

War Aims and War Aims Discussions

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Despite what some believe, there is still a lot to say and learn about the First World War, particularly with regard to war aims. A lot of focus is currently placed on the cultural, social and psychological facets of the Great War, much more than on the traditional issue of war aims. Here, we will review the aims of the different parties and take into account the constant cross-over between political, ideological and economic goals – cross-over that can be found even in the Treaty of Versailles.

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Introduction

The approach to research into the Great War was completely upended in 1961 with the publication of *Griff nach der Weltmacht* by [Fritz Fischer \(1909-1999\)](#). Until then, historians had focused much

more on the origins of the conflict than on the aims of the countries at war.^[1] Fischer's seminal – albeit at times excessive – work focused on Germany's war aims and fueled a good deal of debate. The main critique that can be made is that he did not place the German war aims in the broader context of those of the other belligerent countries; there was indeed cross-over between the aims of the different parties and this dialectical relationship should by no means be overlooked.^[2] Here, this article will review the aims of the different parties through the lens of this dialectical interaction. I will also point up an important feature of the First World War: the constant overlapping of political and economic goals – an interaction that can be found even in the Treaty of Versailles, a document that cannot be fully understood if its very important economic aspects are overlooked.^[3]

Germany until late 1916

On 9 September 1914, Chancellor [Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg \(1856-1921\)](#) had a document drafted that Fritz Fischer famously referred to as the “September Programme”. The text described Germany's desire to push [Russia's](#) borders as far to the East as possible and annex land from Belgium and [France](#). According to Fritz Fischer, this programme was meant to guide German policy throughout the war; it was an extension of the [imperialist](#) aims defined before the war, at least as early as 1912, and mirrored the interests of the German ruling class.^[4]

There was however actually nothing definitive about the “September Programme”; it was a document of the moment that was drafted before the leaders of the *Reich* had understood that Germany was in the process of losing the Battle of the Marne, begun on 6 September. Very quickly, Bethmann Hollweg curtailed his ambitions. Moreover, his main challenge was to rein in the annexationist zeal of [Wilhelm II, German Emperor \(1859-1941\)](#) and the military leaders who were seriously contemplating the annexation of Belgian Flanders, the North of France up to the Somme, [Poland](#) and the Baltic States. Seen as such, the “September Programme” is more of a counter-fire which set in stone only the annexation of the Briey iron ore mining basin in Lorraine. Colonial aspirations were set aside for “future consideration”; the only thing mentioned was the constitution of a coherent entity in central Africa connecting German East Africa with Cameroon and South-Western Africa. (It should also be noted that this was never one of the Reich's main goals).

Above all, the chancellor did not intend the document to be an actual territorial programme; he simply wanted to outline in hypothetical form an overall framework for the peace he still believed to be near to help guide the Berliners in charge of drafting the economic clauses of such a peace agreement. Indeed, the main thrust of the “September Programme” was not territorial but rather economic, as confirmed by the accompanying letter addressed by the chancellor to [Clemens von Delbrück \(1856-1921\)](#), the State secretary of the Interior, who was in charge of preparing the economic and customs clauses of the future treaties. The chancellor wanted above all to establish a customs union in Central Europe (this project is often referred to by the term *Mittleuropa*), a union that would unite Austria-Hungary and Belgium with Germany, as well as France, Italy and the Netherlands (although hope of including the three latter countries was short-lived).

The chancellor was perfectly aware that the customs union project was by no means economically rational since only 4 percent of the *Reich's* foreign trade involved Austria-Hungary, and its main trade markets were actually located outside of *Mitteleuropa*. His motivation was essentially political: the customs union would be an indirect way for Berlin to control Europe via the economy and was thought to be the only means to bolster the *Reich's* security (it is important to recall that German leaders felt threatened, encircled by the alliance between France, [Great Britain](#) and Russia, regardless the actual relevance of their fears) without having to resort to excessive annexations, which would have further increased the number of foreigners in Germany. *Mitteleuropa* was above all a realist policy aimed at curbing the dangerous fantasies of the Emperor and military.

Very quickly scaled back to include the Reich, Austria-Hungary, Belgium and Poland, the customs union remained a permanent and unconditional German war aim right up to the war's end, but always for political reasons: it was thought to be the only means to keep Austria-Hungary closely tied to Germany after the war, as well as Belgium and Poland, without having to resort to large-scale annexations that would not be easily accepted by Europe, once Germany had abandoned all hope (actually just after the Marne debacle) of a total victory over the Allies.

On a purely economic level, however, the project remained the same. Industry quickly objected (except for heavy industry during a brief initial period, but even this was more the result of pan-Germanist intrigues in the industrial sphere related to [Alfred Hugenberg \(1865-1951\)](#) than an actual orientation). Indeed, German industrialists were fundamentally liberal and well aware that their markets were now global, that there was no advantage to limiting themselves to Central Europe and that other countries would not hesitate to counter the creation of a protected economic zone in Central Europe with retaliatory measures. The agricultural sector, on the other hand, feared agricultural competition from Poland and Hungary. The government was unable to reach an agreement with Vienna, despite negotiations that lasted from 1915 until the end of the war: the interests of the two countries were indeed too divergent, with Germany wanting to protect its agriculture and Austria its burgeoning industry. Finally, the word in Berlin was always that an economic *Mitteleuropa* would be conditional on its acceptance by the Allies in the peace treaties, given how fearful the Germans were of retaliatory customs measures and how a return to liberalized world markets was deemed to be the main priority for the Reich; this meant that except in the improbable case of an absolute victory, there was a good chance that the customs union would never actually materialize.

In terms of land claims, the [German government](#) was very hesitant in 1915. It was now understood that only a separate peace with an adversary of the Reich would allow it to win a decisive military victory over the others. On several occasions over the course of 1915 attempts were made to negotiate a separate peace with Russia. In this hypothesis, the Baltic provinces and Poland would obviously have had to be returned to Russia. The King of the Belgians was also approached in hopes of reaching a separate peace with Belgium, which might (it was wrongly believed) have convinced Great Britain to withdraw from the war. Had [Albert I, King of the Belgians \(1875-1934\)](#) agreed, Berlin was prepared to fully restore Belgian sovereignty in exchange only for the signing of a trade

agreement.

But from early 1916 it was obvious that these different attempts at a separate peace had failed, notably due to the Allies' determination to put an end to what they called "the hegemony of Prussian militarism" and drastically curb the influence of Germany in Europe. Berlin in turn toughened its aims anew: it was once again stated that Belgium, Poland and the Baltic States would become political, military and economic protectorates closely controlled by the Reich.^[5]

This orientation had to be altered again following the loss of the [Battle of the Somme](#), from July to the autumn of 1916.^[6] The large-scale challenges faced by the German army and industry during this battle led its political (and economic) leaders to conclude that the war could no longer be won in the West, although the military leaders still believed that it was possible to reverse the situation by embracing unrestricted submarine warfare; the Emperor was torn between the position held by the chancellor and that defended by military leaders. Bethmann Hollweg's belief that victory was now impossible in the West resulted in the Austro-German offer to begin peace negotiations on 12 December 1916. This offer was very poorly presented but was in fact much more serious than is often thought: the chancellor was prepared to accept a return to the *status quo* in the West (even the annexation of Briey was no longer an absolute imperative for him, and he would have accepted guarantees in Belgium that simply stopped the country from militarily or economically allying itself with France and Great Britain), under the assumption that the Reich would compensate in the East at Russia's expense. It is also worth noting that German public opinion and Prussian aristocratic spheres were much more interested in the war aims involving the *Baltikum* and Poland than in those that involved Western Europe. For Bethmann Hollweg, the expansion of German influence to the East and the Reich's economic clout would be sufficient to ensure its control of the situation over the long term.

We can as such see that the German war aims were less rigid and ambitious than is generally thought. It is true that the military leaders were less accommodating, but although they were very influential, it is nonetheless excessive to say, as is often the case, that they actually ruled the country starting in the autumn of 1916 and the arrival of [Paul von Hindenburg \(1847-1934\)](#) and [Erich Ludendorff \(1865-1937\)](#) at the *Oberste Heeresleitung*. The military leaders were also far less optimistic than the chancellor about the possibility of reaching a negotiated peace with the Allies, and much more aware (especially Ludendorff) of the Allies' desire to greatly reduce the influence of the Reich. In this sense at least, as we shall see below, they were not entirely wrong.^[7]

The Allies until late 1916

From the outset of the war, the Allies were far more set on drastically curtailing the political, military and economic influence of Germany than has long been admitted, particularly France and Russia which, starting in 1912, had a similar reaction to what they felt was a growing German threat. As early as 5 September 1914, with the Pact of London, the English, Russians and French agreed to not

seek a separate peace and to agree, when the time came, on the conditions of peace. By late September 1914 the French Council of Ministers (the Germans were still in a phase of retreat following the Battle of the Marne) decided that the war would be pursued beyond the liberation of French territory and until the “downfall of Prussian militarism”, a coded way of saying that the unity of the Reich would be challenged when a peace treaty was signed.

During the autumn of 1914, the Russians and French agreed to the following terms: when the time came, France could do as it pleased in the Rhineland, as could Russia in Prussian Poland. The two main allies (at this point the United Kingdom was not yet very involved in the conflict) as such gave each other *carte blanche* for the post-war period. From this point onward, some French administrative and political spheres envisaged – in addition to the return of [Alsace-Lorraine](#), of course –, the possibility of connecting to France in one form or another the Saarland, [Luxembourg](#) and the Rhineland; these were only hypotheses at the time, but in their public speeches French leaders very quickly introduced the idea of “guarantees” required for peace in view of the post-war period; this vague expression meant that in any case, they would go beyond the mere reclaiming of Alsace-Lorraine, even if their war aims were not yet fully defined (and addressing them in public was forbidden by [censorship](#)).

Thought on this matter in London at the time was less elaborate; nevertheless, there was no question that Belgian independence needed to be restored and, beyond that, the decision had already been made to reduce Germany's influence, especially its military and naval force, and also to chase the Reich out of Africa and limit the spread of its influence in the [Middle East](#).

In October 1915 in Paris, [Aristide Briand \(1862-1932\)](#) replaced [René Viviani \(1863-1925\)](#) as president of the council. Briand was much more proactive than his predecessor in conducting the war, and the question of [France's war aims](#) was soon much clearer, notably following the defensive victory at [Verdun](#) in June 1916 and the promising start to the Somme Offensive in July. Debate within the [government](#) and general staff starting in the summer resulted in an important governmental meeting at the Elysée Palace on 7 October, under the presidency of [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#) (who was particularly active and ambitious in terms of the country's war aims, much more so than Briand who was actually quite cautious) and, on 12 January 1917, following a final debate in the Council of Ministers, in a letter from Briand to [Paul Cambon \(1843-1924\)](#), the ambassador in London, outlining France's aims.

It was agreed that when the time came France would demand the annexation of the Saarland, in addition to the obvious return of Alsace-Lorraine. With regard to the Rhineland, internal disagreement within the government meant that there was no clear favourite among the three possible solutions: annexation, simple military occupation, or separation from the Reich and the constitution of one or two states in the Rhineland under French political, economic and military protection. What was clear was that France wanted to be given free reign by its Allies to settle the issue as it pleased when a peace agreement was signed. Aside from the Saarland and perhaps the Rhineland, Germany would also lose other provinces, notably to Russia, and the entire country's unity might even be challenged.

With regard to Luxembourg, French political and administrative staff were divided, as illustrated by the internal debate that took place when the instructions for Paul Cambon were prepared on 12 January 1917. Some people wanted the Grand Duchy to join Belgium to ensure in exchange a tight-knit political, military and economic union with the country; others (the majority, it appears) wanted France to purely and simply annex Luxembourg.

More than truly imperialist ambition, this set of aims was the product of an obsession with security tied to the fear of Germany's influence and impetus. This security was understood by French leaders in two senses: strategic security, of course, thence the desire to control the Rhine by one means or another; but also economic security, to the extent that they had understood that security in the 20th century was inseparable from industrial influence. And the additional boost to the potential of France's iron and steel industry that would come with the acquisition of Lorraine, the Saarland and Luxembourg would place France alongside Great Britain and not far behind Germany instead of the gap of nearly 1:4 that existed between French and German steelworks before the war. The French were as such hoping for large-scale industrial growth and alongside this hoped to have the means to curb Germany's economic clout.

Indeed, the government drafted a vast project for French economic growth and to counter the German economy, notably driven by [Étienne Clémentel \(1864-1936\)](#), the minister of trade and industry from 1915 to the end of the war; this was further backed by an array of elites from the industrial sector (the large corps of state-certified engineers, so characteristic of modern France). The project tied in with concerns that had arisen in some spheres before the war regarding the relative decline of the French economy's ranking in the world and the insufficient industrialization of the country. The heavy industry and banking sectors – which had close ties to the German and Austrian economies before 1914 and were therefore generally in favour of renewing trade with the Central Powers following the war – were opposed to these government initiatives, which were nonetheless backed by small and medium-scale industry, much more affected by German competition.

This project for economic growth was based on a complex strategy: in addition to the impact on the steel industry that would accompany the return of Alsace-Lorraine and the control of the Saarland and Luxembourg, the French wanted to form a customs union with Belgium and Italy to finally bring continental Western Europe under French economic influence. Among other things, France would come to an agreement with Great Britain both in order to co-manage the main raw materials imported from overseas so as to avoid their sole dependence on market law (in the French Colbertist and interventionist tradition) and to drastically reduce Germany's economic influence. The start of this programme was meant to take shape with the organization of an inter-Allied economic conference in Paris in June 1916 during which it was decided that the Allies would collaborate during and after the war, and ensure efficient control of the world's major [raw materials](#) (which would in turn give them leverage to influence Germany). Among other things, the Reich would be subject to prolonged customs discrimination after the war. In the end, the Belgians, Italians and Russians did not want to jeopardize the resumption of their post-war economic ties with Germany and so refused

to ratify the recommendations of the Paris Economic Conference. But Great Britain, which in 1916, out of fear of Germany's economic influence, was largely prepared to put aside its traditional liberalism, continued to support until 1919 the proposals set out during the Conference of 1916, that it had helped inspire and whose exact wording can even be found in parts of the Treaty of Versailles. The Franco-British agreement to reduce the scope of rival Germany's economic influence was much stronger than is often believed.

Great Britain toughened its position in general in 1916. After a period of hesitation following the deception of the Battle of the Somme in the autumn, during which the liberal Prime Minister [Herbert Henry Asquith \(1852-1928\)](#) had envisaged the possibility of a negotiated compromise with the Reich, conspiring between the Conservatives and [David Lloyd George \(1863-1945\)](#) saw the latter take charge of the [government](#) on 6 December. It was then made known that the war would instead be driven full throttle ahead, notably with the support of the [United States](#) which appeared to be on the verge of entering the war and upon whom the British were counting to reach their aims, even if it meant having to share the management of world affairs in the post-war period. The mood was less optimistic in London than Paris, however: from a fundamentally geopolitical perspective, Britain felt that it would be impossible to stop the Reich from uniting the European "heartland", *Mitteleuropa*, including Austria, Poland and [Romania](#). The British felt that it was essential, however, to control the sea front and keep Germany from gaining ocean access – and thus to chase it out of Belgium, Africa and the Middle East. London's main goals at the time were to free Belgium, break up the Turkish empire and strongly increase Britain's presence in the Middle East; these aims sometimes conflicted with the French, who also wanted to mark their presence in the Middle East, particularly in Syria and Lebanon, but who were not by any means capable of sending 1.5 million soldiers to the area like the British Empire had by the war's end. It was in this context that the [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#) of 1916, that had largely divided the Middle East between the two countries, was challenged at France's expense in 1917 by British policy aimed at the Arab world, which it wanted to encourage to rise up against Turkey, and by the [Balfour Declaration](#) that announced the creation of a "national home" for the Jewish people in Palestine.^[8]

1917: Hesitation and Secret Negotiations

All of the countries at war suffered a blow to their [morale](#) in 1917. This was due to general lassitude after three years of war and was compounded by the political and social fallout of the [Russian Revolution](#) and disappointment in France following the failure of the Nivelle Offensive in April. Germany experienced its first widespread strikes; France suffered a crisis of mutinies in June; and Austria-Hungary entered a crisis period that resulted the following year in the start of its gradual dissolution.^[9]

When the United States entered the war in April, [Woodrow Wilson's \(1856-1924\)](#) considerable influence was immediately felt given the weight of America's economic clout and its financial aid to the Allies, and given the large-scale contribution of troops anticipated starting in 1918. Whether they

liked it or not, this forced the belligerent parties to take Wilsonian principles into account when defining their war aims. Up until then, Berlin and the Allies had played by the rules of traditional power politics, defined by cabinets working under utmost secrecy and without much consideration for public opinion. The Allies in particular had multiplied the number of secret agreements that existed between them, notably with the Serbs, Italians and Romanians to divide up in advance the remains of the German, Austrian and Turkish empires. When defining war aims thereafter, however, it became necessary to refer at least approximately to principles that could be stated publicly: public opinion was now a witness to countries' war aims.

It was as such that, following the deception caused by the failure of unrestricted submarine warfare launched in January (that only resulted in precipitating America's declaration of war), the *Reichstag* voted a "Peace Resolution" in July that rejected annexations by force. Indeed, German deputies had in mind a peace based on the *status quo* in the West and on a German military, political and economic protectorate in the East, in the Baltic States and Poland, without any annexations. The Allies chose to incorrectly interpret this "Peace Resolution" as a pure [propaganda](#) technique; but it was actually a reflection of the true position of Germany's leaders at the time, aware as they were of the strategic impasse in which the Reich found itself and despite the reticence of the country's High Command.

In Paris, the chamber convened secretly in early June to discuss the country's war aims (this was the only such occasion throughout the entire war) following the revelation by Russian revolutionaries of the secret agreement signed between France and the tsar (this was the only such occasion throughout the entire war). The resolution adopted at the end of the debate rejected "all thought of conquest" but restated the goal of "defeating Prussian militarism" and the need "to obtain solid guarantees of peace". Close examination of the debates points up that the deputies wanted to put aside the hypothesis of annexing the Rhineland, but keep open the possibility of either occupying it permanently or even its separation from the Reich. Of the three options envisaged by the government since the summer of 1916, only complete annexation was set aside as it no longer fit with the new spirit that accompanied America's declaration of war and the [Russian Revolution](#). It is nonetheless worth underscoring that the government, with the support of a majority of deputies, by no means intended to abandon its Rhenish policy.

Moreover, the military impasse and social and political problems were beginning to lead some leaders to seriously consider the possibility of a negotiated peace rather than peace imposed by victory or at least shaped by a position of force for the first time since the start of the war. Peace was discussed in great secrecy several times and much more seriously than is generally acknowledged.

The best known, although surely not the most important [affair](#) was the attempted negotiation by the [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#), who succeeded [Francis Joseph I, Emperor of Austria \(1830-1916\)](#) in October 1916, with the Allies through the intermediary of [Sixtus, Prince of Bourbon-Parma \(1886-1934\)](#) starting in March 1917. Charles did not so much have a separate peace in mind but rather a negotiation process initiated by Vienna in which Berlin would be pressured and forced to

join to avoid being isolated. Charles was prepared to concede Austrian Poland to the Reich so that the latter, in exchange, would agree to return Alsace-Lorraine to France in order to as such unlock the peace process. His attempt failed for two reasons: for one, he refused to grant Italy all of its territorial demands (Trieste); secondly, – and less known –, the French, who were very distrustful in any case and feared an Austro-German manoeuvre, felt that the return of Alsace-Lorraine was not sufficient: a change in the status of the Rhineland was also necessary, which was something to which Charles could obviously not commit.

Yet I believe that there were actually four closely connected affairs that were even more important: sounding out by Briand (president of the council until March 1917) aimed at Germany, from December 1916 to March 1917; sounding out by Painlevé (the minister of war from March to September, then president of the council from September to November 1917) aimed at Austria-Hungary; the famous Briand-Lancken affair, which also involved the Belgian foreign minister, [Charles de Broqueville \(1860-1940\)](#), during the spring and summer of 1917; and the “Peace Offensive” by [Richard von Kühlmann \(1873-1948\)](#), head of the *Auswärtiges Amt*, in September. Contrary to common belief, these different affairs were not simple manoeuvres based more on [espionage](#) than politics; they were veritable attempts that were very important from a war aims perspective. Indeed, through the lens of a negotiated rather than imposed peace, scenarios were envisaged that differed greatly from those advocated publicly.

In December 1916, it appears that Briand, who seemingly had some doubts about the appropriateness of the broadened war aims that were being discussed in Paris at the time, secretly got in touch with Berlin through the intermediary of Professor [Emile Haguenin \(1872-1925\)](#), who ran the Press Office of the French embassy in Bern (actually an intelligence body), and [Henry Count Kessler \(1868-1937\)](#), who was close to Wilhelm II and in direct contact with the chancellor. During a series of conversations that lasted until March, the two men very cautiously discussed the possibility of resolving the Alsace-Lorraine issue either through its autonomy within the Reich or with the retrocession of one part of the territory to France and an administrative condominium status for the rest. In exchange, France would give Germany military and economic guarantees in Alsace-Lorraine (free access to iron-ore and demilitarization) and an economic rapprochement with the Reich after the war; further, Paris would abandon plans to form an anti-German block with Great Britain after the war. Such discussions obviously came to an end with Briand’s resignation in March, the decision imposed by Poincaré to pursue the Nivelle Offensive despite the strategic upheaval that resulted from the Russian Revolution, and America’s declaration of war. While they remain quite mysterious, these initiatives nonetheless point up the strong differences that existed among the French ruling sphere in the spring of 1917. While some continued to advocate for a decisive victory in order to achieve the broader war aims outlined the previous autumn – this was the case for Poincaré and that is why he insisted on pursuing the Nivelle Offensive despite objections from one part of the government and some high ranking military officials; other leaders were clearly contemplating the possibility of a negotiated peace and their resolve was further bolstered by the failure of the Nivelle Offensive.

This was notably the case for [Paul Painlevé \(1863-1933\)](#) who, throughout the spring and summer of 1917, was in contact with Vienna several times. During this interaction, the possibilities discussed were either a separate peace with Austria, or a general peace agreement that would nonetheless use Vienna to pressure Berlin. With support from Austria, France would recover Alsace-Lorraine; in return, Austria's integrity would be guaranteed, but on condition that it be reformed in a confederal sense and "Slavicized", which would break up the close ties between the Central Powers after the war. To compensate the loss of Alsace-Lorraine, Germany would receive colonial concessions ([Indochina](#) and Congo).

Vienna took these proposals very seriously. [Ottokar Graf Czernin \(1872-1932\)](#), the minister of foreign affairs, was even prepared to secretly meet with Painlevé in [Switzerland](#). Informed in early September, Kühlmann also took this information very seriously; he realized how tempted Austria was to pursue this route and he decided to immediately counter-attack. He was able to convince the German government to secretly send an offer to London: the Reich was prepared to reinstate full Belgian independence. Kühlmann believed that under such conditions, England would be prepared to make peace and would pressure France to follow suit; the Reich could always compensate at Russia's expense. Kühlmann's offer was very serious and at no time was Berlin closer to accepting a negotiated peace. The British cabinet examined Berlin's offer in late September and decided to reject it despite Lloyd George's contrary opinion. Indeed, most of the cabinet felt that if the Reich was able to become stronger in the East at Russia's expense, then it would resume hostilities a few years later in the West under much better conditions.

About the same time, the scandal blew-up regarding the secret contact over the past few months between Briand, no longer in the government, and Lancken, the head of the German civil administration in Belgium and also close to the emperor. According to Briand, the possibility of reinstating Belgian independence and returning Alsace-Lorraine in exchange for economic concessions had been discussed. It has often been assumed that Briand was manipulated by Lancken in this affair. That is not necessarily so and in some respects these interactions resemble the Haguenin-Kessler discussions. In any case, Painlevé (president of the council at the time) and Lloyd George discussed the affair on 25 September and we know that they at least took it very seriously. But the British Conservatives and Poincaré, who felt that it was merely a German trap, worked together to ensure its failure.

The situation once again changed considerably in the following weeks, and the different parties at war toughened their stances anew. Encouraged by the October Revolution and the possibility of a separate peace with Russia in the near future, Germany also toughened its stance and again envisaged making Belgium a close protectorate. In France, [Georges Clemenceau's \(1841-1929\)](#) arrival in power in November, and the support of public opinion, put an end to the atmosphere of [pacifism](#) and pushed aside all possibilities other than victory. Britain, too, took a tougher stance and for the first time notably demanded the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France when a peace agreement was signed.^[10]

Wilsonianism

Wilson felt that responsibility for the war's outbreak was shared between the Allies and Germany. Yet he nonetheless tipped in favour of France and England from the start of the war and assisted them notably through various discrete financial arrangements despite the many crises tied to the blockade organized by the Allies that failed to respect the rights of neutral powers. Indeed, while Wilson did not want to see Germany crushed, he felt that an Allied victory – which at first he nonetheless wanted to be as limited as possible – would by and large be preferable as the latter were more liberal and democratic than the Reich.

In 1915, Wilsonian policy was limited to the Western hemisphere: the president was convinced that the Allies and Central Powers would form closed and inward-looking economic blocks after the war; since the United States would not be able to stop this situation, a modernized Monroe Doctrine would be required to draw in South America and as such replace European influence and interests. Public opinion and economic circles for the most part agreed with this offensive form of isolationism.

In 1916, as Wilson gradually realized that the United States could not indefinitely keep out of the war, he slowly abandoned this fundamentally isolationist perspective and embraced an internationalist vision in which America played a much more active role in the world, generally referred to as the “Open Door doctrine.” Wilson began to increasingly defend a new vision of international relations that split with the secret diplomacy of the traditional Concert of Europe. Open diplomacy, the right of peoples to self-determination, freedom of the seas, disarmament: this was the policy that Wilson began to defend with increasing resolve, in the name of the global spread of America's liberal, political and economic values. Further, Wilson also turned to policy that was no longer isolationist but could instead be called “Atlantic”, as recommended by major economic interests on the East Coast, and Wall Street in particular, which had close ties to the City in London and wanted to ensure close collaboration with the Allies after the war – and despite the opposition expressed by a majority of public opinion and the industrialists of rural America.

The American declaration of war alongside the Allies in April 1917 did not alter the main thrust of Wilson's policy: he immediately rejected all of the secret agreements signed between the Allies since the start of the war; he countered their exclusive and traditional territorial and economic aims with the Open Door policy; and he refused to be referred to as an Ally, preferring to be called an “associate” of London and Paris. This allowed him to do something new in advancing war aims that, for the first time, were based on principles that were clearly understandable for public opinion and that resonated greatly, even among the Central Powers. It also allowed him to retain complete independence from the Allies and to promote in universalist terms a global opening towards the economic and political values of liberalism that corresponded entirely with the interests of an America that already represented over a third of the world's industrial activity.

Wilson outlined his goals in his famous [Fourteen Points](#) speech on 8 January 1918. He began by restating the guiding principles of open diplomacy, freedom of the seas and economic non-discrimination. But the rest of his speech was more cautious than is often thought: while it certainly

took into account the right of peoples to self-determination, it also considered history, and strategic and economic balance. Belgium would be restored, Poland would be reinstated and Alsace-Lorraine would be returned to France. But neither Austria-Hungary nor Turkey would be broken up, only reshaped according to the principle of equal rights for their different populations. Strategic and economic imperatives would be taken into account along the Italian and Balkan State borders. The split with the pre-1914 Concert of Europe principles was therefore not absolute.

With regard to Germany, Wilson was very cautious: there was no push at the time to impose a change in regime; the American president was still convinced that the Reich would remain the most influential state in mainland Europe and would heavily influence Central and Eastern Europe; this seemed inevitable and acceptable so long as Berlin embraced the international rules of Wilsonianism; in January 1918, this appeared to Wilson as the essential condition for peace with Germany and he in no way wanted to exclude the Reich from the post-war international political and economic order.

It is therefore understandable that the British and especially French Allies – who had much more radical territorial and economic claims against the Reich and that had no intention of admitting Germany into the new post-war international order – were actually quite disappointed by the Fourteen Points which, ultimately, were almost as hostile to their ambitions as they were to those of the Central Powers. But Wilson's position changed following events in the spring of 1918 and in the end allowed for a convergence of war aims between the Allies and America; a convergence that was not absolute but nonetheless sufficient to win the war and impose the treaties of 1919.^[11]

Germany in 1918

The [Treaty of Brest-Litovsk](#) on 3 March 1918 with Russia and the Treaty of Bucharest on 7 May with Romania embodied without a doubt the pinnacle of German ambitions during the First World War. There is no question that these treaties were harsh: Romania became a political and economic protectorate of the Central Powers, Russia lost Poland, [Finland](#), [the Baltic States](#) and, worse still, [Ukraine](#), with all of these regions fated to actually become German protectorates.

And yet in Berlin, there were radically diverging interpretations of the situation. For the military leaders, the peace treaties in the East were meant to allow them to assume the offensive in the West and win the war before the massive arrival of American troops; this is what was attempted with the series of offensive battles that began in late March on the [Western front](#). The plan was to as such definitively establish a broad-scale self-sufficient territory closely controlled by Berlin spanning from the Ukraine to Belgium, as a permanent marker of German influence in the post-war period. With regard to Bolshevik Russia, the military leaders never intended for there to be any cooperation whatsoever, only to weaken it as much as possible.

The civilian leaders on the other hand had no plans to create such a self-sufficient territory, which they knew the Allies would never recognize and which would be insufficient in any case for the needs

of the German economy. They were simply trying to collect the right cards to use when negotiating a peace agreement in order to obtain the best possible conditions and notably avoid letting the Allies deprive Germany of its colonies and subject it to permanent economic discrimination. For them, the treaties signed in the East were provisional and could be revised when a general peace was negotiated.

Starting in May, Berlin began new negotiations with the Russians, despite opposition from the military whose leaders instead wanted to expand the German occupation zone in Russia. These negotiations were to pave the way to the Treaty of Berlin on 27 August which amounted to a considerable revision of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk: the Germans accepted the possibility of a future return of Ukraine to Russia and the payment of reciprocal financial obligations that were actually quite favourable for the Russians, unlike what is usually said, and that notably prepared closer economic cooperation between the two countries. Moreover, Berlin and the Bolsheviks agreed to collaborate, possibly even militarily, against the Whites and against any attempted Allied intervention.

The military leaders' theses were as such losing ground. This was of course even more patent following the large-scale military routs in August. The last chancellor under Wilhelm II, [Max von Baden \(1867-1929\)](#), decided to embrace Wilson's Fourteen Points. Indeed, they guaranteed that Germany would not be broken up or subject to permanent economic discrimination. Further, the right of peoples to self-determination would make it impossible to return Poland and the Baltic States to Russia and, under such conditions, it was obvious that the Reich would in any case have great influence over these countries, even if it was indirect. Max von Baden's entire strategy at the end of the war and throughout the armistice negotiations was therefore based on attempting to use Wilson's Fourteen Points to undercut the much more offensive French and English projects. This strategy was in part a success since, when the armistice was declared on 11 November 1918, the Reich indeed obtained the guarantee that peace would be based on the Fourteen Points, but it was only partial since Wilson had considerably toughened his attitude towards Germany since the spring, although it took a while before this was fully understood in Berlin.^[12]

The Allies in 1918

The spring of 1918 is a perfect example of the dialectical nature of war aims that we underscored above. The Germans had signed very harsh treaties in the East in part because they feared the Allies' punitive economic and political projects for the post-war period. But in return, these treaties persuaded the Allies, and Wilson in particular, of the totally and definitively imperialist nature of German policy, which in turn spurred a new toughening in their attitude. The Allies and Wilson theretofore agreed on the need to impose upon Germany a profound change in regime and men, and immediate democratization, as a condition for peace. Despite what Wilson had felt up until then, Wilhelmian Germany's mere adherence to the international principles of Wilsonianism would not suffice.

Further, the thought of even indirect German control over *Mitteleuropa* could no longer be tolerated,

as Washington and London had accepted until then. The geographical influence of the Reich needed to be drastically reduced and Wilson now agreed with the British and especially French positions on this matter. One essential means of pressure to force Germany to democratize and accept the new international order was to resort to the use of “economic weapons”, i.e. control by the Allies of the main global raw materials and the possibility of subjecting the Reich to economic and trade discrimination. Wilson now accepted the principle of using such “economic weapons”, which he had previously rejected.

Unlike the position previously defended in his Fourteen Points, Wilson was now convinced that Austria-Hungary had to be broken up and its peoples' calls for independence supported. He was able to easily persuade Lloyd George of this but had more trouble convincing Clemenceau. Indeed, contrary to what is commonly admitted, the French government was initially not at all favourable towards the break-up of Austria-Hungary and the creation of small countries in Central and Eastern Europe based on the principle of nation states. Paris feared that were Austria reduced to its German-speaking population it would quickly join the Reich and, more broadly, that Germany would easily dominate such a fractured Central-Eastern Europe. Paris would have preferred to see Austria-Hungary left intact (the French government was still secretly attempting to salvage it in October 1918) and the creation of a greater Poland, including Lithuania and part of Ukraine, based on the idea that under such conditions it could keep Germany in check. It was difficult for Paris to accept Wilson's new policy; even after it had done so, the French rallied for the creation of states that were as powerful as possible, with little heed for their ethnic coherence. That is how France came to play an important role in defining the borders of Poland and Czechoslovakia in the winter of 1919 – with little regard for certain ethnographic realities and with the main goal of erecting the most solid barrier possible against Germany. In this respect, the treaties of 1919 only really had to confirm the policies drafted by the French military and political missions in Central Europe during the winter of 1919.

Although stronger since the spring of 1918, agreement between the French, British and Americans remained far from absolute. Georges Clemenceau discretely but firmly continued to pursue specific French aims that went far beyond the Wilsonian principles: the new border with Germany would not be that of 1815 but that of 1790, meaning it would encompass a large part of the Saarland; the Rhineland would be separated from the Reich and would come under French control by one means or another; and Luxembourg would also become a republic with close ties to France.

Above all, however, the British and French disagreed with Wilson on one fundamental point: for them, the economic and political organization of the post-war world (the League of Nations and economic agreements between the Allies) needed to exclude Germany for a very long time, even if it was democratized. Wilson, on the other hand, believed that as soon as the country was reformed and had accepted the international principles of Wilsonianism, it should be openly accepted into the new post-war international community. More specifically, Wilson did not accept the idea – firmly defended in Paris but also in London – that Germany should be subjected to long-term economic and trade-related discrimination after the war. For Wilson, such discrimination could only be temporary and

would have to cease when Berlin had conformed to the new economic and political world order.^[13]

The Treaty of Versailles

Contrary to what is commonly asserted, the Treaty of Versailles was the product of profound agreement between the United States, England and France, despite their differences, to sustainably weaken Germany politically, militarily and economically. France of course did not obtain all that it had wanted and had to make a few concessions to its English-speaking allies. But the clauses in the treaty (or at least their subsequent application) were for the most part in its favour. It is as such that, while Paris did not obtain the annexation of the Saarland but only ownership of the mines and the institution of the League of Nations' administration, a plebiscite would decide the outcome of the territory in 1935. In 1919, the French government was convinced that Saarlanders would vote to join France when the time came. This was similar in the Rhineland: the French obtained neither its separation from the Reich nor its permanent occupation, only a provisional fifteen-year occupation. But this could be extended if Germany did not pay its reparations – and, as Clemenceau told the council of ministers in April 1919 when they were concerned about limiting the duration of the occupation, Germany would not be able to pay its reparations, meaning that France would indefinitely remain in the Rhineland. Convinced as they were that the Rhenish were of a different nature than the “Prussians”, they thought that the former would end up accepting and even embracing the French presence. Finally, with regard to Luxembourg, nothing in the treaty impeded establishing close ties with France, and Clemenceau fully intended to do so. France's concessions to its English-speaking allies at Versailles were therefore more provisional than definitive; notably, Paris did not abandon its Rhenish policy until 1924. The Americans and English were well aware of all this and, while they could not accept that France openly violate the right of peoples to self-determination, they nonetheless agreed to accept the clauses that ensured (or at least appeared to) France's long-term control over Germany.

The treaty's economic clauses – whose drafting it was easy for the Allies to agree upon – confirmed this impression: they were very strict and sometimes borrowed word-for-word certain resolutions from the inter-Allied economic conference of 1916. It is as such, for example, that Germany lost ownership of its industrial patents, which notably gave a considerable boost to the French chemical industry. Among other things, Germany could be (and was) subjected to a series of trade-related and economic discrimination measures by the Allies for a five-year period that was renewable upon decision by the League of Nations, of which Germany was not a part. The figures of Franco-German and Anglo-German trade in the following years underscore the efficiency of such measures which really could jeopardize Germany's long-term development.

At the same time, it is worth pointing up the existence of some corrective measures. Firstly, Wilson was firmly set on managing the peace in such a way as to avoid long-term political and economic discrimination against Germany if it embraced the new international order. Wilson thought that he could control the evolution of the situation through the League of Nations, by settling the issue of

reparations later (they were not definitively resolved in the treaty) and by the means of pressure bound up in France and England's war debts to the United States. But the refusal by the senate to ratify the treaty robbed him of these means to influence the immediate post-war period.

The treaty was nevertheless more complex, balanced and fair than is often acknowledged. The principle of disarmament applied firstly to Germany but affected all countries in the long run (which led to the World Disarmament Conference of 1932-34). The occupation of the Rhineland could be extended but it could also be shortened. Reparations were based on strict legal principles, but the treaty immediately added that they were contingent on Germany's ability to pay and that it could ask that reparations be reduced at any time. This was the legal basis for the adjustments that occurred throughout the history of the reparations. With regard to the economic clauses, they were indeed strict but they also allowed for the potential maintenance of very important trade, notably in the steel industry, between Lorraine, the Saarland, Luxembourg and the Ruhr. The treaty was actually a dynamic and evolving entity that allowed the treatment of Germany to be adapted and made either more strict or conciliatory depending on its post-war behaviour. The treaty could be interpreted in several ways and could of course be strictly applied – like during the occupation of the Ruhr in 1923; but it could also be more accommodating, like in 1924 at the London Conference, in 1925 with the Locarno Treaties and in 1932 with the final concessions granted to Germany in terms of disarmament and reparations. The Treaty of Versailles is a complex entity that bears the signs of French and English war aims, but also of Wilsonianism.^[14]

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Notes

1. ↑ With a few exceptions such as Gatzke, Hans Wilhelm: *Germany's Drive to the West. A Study of German War Aims during the First World War*, Baltimore 1950. It should be noted that there has recently been renewed interest in the origins of the war, see for example, Schmidt, Stefan: *Frankreichs Außenpolitik en der Julikrise 1914*, Munich, Oldenbourg 2009; McMeekin, Sean: *The Russian Origins of the First World War*, Cambridge 2011.

2. † This article analyses the war aims of Austria-Hungary, France, Germany, Great Britain, Russia and the USA. To learn more about about the war aims of other belligerent countries and regions, please see the following articles: "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(Africa\)](#)", "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(Australia\)](#)", "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(Belgium\)](#)", "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(China\)](#)", "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(East Central Europe\)](#)", "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(Italy\)](#)", "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(Japan\)](#)", "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(Ottoman Empire\)](#)", "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(Portugal\)](#)", "[War Aims and War Aims Discussions \(South East Europe\)](#)" and "[Pre-War Military Planning and War Aims \(Union of South Africa\)](#)".
3. † See Soutou, Georges-Henri: *L'Or et le Sang. Les buts de guerre économiques de la Première Guerre mondiale*, Paris 1989.
4. † For more on this, see Fischer, Fritz: *Krieg der Illusionen. Die deutsche Politik von 1911 bis 1914*, Düsseldorf 1969.
5. † Demm, Eberhard: *Nationalistische Propaganda und Protodiplomatie als Ethnisches Geschäft: Juozas Gabrys, die "Union des Nationalités" und die Befreiung Litauens (1911-1919)*, Lampertheim 2001.
6. † *La Bataille de la Somme dans la Grande Guerre, Actes du Colloque des 1er, 2, 3, 4 juillet 1996*, Péronne [2000].
7. † See: Fischer, Griff nach der Weltmacht; Soutou, L'Or et le Sang; Janssen, Karl-Heinz: *Der Kanzler und der General*, Göttingen 1967 and Jaraus, Konrad H.: *The Enigmatic Chancellor. Bethmann-Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany*, New Haven 1973, as well as Steglich, Wolfgang: *Bündnissicherung oder Verständigungsfrieden. Untersuchungen zu dem Friedensangebot der Mittelmächte vom 12. Dezember 1916*, Göttingen 1958.
8. † See: Soutou, L'Or et le Sang; Soutou, Georges-Henri: *La France et les Marches de l'Est, 1914-1919*, in: *Revue Historique*, October-December (1978); Stevenson, David: *French War Aims Against Germany 1914-1919*, Oxford 1982; Christopher, Andrew and Kanya-Forstner A. Sydney: *France Overseas. The Great War and the Climax of French Imperial Expansion*, London 1981; Rothwell Victor H.: *British War Aims and Peace Diplomacy 1914-1918*, Oxford 1971; Kent, Marian: *Oil and Empire. British Policy and Mesopotamian Oil 1900-1920*, London 1976; Nevakivi, Jukka: *Britain, France and the Arab Middle East 1914-1920*, London 1969; Carlier, Claude and Pedroncini, Guy (eds.): *La Bataille de Verdun*, Paris 1997.
9. † Well aware of this general fatigue, [Pope Benedict XV \(1854-1922\)](#) attempted to spur peace negotiations via his note on 1 August 1917. See Renoton-Beine, Nathalie: *La colombe et les tranchées. Les tentatives de paix de Benoît XV pendant la Grande Guerre*, Paris 2004.
10. † See: Soutou, L'Or et le Sang; Stevenson, French War Aims; Rothwell, British War Aims; Pedroncini, Guy: *Les négociations secrètes pendant la grande guerre*, Paris 1969; Steglich, Wolfgang: *Der Friedensappell Papst Benedikts XV vom 1. August 1917 und die Mittelmächte*, Wiesbaden 1970; Soutou, Georges-Henri: *Briand et l'Allemagne au tournant de la guerre (septembre 1916 - janvier 1917)*, in *Media in Francia. Recueil de mélanges offerts à Karl Ferdinand Werner*, Paris 1989; Pedroncini, Guy : *Des étoiles et des croix. Mélanges offerts à Guy Pedroncini*, Paris 1995; Soutou, Georges-Henri: "Paul Painlevé und die Möglichkeit eines Verhhandlungsfriedens im Kriegsjahr 1917" in Bernecker, Walther L./ Dotterweich, Volker (eds.): *Deutschland in den internationalen Beziehungen des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*, Munich 1996.

11. † Aside from Soutou, *L'Or et le Sang*, see the biography of Woodrow Wilson by Link, Arthur S.: *Wilson*, 4 volumes, Princeton 1956-1965; Gelfand, Lawrence E.: *The Inquiry. American Preparations for Peace 1917-1919*, Westport 1976; Schröder, Hans-Jürgen (ed.): *Confrontation and Cooperation. Germany and the United States in the Era of World War I 1900-1924*, Providence 1993; Ambrosius, Lloyd E.: *Woodrow Wilson and the American Diplomatic Tradition*, Cambridge 1987.
12. † See, Fischer, *Krieg der Illusionen*; Soutou, *L'Or et le Sang*; Baumgart, Winfried: *Deutsche Ostpolitik 1918 von Brest-Litovsk bis zum Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges*, München, Oldenburg 1966; Haupts, Leo: *Deutsche Friedenspolitik 1918-1919*, Düsseldorf 1976; Renouvin, Pierre: *L'Armistice de Rethondes*, Paris 1968.
13. † In addition to the works previously cited, see Duroselle, Jean-Baptiste: *Clemenceau*, Paris 1988 and Le Moal, Frédéric: *La France et l'Italie dans les Balkans 1914-1919. Le contentieux adriatique*, Paris 2006.
14. † See Soutou, *L'Or et le Sang*; Stevenson, *French War Aims*; Miquel, Pierre: *La paix de Versailles et l'opinion publique française*, Paris 1972; Schwabe, Klaus: *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking, 1918-1919*, Chapel Hill 1985; Kolb, Eberhard: *Der Frieden von Versailles*, Munich 2005; Schwabe, Klaus (ed.): *Quellen zum Friedensschluss von Versailles*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1997; Boemecke, Manfred F./Feldman Gerald D./Glaser Elisabeth (eds.): *The Treaty of Versailles. A Reassessment after 75 Years*, Cambridge 1998; Macmillan, Margaret: *Peacemakers. The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War*, London 2001; Schwabe, Klaus: *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany and Peacemaking 1918-1919*, Chapel Hill 1985; Mayer, Arno J.: *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918-1919*, New York 1967; Krumeich, Gerd and Fehlemann, Silke (eds.): *Versailles 1919*, Essen 2001.

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