homogenous group. This makes it easier to compare the politics and opinions of the Rhinelanders with those of the leaders of the Weimar Republic. However, like the rest of the Weimar Republic at this time, the separatists were not united. Each city had its own party with

¹⁶ Klaus Reimer, “Die Separatistenherrschaft,” *Heimat-Jahrbuch des Kreises Daun*, 1983, 199–202.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, quoted from “Bericht des Dauner Kreisdelegierten v. Okt. 1923 an den Präsidenten der Rheinlandkommission Tirard” (AN AJ 9-3774).

its own leaders. Karl Jarres and Paul Moldenhauer were members of the German People's Party (DVP) from Duisburg.¹⁸ Adenauer was the mayor of Cologne and as mentioned before belonged to the Zentrum party. Each of these men wanted to maintain the political clout and power they already had. As the Rhineland separated evidence of these mini power plays became clearly evident.

The origins of the separatist movement started in 1918 after the military revolutions. Konrad Adenauer, the mayor of Cologne and the leader of the Catholic Center Party, invited a number of prominent politicians and industrialists from the Rhineland to a meeting to discuss the future of their region. On 10 November 1918 these men met and began open discussion of the reasons to establish a free state and how they would go about it. The meeting revealed three main separatist platforms. Each party took a different stance on how to enact their plan.

Adenauer represented the first option. He wanted to establish a separate Rhenish state within Weimar Germany. In essence it would be another state similar to Prussia or Bavaria. His biggest concern was breaking Prussian hegemony over the Rhineland. He also assumed France planned on annexing the Rhineland, something Adenauer wanted to avoid if possible. Creating a state within the German republic would prevent French annexation, and at the same time set up a buffer state that could deal more openly with the French than Prussia and the leaders in Berlin. Adenauer wanted to use all the legal and political methods available through the Weimar Republic to create the new state. The German constitution allowed for the formation of

¹⁸ K. P. Jones, "Stresemann, the Ruhr Crisis, and Rhenish Separatism: A Case Study of Westpolitik," *European Studies Review*, 7 (1977), 325.

new states and presented an outline for politicians to follow. At all costs Adenauer did not want to use violence or revolution to create a new state.

Hans Dorten, a former lawyer and judge championed the second position. His idea was similar to Adenauer's in that he wanted to create a separate state without any sort of Prussian control or influence. He differed from Adenauer in his method to create the new state; he was willing to use any means necessary to break free from Prussia, even if that meant relying on France for support. When the meeting ended without any clear plan of action Dorten took matters into his own hands, which will be discussed later.

The third platform did not have a clear leader until later, but it centered on a Rhenish state that was independent of the Weimar Republic. Other than this main idea the people who supported Rhenish independence were not organized or very cohesive. Some of the factions, like the paramilitary group *Stahlhelm*, wanted to be completely independent, while others wanted to be a French protectorate. *Frei Rheinland* was a political party led by Leo Decker that also wanted an independent Rhineland.¹⁹ These groups also approved of using any means necessary to accomplish their goal.

Adenauer realized they did not have the unity needed to legally create the state. The meeting ended with the members agreeing that they wanted to break free of Prussian control, but planned on discussing the dismemberment of the Prussian state with the Allied powers. After the meeting adjourned Adenauer dropped the separatist issue, due to lack of public political support.

¹⁹ Margaret Pawley, *Watch on the Rhine: The Military Occupation of the Rhineland, 1918-1930* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 72.

Dorten, on the other hand, immediately started a plan to establish a Rhenish state. In Wiesbaden he gave a speech on 1 June 1919, declaring an independent Rhenish State. Later that day with the help of the French military he proclaimed himself president of the new state. German officials were unable to arrest him, because of French protection. After five days he was kicked out of office. He also tried to seize power in Mainz, but failed due to a lack of popular support. As a result of his attempted coup the Supreme Court in Leipzig declared him a traitor and issued a warrant for his arrest. His criminal status severely hampered his efforts to gain legitimate support. After this none of the other politicians seriously considered his plan.²⁰

Separatists Take Control

Dorten and other separatists started to get desperate. As mentioned earlier, after the Allies occupied the Rhineland the Weimar Republic Government sponsored passive resistance, effectively shutting down the infrastructure and factories in the main industrial area of the Weimar Republic. Many of the unemployed men were frustrated by the lack of action from Berlin. This frustration coupled with the pressures of extreme hyperinflation and occupation troops walking their streets. Many men joined the paramilitary groups like *Stahlhelm* and the *Freikorps*, who also supported the separatist ideals. As the paramilitary groups grew more aggressive so did the French troops. The militarized separatists sabotaged factories, railways, and bridges. France moved against people who refused to work.²¹

It seems odd that France and the paramilitary groups fought each other, since France provided most of the financial support for the separatists. However, it is

²⁰ Pawley, *Watch on the Rhine*, 57.

²¹ Eyck, *A History of the Weimar Republic*, 237.

important to remember that the paramilitary groups were numerous and extremely unorganized. The militants were not always loyal to a political party or movement. Most of the time it seems groups like the *Schwarz Reichswehr* were focused only on action. As long as members of the paramilitary factions were doing something it was okay. All the paramilitary groups accomplished was driving France to violence and destroying the rest of the unity in the Rhineland.²²

The increased violence, growing financial crisis, and perceived lack of support from the German government convinced some of the separatists they needed to take political control. On 11 October 1923 a group of seventeen politicians met in the Schramm Hotel. These men were from separatist parties from the cities Daun, Hillesheim, and Gerolstein. During their meeting they wrote a quasi-declaration of independence to District Delegate Remy:

The undersigned, as representatives of all strata of the population of the District of Daun, respectfully present the overwhelming desire of the population of this district with this letter, to establish a Rhenish State. The will of the people is to be free, with its own constitution and authority. We kindly ask the District Delegate to share this with the Chairman of Inter-Allied Rhineland High Commission, Mister Tirard.²³

They further explained that the transition would be simple, because the Socialist and Communist parties were not active in their region, and the Catholic Church agreed to stay out of politics. They believed everything could be set up by the end of October without any problems or delays. Around the same time other groups of separatists did the same thing. Politicians from Cologne, Aachen, Koblenz and other areas voiced the desires of their populations to separate from the Weimar Republic. On 21 October

²² Eyck, *A History of the Weimar Republic*, 249.

²³ The original letter is in the Archives Nationales Paris (AN AJ 9-3774).

1923 in Aachen and Koblenz the separatists took control with a series of coups with the aide of France's military.

Contrary to the letter written in Daun, not all the people in the Rhineland wanted to separate from Weimar Germany. In November after the Rhenish Republic was created a group of 500 to 600 workers gathered together to chase off the separatist mayor of Gerolstein. The mayor expected something of this nature, and had an armed escort of 25 men to protect him. Shortly after the workers showed up, so did the French military. The army captured most of the men and took away their passports. The District delegate later informed the men if they wanted their passports back they would have to work for at least five years.²⁴ This is but one isolated example of dissatisfied people. They were willing to try to force the separatists out, but due to the French support did not stand a chance.

In each of these cities the separatists acted in a similar manner. They marched into the city hall, forced the mayor out, and declared power. At the beginning of the movement each city was its own autonomous center, at least politically. Then all of the leaders of the cities met together. The power structure of the Rhenish Republic changed quickly. Power was quickly centralized, politically and geographically. The leaders of the smaller cities gave into those who had taken larger cities. The men who took control of Daun and Gerolstein ceded their power to Hans Dorten and Josef Matthes, who had taken Koblenz. After the initial coup on 23 October 1923, Dorten and Matthes shared power. Paul Tirard, the leader of the Inter-Allied Rhineland

²⁴ Erwin Schoening. "Die Wenigen Tage einer Rheinischen Republik: Passiver Widerstand und Separatismus im Kreis Daun," *Jahrbuch des Kreises Daun*, 2000, 211–214.

Commission, recognized Matthes, a former newspaper reporter, as the president of the Rhineland Republic on 26 October.

The End of Separatism

Dorten and Matthes began fighting over power immediately. Both men realized their claim to political power was extremely fragile. The separatist movements did not take hold in every area. There were also many of the larger cities, such as Duesseldorf and Bonn, where the coups were beaten back. Outwardly Dorten inferred the people wanted the separatists to take control. He wrote, "The people, weary of finding themselves perpetually between hammer and anvil, longed for change in their unendurable condition."²⁵ However, he and Matthes both knew the majority of the population did not support them. Dorten believed the majority of the Rhinelanders were "opportunist-fatalistic" people with a "mellowness and lack of stamina" for fighting.²⁶ He said the people would let who ever had power rule, but his actions showed how much he really believed his own words. Some of the first things they did in order to maintain control was limit the freedom of the press and establish a curfew. They also employed a police force that was little more than a violent group of thugs.

After Matthes took control Raymond Poincaré, the French premier, could no longer hide France's support of the separatists. As soon as France's support was made public, France cut all ties with the separatists.

Violence increased in the separatist areas. In an effort to fund themselves the police force looted citizens and businesses. The public outcry from within the

²⁵ Hans A. Dorten, "The Rhineland Movement," *Foreign Affairs*, 3, No. 3 (April, 1925), 399-410.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 407.

Rhineland Republic was growing louder. The Rhineland was receiving more international attention.

The *Siebengebirge* Insurrection was an armed conflict between the separatist military and a group of anti-separatists. It took place south of Koblenz in an area called the *Siebengebirge*, which translates to seven hills. The local villagers set up a defense system against the roving band of separatists. Widespread reports of looting, destruction, and violence went ahead of the military force. In Aegidienberg, the townspeople prepared by gathering any weapon available, and creating an alarm system with the factory sirens as a way to warn the people when the separatists approached. The conflict was brief with a handful of deaths on both sides.²⁷

More important than the conflict itself was the common perception that France allowed, and possibly supported the separatists. The other Allied forces heavily criticized France and pushed them to respond quickly. Britain refused to allow the separatists to operate in their zone. The British occupation forces quickly stopped any violence and they demanded France do the same.²⁸ The French army moved in to restore order, but by the time they got there the situation had calmed.

The separatist government fell apart largely due to the results of this insurrection. On November 28, 1923 Matthes dissolved the Rhineland Republic. He and Dorten disagreed about how to proceed after the insurrection. Matthes wanted to distance the government from the militants. Dorten wanted to support them. The disagreement led to a split in the cabinet based on loyalty to Dorten or Matthes. Franz

²⁷ Karl Gast, *Aegidienberg im Wandel der Zeiten* (Aegidienberg:Gemeinde Aegidienberg, 1964).

²⁸ Elspeth O’Riordan, “The British Zone of Occupation in the Rhineland,” *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 16 (2005), 451.

Rosenbaum, who was previously Secretary of State for the separatists, led an armed coup against Matthes. The military leaders took control of the Castle of Koblenz, the governmental headquarters of the Rhineland Republic. Some of Matthes' staff came to his office and asked him what they should do. Matthes said, "The only thing left to do is to dissolve the Government and wash my hands of the whole business."²⁹ Matthes then fled to England. Dorten had already moved to Bad Ems, and by the end of the year fled to Nice. The government they set up collapsed after a little more than a month.

In the Palatinate, the southern area of French occupation zone, Dorten set up a similar separatist government. This was also supported and kept in power wholly by France. General Charles Mangin, of the French Army recognized the Palatinate as a legitimate government, which meant he and his troops were obliged to follow the wishes of the new government.

Franz Josef Heinz-Orbis, the president of the new Palatinate state, was assassinated in a café in the French zone on 9 January 1924. Initially the French army investigated the murder. They did not make any concrete discoveries, although they suspected the *Treubund*, a nationalistic paramilitary organization, was responsible for the killing. Dissatisfied with the lack of information from France the British decided to conduct their own investigation. Robert Clive, the British Consulate in Munich, conducted it. He was unable to find any information on the murder, but everywhere he went he "was told that if the occupying authorities withdrew their support ... for 24 hours, there would not be one separatist left" in the area.³⁰ Of course the authorities in question were the French officials. Again it was manifested that the separatists were in

²⁹ "Separatists Split; Matthes is Ousted," *New York Times*, November 29, 1923.

³⁰ Pawley, *Watch on the Rhine*, 75.

power because they had foreign military support, not because the local population wanted to establish their own autonomous state.

In February the separatists fell from power. Once France's support for the separatists was revealed it was quickly eliminated. At the same time, French popular support for the continued occupation was waning. The French people showed this on 11 May 1924 by electing Édouard Herriot to replace Poincaré as their leader. Poincaré was the unyielding man who pushed so hard for the occupation of the Ruhr and Rhineland. The Belgium, British, and American governments had also increased the pressure on France to restore peace and order in the French occupied zone.

During their brief time in power, the separatists did not accomplish any lasting changes. They were able to set up a temporary government, but lacked competent and coordinated leadership, and more importantly did not have the backing of the population. If the separatists had somehow gained popular support, perhaps they would have had the chance to enact lasting change.

CHAPTER 3: FRENCH SUPPRESSION

Franco-German Animosity

Alsace-Lorraine was the industrial center for French mining and coal. The loss of this area in the Franco-Prussian war severely hampered France's industrial output potentials. Along with the loss of territory, France had to make reparations to the new German Empire. World War I left France even more embittered toward the Imperial Germany.

The German Empire was widely held responsible for starting World War I. The German army invaded Belgium and later France. After four years of fighting, mainly between France and the German Empire, neither the Allied nor Central Powers had the upper hand. Soldiers and supplies flowed from both sides, with little gain from the expended resources. The Western Front fluctuated a few kilometers either way over the course of the war, without any clear victories. Men and supplies were continually shipped to the front lines, slowly devastating most of the countries involved.

France suffered more destruction, both in land and population, than the other nations involved. The Western Front ran through France. Artillery fire and the advancing armies repeatedly destroyed the French countryside, and more importantly weakened the industrial production capabilities of France; World War I reduced the already lowered production numbers by half. According to Randall Gray and Christopher Argyle in *The Chronicle of the First World War, Volume II*, in 1913 the French coal output was roughly 40 million metric tons; in 1914 it dropped to 27.5 million, and in 1915, the first full year of war, it was only 19.5 million. 1915 was the lowest production year of the war with the average hovering around 26 million metric

tons. The reductions in iron ore and pig iron are more drastic, dropping from 27 million metric tons in 1913 to 1.2 million in 1915, with the 1915 production rates meeting only four percent of prewar levels. Similar to coal output, the totals for iron production climbed as the war went on but did not come close to prior levels. The average throughout the war was about 3.5 million metric tons a year, still only 13 percent of what it had been prewar. Iron production levels across Europe dropped, but none as drastically as those of France, in part because the front lines formed a blockade to some of France's industrial areas, keeping workers out and eliminating shipping lines.³¹

The geographical structure of the front line was part of the lowered productivity; the need for French men to fight in the army was another. The army casualties and population losses matched the disproportionate economic strains France encountered during the war. Also according to Gray and Argyle, the British Empire mobilized an army of roughly 8.9 million. The French army numbered 8.7 million soldiers. The British suffered 3.4 million casualties, compared to 6.2 million French casualties. These armies were the two largest armies fielded by the Allied forces on the western front. France had almost double the casualties of Britain. This overwhelming number of deaths and injuries devastated the morale, as well as the economy of France. During the war 8.7 million men were out of the factories, fighting instead of working. After the war only 2.5 million were able to return to their jobs, if those jobs even existed, as most buildings and business infrastructures had been destroyed. France suffered almost all the physical destruction of the war, as well as the

³¹ Randall Gray and Christopher Argyle, *Chronicle of the First World War, Volume II: 1917-1921* (Oxford: Facts on File, 1991), 294.

brunt of the casualties. The Germans inflicted death and destruction, creating a more bitter hatred and desire for revenge, compounded with the already festering desire to regain Alsace and Lorraine. After World War I France used the Treaty of Versailles as an opportunity to extract their revenge.³²

War Reparations

On June 28, 1919 the Weimar Republic signed the Treaty of Versailles. France and the Allies used it as a weapon intended to punish and more importantly cripple the new Germany. Suppressing the German economy would limit the ability of Weimar Germany to rearm and start another war, thereby protecting France and the world from future German aggression. Weimar Germany and the other defeated countries had not been invited to the conferences. The Allies expected them to simply sign the document they had created. The treaty did not go into effect until January 10, 1920.

The Germans had hoped to retain some of the land they had conquered. In 1919 they expected Belgium to remain in their control, at the very least economically, as well as the land they gained eastward in World War I. What they received from the Treaty of Versailles was massive war reparations, an order to disarm, and the entire blame for the war. The Weimar Republic also had to give back all the land they had taken. Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France. Poland was recreated from Prussia and Russia. The perception in Weimar Germany was that they were being punished, and all Germans felt punishment and believed it was unjust. Because of Imperial Germany's propaganda from the leadership, the average citizens still saw themselves as victors.

³² Gray and Argyle, *Chronicle of the First World War*, 294.

The initial sum for the reparations was set at 132 billion gold marks to be paid over thirty years. Between 1921 and 1932 Weimar Germany actually paid out 20 billion gold marks, which was roughly 2.5 percent of the German National income. While these numbers sound astronomical, after the Nazi party took control, the German Reich was spending more annually than this on rearmament in the Soviet Union.³³ This gives some context to the numbers. Germany was able to spend this kind of money within ten years. The amount demanded by the Allies could have been paid, had the German economy been stable.

War reparations were a common practice in European conflicts. After the Franco-Prussian War the German Empire set the reparations for France at five billion gold francs over five years, and also annexed Alsace-Lorraine as part of the reparation package. After Lenin took control of Russia, Imperial Germany demanded nine billion gold marks. The German Empire and Austria also demanded land and resources that stripped Russia of 90 percent of its coal, 50 percent of its factories and industry, and 30 percent of its population, along with one million train cars of grain.³⁴ The numbers demanded by the Allies were larger than the totals the German Empire took in earlier wars, but Weimar Germany also had a larger economy and had destroyed more of France than in any prior conflict. When the reparations are broken down the sums are not as vast nor as unfair as Stresemann and the other government officials made them seem.

³³ Brendan Hodge, "World War I Reparations Weren't As Unfair As You Think," *The Federalist*, [www.thefederalist.com](http://thefederalist.com), July 29, 2014, accessed on March 11, 2015, (<http://thefederalist.com/2014/07/29/world-war-i-reparations-werent-as-unfair-as-you-think/>).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

France did not let up the economic demands placed on the Weimar Republic. After the occupation the Berlin Government still refused to pay. The government backed strikes and paid the workers unemployment in an attempt to keep German resources out of French hands. In response France took control of the Ruhr area, which was the heart of the Industrial strength of the Weimar Republic. The French government planned to take the reparations directly from the mines, bypassing the German Government. After Stresemann did not give in to their demands, France made a deal directly with the industrialists of the Ruhr. France received direct payments from the Rhineland until mid 1925. Stresemann still used the high reparation demands and the failing economy as a way to involve the other allies in a campaign against French aggression.

CHAPTER 4: SAVING GERMANY

Gustav Stresemann

Gustav Stresemann became chancellor on August 13, 1923 during the most intensive period of German separatism. Across the country political parties were trying to break away from the Weimar Republic. He served in office until November 1923 when he resigned. However, he remained the Foreign Minister of the Weimar Republic until 1929. Stresemann's political motives have been questioned repeatedly since his decision to allow the Rhineland to secede. The root of this controversy stemmed from Stresemann's earlier political beliefs.

Throughout World War I Stresemann was a staunch annexationist and nationalist. He believed Germany deserved the lands they had conquered and that returning them should not be a negotiable point. He was also a proponent of the *Großdeutschland* idea, which meant that all Germanic speaking peoples should be united under a common government of Germany. According to this position, this would unite all the Germans in Czechoslovakia, Austria, Alsace-Lorraine, Lichtenstein, Switzerland, and any other area that had a German speaking population. After the war Stresemann changed some of his political positions. He did not support annexation as much as before the war. He was willing to negotiate with the other European leaders. Some members of the press in the Allied nations and Allied politicians thought this was only a guise: Stresemann was pretending to be contrite and obedient to the Allied demands, while at the same time having ulterior motives to empower Weimar Germany again. One of these people was Claud Cockburn, a British reporter whom had dinner with Stresemann. In his newspaper article reported:

He was one of those Germans who had, at a fairly early date, discovered that the way to get away with being a good German was to pretend to be a good European. He had a wonderful act in which he pretended to be not only fat, which he was, but good-hearted and a little muzzy with beer into the bargain. In reality he was as quick and sharp as a buzz-saw, and if being a sharp, fast moving buzz-saw was not enough, he would hit you from behind with a hammer.³⁵

This portrayal painted Stresemann as a Bismarkian figure who was willing to mask his true motives to ensure German economic and political dominance.

While he had supported German expansionism before World War I, during the negotiations with the Allies about reparations, the Rhineland separatist movement, and the Locarno negotiations, Stresemann took the opposite stance. He was willing to accept the majority of the newly drawn borders. He abandoned his earlier ideas of annexing large tracts of land. Most of his arguments and pleas to the United States and Britain were that Weimar Germany wanted to make the reparation payments, but could not due to the struggling post-war economy. Thomas Mann believed Stresemann had changed. In 1930 Mann wrote about Stresemann:

Coming from a right-wing bourgeois background, with spiritual and political traditions of this origin in his blood, as a patriotic middle-class business man, even if above average in education and intellectual curiosity, identified with the idea of an expansion of German power and still during the war a convinced advocate of imperial conquest, he was able through a power of understanding, which was simultaneously full of vitality and refined by illness, directed and driven by an exemplary commitment to life, which was physically already marked by death, to grow out from and above all the traditions he had inherited, into the world of a European society of nations in thought, conviction and deed, which no one would have dreamt possible on the basis of his early adulthood.³⁶

³⁵ Jonathan Wright, "Stresemann and Locarno," *Contemporary European History*, vol. 4, no. 2 (1995), 110, quoted from Claud Cockburn, *In Time of Trouble: An Autobiography* (London: Rupert Hart Davis, 1957) 97.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 111, quoted from Felix Hirsch, *Stresemann: Ein Lebensbild* (Göttingen: Musterschmidt, 1978), 307-308.

According to Mann, Stresemann saw the error of his earlier ways and understood that the Weimar Republic needed to join the larger European community as a contributor instead of a dominating ruler.

Stresemann's motives are still considered enigmatic today by some historians, most notably K.P. Jones who has studied Stresemann extensively. Was he the same nationalist of his younger years, feigning weakness to secure a more favorable outcome for Weimar Germany? Or had he truly changed his beliefs and simply wanted to make it possible for the Weimar Republic to comply with the Treaty of Versailles? While it may be impossible to completely understand his true motives, his actions during the Rhineland separatist movement indicate that the answer lies somewhere between these two beliefs.

One of the easiest ways to understand Stresemann's position and decisions is to put his actions in context with ongoing events during the French occupation and Rhenish separatist movement. By understanding the context of his decisions it becomes apparent that Stresemann took calculated risks, similar to Bismarck. Bismarck was willing to go to war with Denmark, Austria, and France in order to empower Prussia. Stresemann was willing to compromise and accept a temporary negative outcome if it helped him obtain his long-term goal.

Stresemann accepted the Allied occupation as one of these negative compromises. He was willing to go along with it as long as it helped him his plan to force France and the other Allies out of Weimar Germany. His long-term goal in regard to the occupation was to divide the Allies and make them leave the Weimar Republic. France occupied the Ruhr area on the eastern border of the Rhineland on January 11,

1923 in order to secure reparation payments. The Ruhr was the industrial center of Weimar Germany. The majority of the coal and iron mines were located in this area, as well as the steel factories. Raymond Poincaré, the French premier, planned to institute productive pledges, allowing France to directly seize local assets in the form of raw materials to cover the payments of Weimar Germany's reparations. Poincaré wanted to consolidate control over the Rhineland and the industrial centers through the *Mission Interalliée de Contrôle des Usines et Mines* (MICUM) the French organization placed in control of the occupation zone. After securing control of the mines, factories, railways, and communications France could negotiate with the other Allies from a stronger position in order to confiscate more goods directly from the mines and factories instead of the payments going through the German government.³⁷

Passive Resistance and Hyperinflation

From January 11, 1923 until September 27, 1923 the Germans used passive resistance to battle French demands. German miners and factory workers, backed by the Berlin government, went on strike. While the strike was successful at keeping German resources out of French hands, it was crippling to the rest of Weimar Germany's economy. Stresemann realized the strike needed to end to keep France from taking more drastic actions, such as invading more of the Weimar Republic, and also to keep the rest of Weimar Germany from bankruptcy. More importantly, Poincaré refused negotiations outright as long as the strike was enforced. Poincaré's justified the Ruhr invasion because the Weimar Republic was not complying with the Treaty of Versailles, more specifically the reparations payments. On September 27 Stresemann

³⁷ Jones, "Stresemann, the Ruhr Crisis, and Rhenish Separatism," 312-314.

ended the strike, which had several consequences: Paramilitary activity increased dramatically, Stresemann attempted to negotiate with France on the basis that ending the strike was an act of compliance, the industrial magnates of the Ruhr started negotiating with France independently of the government, and the Rhenish separatist movement started to gain serious supporters and momentum.

The new developments caused by ending passive resistance created a political nightmare for Stresemann. The paramilitary groups *Stahlhelm* and *Jungdeutscher Orden* gave the angry Rhinelanders a way to act out their frustrations. Localized incidents of sabotage and violence against the French troops began, and Stresemann needed to quell this violence in order to keep France from sending in more troops. Poincaré wanted any plausible excuse to mount a full invasion into Weimar Germany, and Stresemann feared the paramilitary violence would be construed as communist uprisings, which would provide Poincaré with his excuse to invade. However, the government had no control over these groups, so Stresemann tried to renegotiate the reparations payments as quickly as possible.

After the factories resumed production, Stresemann was still faced with how to pay France its reparation monies. He was presented with a number of options from various government offices as well as from individuals both within and outside the government. The first recommendations came from the War Burdens Commission in Paris, which was an organization created by the Allies to investigate Weimar Germany's ability to pay reparations. They claimed only two possible paths existed: the Weimar Republic must either give the Rhineland to France, or pursue a policy directly against Poincaré and France, which would entail programs like the recently ended

passive resistance and strikes. They pushed for the second option, because they believed the other Allies would step in to limit French claims and would lower the reparations payments. Unbeknownst to the Germans at the time, Britain and the United States had already taken the Weimar Republic's side against French actions. Hans Luther, the Minister of Finance, tried to convince Stresemann the first option was necessary. In order to stabilize the German economy and the new Rentenmark currency the government needed to significantly lower expenditures. Luther argued the best way to do this was to give the Rhineland and all the expenses that went along with it to France.³⁸

The Association of Industrialists (*Reichsverband der Industriellen*) presented Stresemann with an alternative: they would pay the reparations for three to four months to allow the government a chance to balance out the economy and currency. In return they wanted tax breaks and changes in the labor laws. They wanted the eight-hour workday lengthened to 10 or 12 hours a day. This would boost their profits, along with the tax breaks and the interest on the loans to the government.

Each of the options presented to Stresemann was supported by (or motivated by) economic reasons. The War Burden Commission did not want to pay France anything. The Minister of Finance wanted to secure the German economy and currency. The industrialists wanted to enrich themselves. Stresemann rejected all of their advice and opted instead for a plan to "convince the world that the French policy constituted a direct threat to European peace and the world economy."³⁹ The backbone of his plan

³⁸ Jones, "Stresemann, the Ruhr Crisis, and Rhenish Separatism," 313-315.

³⁹ Henry Bretton, *Stresemann and the Revision of Versailles: A Fight for Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1953), 65.

was to feign compliance and submission from the Weimar Government on the one hand, and on the other show that France's expectations were unreasonably high and destroying the German economy. Stresemann wanted to show a willingness to pay, but more importantly the inability to make the payments because of the high demands. He wrote a letters to the British and Americans stating that Weimar Germany was willing to comply with the Treaty of Versailles, but unable to make the payments. His success depended on casting the blame for the problem on France.

On October 9, the day before Stresemann's scheduled negotiations with Poincaré, the German industrialists took matters into their own hands. Hugo Stinnes and a committee of six of the wealthiest, most powerful coal and iron magnates, started private negotiations with France. Stresemann rejected their offers earlier in the year, so they went to the French officials with almost the same deal they offered Stresemann. They were willing to recognize French authority in the Rhineland, if France would eliminate the eight-hour workday in the occupied zone. Although Stresemann said this offer "seriously damaged the authority of the government," Stresemann and the government had no choice other than to allow the committee to continue with their negotiations.⁴⁰ In a letter to Stinnes, Stresemann wrote that the German government was willing to make the reparations payments, but lacked the ability due to limited finances. He also wrote that Berlin could not guarantee the industrialists a reimbursement of the deliveries and taxes demanded by the MICUM, and that Stinnes should not agree to anything that would limit the sovereignty of the Reich. With this letter Stresemann absolved the German government of any financial responsibility to

⁴⁰ Jones, "Stresemann, the Ruhr Crisis, and Rhenish Separatism," 315, quoted from Cabinet Minutes, 10 October 1923, (*Vermächtnis*, I, 160). Second section from 316.

the industrialists. He allowed them to make their own deal, as long as they did not impede the rights of the government to rule the German territory. The reparation payments were taken on the local level in the form of raw materials, bypassing the government in Berlin. This deal required the Ruhr industry to pay taxes on coal that had already been delivered and all future coal deliveries, as well as thirty percent of the total coal output split among the Allies.⁴¹ This was much harsher than what Stresemann planned; however, the deal had already been made.

Stresemann's main argument for the Weimar Republic's inability to make payments was the extreme hyperinflation in the German economy. One could argue that the reparations caused the hyperinflation in post war Germany that heavily influenced Stresemann to allow the Rhineland secession. This was Stresemann's main complaint to the British and Americans, and what he wanted the world to believe. However, Austria experienced the same hyperinflation at the same time, even though their war reparations had been forgiven. Austria had made the case with the Allies that it could not pay, and the requirements were dropped. This did not help Austria avoid the economic hardships it shared with Weimar Germany.

Some scholars, like Gerald Feldman, argue that the inflation was due to reckless spending during the war.⁴² Unemployment payments to the workers who participated in the passive resistance were also extremely expensive. Stresemann reported "the present costs of passive resistance amount to 40 million gold marks everyday."⁴³ These

⁴¹ Erich Eyck, *A History of the Weimar Republic*, trans. by Harlan P Hanson and Robert G. L. Waite (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 279-281.

⁴² See Gerald D. Feldman, *The Great Disorder: Politics, Economics, and Society in the German Inflation, 1914-1924* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴³ Eyck, *A History of the Weimar Republic*, 256.

massive unemployment costs, along with stopping the industrial backbone of the German economy started hyperinflation.

Before World War I one dollar was roughly worth four gold marks. During the height of hyperinflation one dollar was worth 40 million gold marks. Savings accounts across the country were wiped out. People's life savings quickly disappeared. The costs of goods and services were astronomical. Money had become worthless. Hyperinflation increased anxiety across the country.

Stresemann used this along with claims that the Weimar Republic wanted to pay the reparations, but could not due to French occupation to garner support from Britain and the United States. Anti-French sentiment in both countries was on the rise. Stresemann exploited this opportunity. On October 25, Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin informed Stresemann that he had conferred with the Americans and both agreed to give the Weimar Republic assistance. Baldwin informed the other allied governments, which had all consented except for France.⁴⁴

Stresemann's Resignation

On 23 November 1923 Stresemann called for a vote of confidence in the Reichstag. He believed he needed the full support of all parties in order to enact lasting change and negotiations with the allies. The Social Democrats voted against him. They wanted him to stay in power, and they knew that Stresemann would win the majority of confidence without their vote. After the vote did not show total confidence Stresemann resigned as Chancellor. Erich Eyck, a German historian, wrote, "it (the Social Democratic Party) unseated a chancellor whose foreign policy conformed to

⁴⁴ K. P. Jones, "Stresemann, the Ruhr Crisis, and Rhenish Separatism: A Case Study of Westpolitik," *European Studies Review*, 7 (1977), 318-319.

their wishes and who, at the same time, was helping more than any other to strengthen Germany internally.”⁴⁵

Stresemann remained Foreign Minister, which allowed him to continue his plan of turning the Allies against France. He had not enjoyed his time as Chancellor. He did his job well, but the domestic issues were extremely complex. As Foreign Minister he did not have to rely on parliament any longer. He had the freedom to develop and enact foreign policy without the need to defend it in the *Reichstag*. Stresemann was no longer required to address the complex domestic issues of the Weimar Republic. He could focus entirely on the problem with France and how to force them out of Weimar Germany.

Stresemann’s foreign policy was straight forward: first, he wanted to fight France and maintain the Weimar Republic’s territorial integrity, with any ally they could find. Then, he wanted to make Weimar Germany the home of the German minorities in an effort to protect them from the aftermath of World War I. Next, he wanted to redefine the eastern border. He also wanted to try to regain the territory they lost after the war. Lastly, the Weimar Republic needed to fight for self-determination, especially in regards to combining with Austria.⁴⁶

Stresemann negotiated with the Allies, mainly Britain and the United States to rework the reparations. The negotiations resulted in the Dawes Plan, which gave Weimar Germany a different payment schedule that was more achievable, required the allies to withdraw from the Rhineland, and the United States loaned the Weimar Republic 800 million dollars. In end effect, Stresemann accomplished everything he

⁴⁵ Eyck, *A History of the Weimar Republic*, 282.

⁴⁶ Bretton, *Stresemann and the Treaty of Versailles*, 38.

wanted, aside from the territorial acquisitions. He renegotiated the reparations. The failing economy was rescued and quickly returned to one of the strongest economies in the world.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

German Strength

Gustav Stresemann used the French invasion of the Ruhr and the resulting separatist movement to force France, with the help of the other Allies, to renegotiate the payments for the Weimar Republic's reparations. Stresemann chose to show compliance to French demands as he demonstrated to Britain and America that Weimar Germany could not realistically comply during the hyperinflation the Weimar Republic suffered. He effectively isolated France from the other Allies by showing French aggression hindered the Weimar Republic from rebuilding after the war. Stresemann tried repeatedly to negotiate with France with little success.

France did not accept any form of renegotiation until their support for the separatist movement was exposed. It was only after the British discovered that the Germans in the Rhineland did not support the separatists and only the French Army was keeping the movement alive, that France was willing to collaborate with the other nations. Throughout this time Stresemann was in contact with France's other allies, pressuring them to force France into action.

After France agreed to change the terms of the Treaty of Versailles the Dawes plan was enacted. This gave Weimar Germany the money it needed to stabilize the economy and currency, and start the rebuilding process to fix the damage done by the war. The Rhineland rejoined the Weimar Republic. The war payments were changed to a more manageable amount. In terms of the post war economic battle between France and the Weimar Republic Stresemann was victorious.

Weimar Germany quickly rebuilt its economy. It was so successful that in a few years they were strong enough to start another World War, which was the main objective France was trying to prevent. Stresemann was able to overcome the Weimar Republic's financial issues, but unable to curb nationalism which culminated in Hitler's rise to power.

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