

War Aims and War Aims Discussions (France)

By [Stéphane Tison](#)

Summary

On 4 August 1914, in his first speech after the declaration of war, Raymond Poincaré, president of the French Republic, did not outline any aims other than the Union sacrée (sacred union) and the defence of the country's borders. Once the hopes for a short war had been dispelled, it was necessary for France to define more precise war aims. The main goal pursued by the government remained establishing a security system to avoid new threats to its borders. To reach these goals, France's war aims wavered between territorial expansion to protect its borders and the inclusion of Germany in an international framework (of alliances or collective security).

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Introduction

The return of [Alsace-Lorraine](#) to [France](#) had been an issue of vital importance for the French

since 1871, although the country's authorities were not prepared to resort to war for its recovery. While some nuance had begun to appear at the margins – a few socialists suggested that the return should be based on a plebiscite; pacifists such as [Paul d'Estournelles de Constant \(1852-1924\)](#) raised the issue of how the status of Alsace-Lorraine had evolved – such proposals did not garner much interest. The discourse in August 1914 was driven more by a spirit of defence in the face of aggression than by a desire for revenge. The return of Alsace-Lorraine only became an important issue once the perspective of a short war had subsided.¹ While there was immediate consensus over the need to recover the lost provinces, other war aims were elaborated over the course of the war.

Defining War Aims, 1914-1917

Continuity with the Pre-war Period

Numerous, often individual discussions took place between the chanceries between August and December 1914. French authorities addressed the issue of war aims more openly with their Russian [allies](#) – whose appetite was equally large – than with the British, who were more concerned about maintaining equilibrium in Europe. [Théophile Delcassé \(1852-1923\)](#), who returned to the head of foreign affairs on 26 August, continued to toe the line set by [Raymond Poincaré \(1860-1934\)](#) in 1912: support for [Russia](#), to express a firm stance toward [Germany](#).² Delcassé informed Petrograd on 21 September that the French army would march beyond Alsace-Lorraine towards the Russian army and continue until the conditions were in place to create a new European system.

War aims were completely absent from the public debate, since the [French press](#) was forbidden to address the issue beyond vague expressions about “the war of justice and lawfare.”³ The work of the chamber of deputies had been suspended until the end of the year; its first official position was presented at the Palais Bourbon on 22 December 1914 when [parliamentary](#) activity resumed. Council President [René Viviani \(1863-1925\)](#) recalled that since, “despite their attachment to peace, France and its allies were subjected to war, they would fight right to the end.” Then he outlined several aims: the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine; the restoration of Belgian independence; an end to Prussian [militarism](#) and the construction of a renewed Europe. From this point onward, compromise was no longer an option.

Securing the Eastern Front

Debate flourished over the following years. The issue of the left bank of the Rhine was reintroduced by [Maurice Barrès \(1862-1923\)](#) when he published a series of articles between

February and April 1915 in which he called for the suppression of “all German sovereignty” west of the Rhine. This opinion was broadly shared from the [nationalist](#) right wing to the centre left, and was disseminated by *Action française*, the *Ligue des Patriotes* and the *Comité de la Rive Gauche du Rhin*, composed in 1916 of parliamentarians, industry actors, military personnel and academics. Some publicists went even further and called for the breakup of the *Reich* and the creation of several confederations. The issue spurred debate in the government starting in the summer of 1916 against Poincaré, in favour of division and the more moderate council president, [Aristide Briand](#).⁴

When Poincaré asked the general staff to study the conditions of an armistice in August 1916, the demands became increasingly ambitious and included a return to the borders of 1790; the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine and the Saar coal basin; the creation of states detached from Germany on the left bank of the Rhine that would be militarily occupied for thirty years and part of a customs union with France; and control of bridgeheads on the right bank of the Rhine. The socialists debated consulting the inhabitants of Alsace-Lorraine via a plebiscite, but this idea was shared by only a small minority.

In late 1916, important figures worked to refine the position of the government. A meeting held at the Elysée Palace on 7 October brought together the president of the republic, Council President Aristide Briand, and Minister [Léon Bourgeois \(1851-1925\)](#), known for his moderation regarding the country’s war aims, as well as [Paul Deschanel \(1855-1922\)](#) and [Antonin Dubost \(1842-1921\)](#), presidents of the two chambers, both known for their more maximalist positions. They agreed to the following compromise: France would demand a return to the borders of 1790, including the Saarland. While the right to decide on the status of the left bank was discussed, talk about the concrete details was postponed until after the war, which avoided having to find a common ground between extremely diverse positions.⁵ The idea of indemnities for the “insults” suffered was also discussed. Briand dismissed the idea of breaking up the *Reich* a few weeks later. [Paul Cambon \(1843-1924\)](#), the ambassador in London, shared these decisions with the British on 12 January 1917 and discussed them further with the secretary of state for foreign affairs, [Arthur Balfour \(1848-1930\)](#), in early June. With regard to the Russians, they expressed their support for the French demands regarding Alsace-Lorraine and the left bank of the Rhine in early February 1917 during a mission in Russia conducted by [Gaston Doumergue \(1863-1937\)](#). The Allies confirmed the position adopted in early September 1914: a rejection of any compromise peace; they refused the Austro-German offer to negotiate on 12 December 1916, as well as the American proposal for mediation the following 19 December.

Most historians consider that thinking about the eastern march of territory was more part of a

passion for security than a true desire for conquest. This thinking was bound up not only in a geographical mindset but was also, partially, a reflection on the economic situation of France and Europe.

The Quest for Economic Security

In 1916, effort was made to reach an inter-allied agreement on economic aims. [Étienne Clémentel \(1864-1936\)](#), the French minister of industry and commerce, was a key player in this process. He was favourable to the creation of an Allied “economic block” to counter Germany’s [Mitteleuropa](#) project. His goal was to ensure that France had access to [raw materials](#) and, after the war, to base this security on a system of preferential trade with the Allies and certain [neutral](#) countries. This would help reduce dependence on the Central Powers. The project was presented during the Paris economic conference, held from 14-17 June 1916: an “economic alliance” between the Entente powers was envisaged. They felt it was essential that Germany no longer benefit from most favoured nation status and perhaps even that the trade of certain goods and resources with some of the Entente powers should be prohibited.

Colonial Ambition

France’s [colonial ambition](#) was part of a complex search for balance with its British ally, at the crossroads of partnership and containment, without requiring the commitment of too many financial or military resources. After the Dardanelles operation, pressure groups – notably members of the Colonial Party – introduced the idea of a partition of the [Ottoman Empire](#) to French public opinion. They called for the creation of a Syria under French influence, but were unable to convince the successive French governments to increase the country’s military presence in the Middle East. The Arab uprising forced the British and French to discuss the future of the region. These talks led to the [Sykes-Picot Agreement](#), signed on 16 May 1916, that established a French presence in the “blue zone” (along the Lebanese and Syrian coast, Cilicia) under direct French administration and a vast zone of exclusive influence in the promised future Arab states (Syria and the Mosul region, in Mesopotamia). An “indigenous” administration of the Arab territory was envisaged, but without giving much of a free hand to the Hashemites, deemed too close to the British. France counter-signed the [Balfour Declaration](#) in favour of the creation of a Jewish state, but did not define a coherent policy for Jews at the European and Middle Eastern scale. The idea of an independent [Armenia](#) under French trusteeship was discussed at the end of the war, but the project remained vague. Moreover, the government did not envisage any conquests in Africa beyond recovering the German colonies of Togo and Cameroon.

Revising Appetites in 1917 and the Debate over a Compromise Peace

The Allure of a Compromise

Starting in 1917, talk about French war aims took a new turn. The [Russian revolution](#) and then the [United States](#) entering the war forced the French government to better define its position on the new European order envisaged for the post-war period. In February 1917, Aristide Briand facilitated the creation of a *comité d'études* (committee of inquiry) comprised of roughly thirty academics, headed by historian [Ernest Lavisse \(1842-1922\)](#) and geographer [Paul Vidal de La Blache \(1845-1918\)](#). The historians, geographers, economists and linguists involved laid the foundation stones for the technical implementation of French demands.⁶

More broadly, a wave of opinion in favour of peace was forming both at the front – as proven by the postal checks in place⁷ – and behind the lines, particularly among the Parisian working class. Associations in favour of legal internationalism ramped up their propaganda efforts aimed at parliamentary circles.⁸ In 1917, [Joseph Caillaux \(1863-1944\)](#) – a former council president in 1911, considered to be a Germanophile – appeared as a potential channel for negotiating a compromise peace. In reality, he used, as his basis, the war aims defined by the government. In the speech he gave in Mamers on 22 July 1917, he presented as *sine qua non* negotiation with a democratic state, which meant the end of German militarism, and the return of Alsace-Lorraine. He did not exclude indemnities or annexations.

That year, several attempts put intermediaries from the [Austrian](#) and French governments in contact. We will only mention them briefly here and suggest referring to the [article](#) by [Georges-Henri Soutou](#) for further details. The first such contact came through [Charles I, Emperor of Austria \(1887-1922\)](#), via his brother-in-law, Prince [Sixtus of Bourbon-Parma \(1886-1934\)](#), an officer in the Belgian army: a letter addressed to President Poincaré on 31 March 1917 offered to support French demands for Alsace-Lorraine. On 19 April, the Italians expressed their refusal of any arrangement with Austria and the French government decided not to respond. Other talks took place over the summer of 1917 between [Nikolaus Graf Revertera von Salandra \(1866-1951\)](#) and [Abel Armand \(1863-1919\)](#), an officer from the *Deuxième Bureau*, which could have resulted in a secret meeting between [Paul Painlevé \(1863-1933\)](#), the French head of government, and [Ottokar Czernin \(1872-1932\)](#), the Austrian minister of foreign affairs. Aristide Briand was approached by Baron [Oscar von der Lancken-Wakenitz \(1867-1939\)](#), but the two did not meet.

The War Aims Voted for by the Chamber

With the evolving international context and the obligation, imposed in late 1916 by the United States, requiring countries to openly state their war aims, the French government reassessed its ambitions somewhat. Secret agreements with the Russian tsar regarding the left bank of the Rhine were criticized by socialists during the secret committee of the chamber that sat from 1 to 4 June 1917. This was the only opportunity for any real debate over war aims in the chamber throughout the entire war: the government of [Alexandre Ribot \(1842-1923\)](#), council president from March to September 1917, dropped the idea of annexing the left bank, although it did not rule out its occupation or neutralization. Under pressure from the socialists, Ribot expressed his support for the creation of the [League of Nations](#). On 5 June 1917, a large majority of deputies voted for an agenda in the chamber that was both firm yet more moderate than previous plans. A product of compromise, the resulting war aims were more specific: liberation of the occupied departments; the return of Alsace-Lorraine; the payment of reparations; and the creation of a League of Nations to ensure peace and the independence of peoples.

These decisions were quickly implemented. The same day, a presidential decree placed the administration of Alsace-Lorraine under direct authority of the minister of war through the creation of the Alsace-Lorraine Office that was to test an integration policy for the population in the region around Thann, which had been recaptured in 1914.⁹ On 22 July 1917, an inter-ministerial committee of inquiry on the League of Nations was created, headed by Léon Bourgeois. Important actors from different branches and of different leanings rallied in late 1917 to support the idea presented in May 1916 by President [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#): the Radical Party, the *Grand Orient de France* and the *Ligue des Droits de l'Homme* (Human Rights League) which, at its congress in November 1917, even declared its support for “an immediate plan for the League of Nations” to be drafted by the Entente powers. The Human Rights League and some socialists had openly supported the project since the autumn of 1916.

The country's war aims as such appeared to be more or less established and the prospect of a compromise peace rejected when Poincaré chose to appoint [Georges Clemenceau \(1841-1929\)](#) to the council presidency rather than Caillaux. Would Clemenceau's arrival in power and his hostile approach to all pacifist inclinations change this vision?

The Conception of War Aims under Clemenceau

Only War, Nothing but War

Clemenceau *de facto* toed the same line and refused any parliamentary debate over France's

war aims.¹⁰ He knew that the Allies had different positions and he preferred to defer debate until after the war. He outlined his policy in a speech on 8 March 1918: “My foreign policy and my home policy are the same. At home I wage war. Abroad, I wage war...I shall go on waging war.” He would not back down. France approved Wilson’s [Fourteen Points](#), announced on 8 January 1918, since they included the return of Alsace-Lorraine. Clemenceau agreed with the fact that democracy was a condition for peace; he supported the right of peoples to self-determination, but remained sceptical of the League of Nations project. Wilson’s initiative was indeed supported by most socialists, since all currents of French socialism agreed with the plan. This choice worked to shift power within the French Section of the Workers’ International (SFIO) towards the pacifist minority that controlled the party, starting on 28 July 1918, and was further reinforced at the national congress in October.

The work of the inter-ministerial committee of inquiry on the League of Nations continued. It recommended an organizational plan on 8 June 1918 that was part of a logic of peace through victory of the Allied powers and neutral states.¹¹ The ambitious work of this committee was ignored and did not receive official support from Clemenceau or [Stephen Pichon \(1857-1933\)](#), the minister of foreign affairs.

Clemenceau was interested in the proposals of Étienne Clémentel, however, regarding the financial adjustments he envisaged for the post-war period. In a letter from Clémentel on 19 September 1918, the latter indeed mentioned the creation of an “Atlantic economic union” between the United States, France, [Great Britain](#), [Italy](#) and [Belgium](#). He mentioned reparations in kind for the reconstruction of the French economy and an inter-Allied organization for raw materials to curb the economic development of post-war Germany.

Towards Support for Nationality

Only a few organizations – such as the *Association de la Paix par le Droit* and the national council of the SFIO – had suggested, as early as 1915, that the treaties be based on respecting the principle of nationality by including them in the continuity of the legal work undertaken during the [Hague Conventions](#) (1899, 1907). Elected officials, diplomats and military personnel remained divided over the topic. As such, prior to the revolution of February 1917 and [Brest Litovsk](#), the French government had shown no support for any national movements, not even for [Poland](#). The influence of [Philippe Berthelot \(1866-1934\)](#) and [Pierre de Margerie \(1861-1942\)](#), diplomats with the French ministry of foreign affairs, gradually helped the French position evolve. Starting in the autumn of 1917, they recommended supporting the “four pillars” (reunified Poland, [Czechoslovakia](#), [Yugoslavia](#), including [Serbia](#) and the Southern Slavs, and [Romania](#)) and creating a “barrier in the East” to contain German influence. This was still quite far from the principle of nationality.

Clemenceau was not particularly favourable to this, but he agreed under pressure from President Wilson and the chamber of deputies. Contrary to common belief, however, he did not support the breakup of Austria-Hungary; he indeed feared that the German-speaking part of the [empire](#) would reunite with Germany after the war, a position he maintained until October-November 1918. After March 1918 and the Russian defection, he still hoped for the return of a federated (if not united) Russia as a counterweight to Germany. France only officially expressed its support for Polish and Czechoslovakian independence with the declaration of 3 June 1918 on Poland and the recognition on 30 June of the Czechoslovak National Council created in 1916.

Elaborating War Aims at the Time of the Armistice

The issue of war aims returned to the forefront just as the end of the war was being envisaged – and not without some tension between France and its allies. France was less powerful in 1918 whereas the British and Americans had a more influential role. The country had lost the advantage it had when a compromise peace had been envisaged. Poincaré and [Philippe Pétain \(1856-1951\)](#) wanted to inflict a decisive defeat in order to impose their war aims. A compromise was etched out in talks with Colonel [Edward House \(1858-1938\)](#) from 29 October to 4 November. Clemenceau and [Ferdinand Foch \(1851-1929\)](#) chose to compromise on the handling of pensions for the victims of war, but the idea of compensation for the damage caused by the war was nevertheless accepted by the United States. While there was no debate over the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine, the [occupation of the Rhineland](#) was granted momentarily, until the conditions of peace had been reached. That was the tone of the note sent the following day by American Secretary of State [Robert Lansing \(1864-1928\)](#) to the [German government](#): the Allies agreed on the fourteen points, but France wanted “compensation for the damage inflicted on the Allied civilian population and its property” by German aggression.

After the armistice was signed, appetites grew larger. In a memorandum on 27 November 1918, Foch proposed that the border be drawn along the Rhine. This plan to detach the Rhineland – which Clemenceau appeared to support – was presented to the British in London on 30 November but was received with suspicion. In parliament on 29 December 1918, the head of government remained vague and asked for a show of confidence, which he received like a “blank cheque”. The debate remained secret, much to the dismay of journalists. The parliament was largely ignorant of the country’s demands, as were the council of ministers and President Poincaré. The latter complained about Clemenceau, whom he found unpolished and secretive, and could not understand why the League of Nations project had been discussed first.

War Aims during the Peace Negotiations

The French conception of negotiations continued as part of the “[war culture](#)”: the armistice was immediately perceived as a prefiguration to the peace treaty. Its clauses were *a minima* conditions rather than the baseline for negotiations aimed at establishing peace. For decision-makers and diplomats, war aims as such became objectives for peace.^{[12](#)}

Clemenceau likely drafted a coherent plan before the end of January 1919. His first goal was to conserve an entente between the democracies comprising the winning camp. That is why he supported the League of Nations project – sometimes enthusiastically, such as on 15 December during a discussion with Wilson and House. He saw the institution as a flexible framework and did not ultimately support the project of Léon Bourgeois to create an international army. The Covenant of the League of Nations was signed on 28 April, much to the disappointment of the defenders of peace (e.g., Bourgeois and d’Estournelles de Constant) who saw in it a move away from the spirit of the Hague Conventions. These positions were adopted without taking into account the considerable work conducted since 1917 by the committee of inquiry created by Briand. The government did not heed to the recommendations of its members, who were closer to Poincaré and had a more radical vision regarding Germany. Only a few geographers, individually – like [Emmanuel de Martonne \(1873-1955\)](#) – played a small role consulting [André Tardieu \(1876-1945\)](#), the commissioner for foreign affairs, and the French delegation.^{[13](#)}

Clemenceau’s second goal was the security of France’s borders based on the protection of the Rhine, a principle outlined in a memorandum that Tardieu drafted at Clemenceau’s request.^{[14](#)} The border would be political and military, based on the creation of one or more autonomous (Foch) or independent (Clemenceau) states. When he understood that the British and Americans were categorically opposed to such proposals, Clemenceau adopted a more moderate stance: a temporary occupation of the Rhineland, to be evacuated in thirds every five years, as well as bridgeheads on the right bank. This decision spurred great discord between Clemenceau and Foch, who threatened to resign and publicly declared in a plenary session of the conference on 6 April that the solution envisaged was “equal to zero.” Foch continued to disseminate this idea after the war and was in favour of the creation of alliances with states that demanded absolute respect of the treaties.

Lastly, Clemenceau wanted to guarantee the security of France at the European level, by containing German influence. The possibility of an *Anschluss* was as such rejected. He did not rule out the idea of a federal Germany in which Prussia would have a reduced role until after the revolution in Bavaria (April 1919). In the east, France supported the creation of states

between Germany and Russia, although this support was based more on economic and political pragmatism than on the right of peoples to self-determination. It supported the creation of Poland, Czechoslovakia, the territorial demands of Romania and the birth of the kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenians. In economic terms, the same logic was applied. France managed to obtain the liquidation of the German steelworks in Lorraine; a franchise on the sale of products from Alsace-Lorraine, the Saarland and [Luxembourg](#) for a five-year period; and acquired the Saar mines. Poincaré nevertheless felt that Clemenceau had not gone far enough in this respect and that France had not been sufficiently compensated for its sacrifices.

Ultimately, Clemenceau negotiated the treaties without the help of experts; he voluntarily kept at the distance both experts from the Bourgeois Committee, attached to the ideas of the Hague Convention, and those from the committee of inquiry created by Briand, more ensconced in a war culture and with a harsher position towards Germany.

Conclusion: War Aims and French Diplomacy

The effect of the Great War on French diplomacy was as follows. The evolution of war aims mirrored that of the cultural mobilization of public opinion: maximalist at the start of the war, more nuanced in 1917, before becoming once again bound up in an overzealous war culture at the end of the war, to the extent that it delayed the true onset of peace. French war aims nevertheless remained in line with the context of traditional diplomacy as introduced by Vergennes in the 18th century (excluding the period of the revolution and empire): ensure security via a system of European organization, without conquest and without relying too heavily on treaties of guaranty. The French policy that emerged in Europe was that of a middle power that relied on smaller powers, without taking into account the potentiality of its colonial empire. This approach – broadly shared by the ruling elite – remained unchanged even when peril returned in 1940.

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Notes

1. Lecaillon, Jean-François: Le souvenir de 1870. Histoire d'une mémoire, Paris 2011. [↑](#)
2. The Russian alliance was considerably reinforced after the nomination of Raymond Poincaré to the council presidency in 1912, followed by his election as president of the republic in 1913. Georges-Henri Soutou has argued that this approach, which implied support even if Russia was attacked in the Balkans, actually contributed to escalation in July 1914. This interpretation, similar to that of Christopher Clark. See: Clark,

Christopher: The Sleepwalkers. How Europe went to War in 1914, New York 2013, which remains controversial among historians. ↑

3. The press received instructions on 1 February and 29 April 1915: the publication of articles on the future peace was forbidden. On 14-15 December 1915, this prohibition was further reinforced. Given the proliferation of articles from the summer of 1916 onwards, the censors ceased to enforce these rules in September-October. ↑
4. Soutou, Georges-Henri: La France et le problème de l'unité et du statut international du Reich, 1914-1924, in: Soutou, Georges-Henri/Valentin, Jean-Marie (Eds.): Le statut international de l'Allemagne. Des traités de Westphalie aux accords "2+4", Paris 2004, pp. 745-793. ↑
5. The idea of a detachment had already appeared in projects by General Joseph Joffre (1852-1931), inspired by General Pierre Dupont (head of the Deuxième Bureau), in June 1916. See: Duroselle, Jean-Baptiste: Clemenceau, Paris 1988, p. 727. ↑
6. Lowczyk, Olivier: La fabrique de la paix. Du Comité d'études à la Conférence de la Paix, l'élaboration par la France des traités de la Première Guerre mondiale, Paris 2010. ↑
7. Nicot, Jean: Les poilus ont la parole. Dans les tranchées, lettres du front, 1917-1918, Paris 2003. ↑
8. Recent research has underscored the importance of this shift in opinion, which may have played a more important role than previously thought in influencing French diplomacy. See, notably, the research of Jean-Michel Guieu, Peter Jackson and Carl Bouchard. ↑
9. Schmauch, Joseph: Les Services d'Alsace-Lorraine face à la réintégration des départements de l'Est (1914-1919), Thesis, Paris 4/Ecole nationale des Chartes, 2004. ↑
10. Jean-Baptiste Duroselle has argued that "no text exists that describes in detail Clemenceau's war aims before the armistice", See: Duroselle, Clemenceau 1988, p. 722. In his memoirs, Poincaré noted that Clemenceau wanted the return of Alsace-Lorraine, the liberation of Belgium, of occupied regions and "freedom for oppressed peoples". ↑
11. Blair, Scott G.: Les origines en France de la SDN. La Commission interministérielle d'études pour la Société des Nations, 1917-1919, in: Relations internationales 75 (1993), pp. 277-292. ↑
12. Laniol, Vincent: Entrer en paix? Dynamiques internationales et phase préparatoire de la Conférence de la Paix. Opinions, images de l'ennemi et dissensions interalliées (4 octobre 1918 – 18 janvier 1919) (thesis), Paris 1, 2015. ↑
13. Ginsburger, Nicolas: La guerre, la plus terrible des érosions. Cultures de guerre et géographes universitaires. Allemagne, France, États-Unis, 1914-1921 (thesis), Paris 10, 2005. ↑
14. Tardieu, André: La Paix, Paris 1921. ↑

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External Links

- [Ginsburger, Nicolas: La guerre, la plus terrible des érosions. Cultures de guerre et géographes universitaires. Allemagne, France, États-Unis, 1914-1921, thesis, 2005 \(HAL\) \(Article\)](#)
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