

Jonathan Gast, 2006

An OP-ED on:

How (not) to punish Germany after World War 1

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When Germany announced its desire to surrender on October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1918, to end World War 1, it did so under the assumption that US President Wilson's "14 Points" would decide the peace process.<sup>1</sup> Wilson's speech promised that "[the victors did] not wish to fight [Germany] either with arms or with hostile arrangements of trade," which implied that Germany would not be punished in the ensuing settlement.<sup>2</sup> Thus, when the Versailles treaty blamed Germany for the war and imposed reparations, Germans could not accept the legitimacy of the settlement, and they sought its undoing.<sup>3</sup> In order to ensure a lasting peace that all countries could accept, the Entente should have acceded full-heartedly to the 14 points without tacking on guilt or reparations.

Georges Clemenceau, the French representative at the peace conference, pounced at every opportunity to impose harsh reparations on Germany, ostensibly for the reconstruction of France, the recovery of Alsace-Lorraine, and to prevent Germany from invading France ever again.<sup>4</sup>

Firstly, Wilson's fourth point clearly provides for the return of Alsace-Lorraine to France, thus resolving any territorial disputes between Germany and France. The occupation of the Saarland and the Rhineland by France only created more problems than it solved. When the French moved into the Rhineland, occupation cost them more than they were able to extract in resources due to a strike by German workers.<sup>5</sup> When the Saarland voted to join Germany it made France look belligerent, because the province, consisting mostly of Catholic socialists, voted overwhelmingly (90%) to join a restrictive and fascist Germany.<sup>6</sup>

Secondly, Wilson's third point essentially lays out plans for a common market. With this in mind, the French could easily have rebuilt their country, purchasing resources and goods from within a common market for the lowest price possible. From a historical perspective, the US was

clearly willing to loan money to Europe, as they did to Germany twice with the Dawes and then the Young plan.<sup>7</sup> It is therefore conceivable that this money also could have been loaned to France. Truly, the French were alone in desiring harsh reparations, because even England desired a restoration of the European economy in order to bolster trade.<sup>8</sup> For Germany, unjust reparations were an excuse to accuse the entire peace treaty of being unfair. The historian A.J.P. Taylor sums up the German attitude that, “[r]eparations were wicked. Therefore the disarmament of Germany was wicked; the frontier with Poland was wicked; the new national states were wicked. And not only wicked: they were a justified German grievance.”<sup>9</sup> If France had rebuilt with US loans and participated with Germany in a common market, Germans would have had nothing to cry about.

Thirdly, Wilson’s fourth point requires all powers to reduce the size of their militaries to that of a defense force. This prevents Germany from invading France with a large army. This is arguably not convincing enough, because it fails to take into account what might happen if Germany were to rearm.<sup>10</sup> However, the fourteenth point establishes a league of nations which by Article XVI of its charter considers an attack on one member as a declaration of war on all members.<sup>11</sup> If the post-war powers had whole-heartedly embraced this point—especially the US—the combined defensive forces of each member country could have acted effectively as peace keepers for the league. This is principally what NATO does.

Finally, the legitimacy for such a treaty would have greatly enhanced its enforceability, because it addresses the grievances and concerns of all the wartime powers. France would rebuild and secure itself from another German attack, while England could bolster its economy again by taking advantage of the common market. It is also principled enough to reconfirm President Wilson’s idealistic reasons, as opposed to material reasons, for bringing the US into the war.<sup>12</sup> Hitler would never have become dictator, because an economically prosperous Europe

brought on by a legitimate peace treaty would have ensured that no German voted for the Nazis out of desperation. Austria would not have suffered such a massive identity crisis if its initial attempt at Anschluss had gone unhindered.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, when the victors eventually agreed that the post-war settlement had been too harsh, they essentially gave merit to appeasement which then led them down the road to war.<sup>14</sup>

Since some of Wilson's points were eventually implemented full-heartedly after World War 2 into such institutions as NATO and the EEC, the benefits which are apparent to us nowadays could have ensured that Europe did not enter into another war. Although one might point to a lack of cooperation post WW1, one needs to look no further for an indicator of cooperation than to the *Spirit of Locarno* which surrounded the 1925 Treaty of Locarno that gave Europe "a period of peace and hope."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Rich, Great Power Diplomacy Since 1914. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2003) 38.

<sup>2</sup> Woodrow Wilson, 14 Points Speech. 8 Jan, 1918. (<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/wilson14.htm>).

<sup>3</sup> A.J.P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War. (New York: Touchstone, 1961) 23.

<sup>4</sup> Rich 51.

<sup>5</sup> Rich 147.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor 86.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor 48.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor 45.

<sup>9</sup> Taylor 46.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor 78.

<sup>11</sup> Rich 48.

<sup>12</sup> Rich 46.

<sup>13</sup> Reinhard Heinisch, Populism, Proporz, Pariah. (New York: Nova Science Publishers, 2002) 8.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor 170.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor 55.