

# Gustav Stresemann and Weimar stability 1923–29

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Gustav Stresemann was known as ‘the good German’. But was he?

key concept

## Significance

### Before you read this

You have probably covered some of Stresemann’s career. Check in particular his foreign policy; had he not died in 1929, in what direction does the evidence suggest he was trying to take Germany?

**Allies:** during the First World War — Britain, France, Italy and the USA. Also used to describe this combination of countries throughout most of the 1920s.

**Treaty of Versailles:** one of four peace settlements concluded in Paris 1919–20, the Treaty was the principal Allied peace agreement with Germany, bitterly resented in Germany for its harsh terms.

**reparation:** the Treaty of Versailles was very clear that Germany should be made to pay compensation to the Allies for all damage and loss of life caused by the First World War. However, the setting of a precise amount proved to be beyond anyone’s ability.

**chancellor:** German equivalent of the British prime minister.

**G**ustav Stresemann was German minister for foreign affairs from 1923 until his death from throat cancer in October 1929. His period of office was remarkable for two main reasons. First, its duration. Domestic politics in Weimar Germany were dominated by short-lived coalition governments. Consequently, it was difficult for any government to adopt long-term strategies to cope with the complex and diverse problems Germany faced after the First World War. Stresemann’s 6 years in charge of German foreign policy meant that, at least in this area, this pattern could be broken.

A second reason why Stresemann is important is because he held office during years of relative prosperity and stability, when Europe appeared finally to be emerging from the military, political and economic shadow of the First World War. He had a number of notable diplomatic successes that helped shape European history in the interwar period as a whole. However, his motives have been hotly debated by historians.

Scholars who were Stresemann’s contemporaries were anxious to preserve an image of him as a ‘good European’, concerned with seeking peaceful relations with the **Allies**. But after the Second World War, Stresemann’s desire to seek revisions of the **Treaty of Versailles** led to strong

comparisons being made between his foreign policy strategy and the nationalist agenda pursued later by Hitler. Because Stresemann died before he had achieved his objectives, they argue, we will never know whether he would have resorted to war as Hitler did. Nowadays, however, Stresemann is not compared quite so often with Hitler, although it is still argued that he pursued a nationalist foreign policy.

## The Ruhr crisis and the Dawes Plan

Stresemann’s first test was to respond to the crisis that began in January 1923, brought about by the occupation of the Ruhr industrial region in the west of Germany by French and Belgian troops. The argument made by the French and Belgian governments was that, because Germany had failed to meet some of the **reparation** payments required under the Treaty of Versailles, despite possessing the ability to do so, direct action was necessary to obtain these payments by force. Stresemann, who also occupied the post of **chancellor** at the time, responded by ordering the adoption of a policy of passive resistance to the occupying forces in the region.

He also appealed to the international community for assistance in having the Ruhr occupation declared illegal and against the terms of the Treaty of Versailles. The Ruhr crisis coincided with the final collapse of the German currency — the mark — which had been losing value dramatically since the spring of 1921. Far from trying to prevent this, Stresemann actively encouraged the worsening of the domestic economic crisis as a weapon to use in international diplomacy. If Germany appeared to be bankrupt, foreign assistance to get the German economy back on the road to recovery would have to be forthcoming. After all, it was in the interests of the Allies that Germany had a prosperous and strong economy so that reparation payments could

be made.

Furthermore, with relations with France, Belgium and Britain at a low ebb, the Ruhr crisis offered an opportunity for the whole debate about the economic recovery of Germany to be widened to include other powers, especially the USA. Although officially the USA was reluctant to become involved in Europe's problems after the First World War, American businessmen had long viewed European economic recovery as too good an investment opportunity to miss. Stresemann followed the tradition set by some of his predecessors, notably Walther Rathenau, in encouraging the American government to offer Germany a recovery package. Stresemann's thinking here was also typical of the type of men who held office during the Weimar Republic. Often self-made men from the middle classes, they brought their business knowledge to bear on politics and diplomacy in a way which the aristocratic politicians of the pre-war era had not.

The economic aid that Stresemann wanted to secure for Germany eventually came in 1924 in the form of the Dawes Plan, named after the US chairman of the committee that drew it up. The plan to offer Germany a long-term programme of assistance had actually originated with the US government in November 1923, during the worst phase of the Ruhr crisis. Allowing Germany to repay the loan over a period of 59 years, the plan recognised the need to give Germany a break from the repayment of debt, with token payments being made until 1928–29, when full payments of 800 million marks per year would begin. The terms of the Dawes Plan were approved by the British, French, American, German and Belgian governments at a conference held in London in the

### Key points

- Stresemann was German foreign minister for 6 years, thus allowing him to develop effective long-term policies.
- He was very able and did much to persuade the British, French and Americans that Germany could be trusted after the First World War.
- He pursued a foreign policy based on seeking agreements first with Germany's neighbours in the west of Europe, and then in the east.
- Stresemann was one of the architects of the Treaty of Locarno, often seen as the diplomatic high point of the interwar period.
- Stresemann was a typical politician of the Weimar era: a middle-class self-made man rather than an aristocrat.

**Otto von Bismarck** (1815–1898): statesman who created the modern state of Germany.

**Low Countries:** the Netherlands, Belgium and Luxembourg.

**Alsace and Lorraine:** French provinces bordering Germany. Lost to Germany at the end of the Franco-Prussian war in 1871. Their return to France in 1918 was therefore of great symbolic significance, indicating that the fortunes of Germany and France in European affairs were reversed.

summer of 1924.

### **Stresemann's diplomacy**

The establishment of the Dawes Plan was intended to draw a line under the controversy surrounding the economic clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. As far as Stresemann was concerned, the final settlement of Germany's economic problems meant that he could at last focus his attention on what was for him the more important issue — protecting the country from further foreign invasion. It is during the period between 1924 and 1929 that we see evidence of his vision for Germany's role in international affairs. Like **Otto von Bismarck** before him, Stresemann knew that the key to preserving Germany from attack was through an understanding of European geography. Situated in central Europe, Germany had former enemies to its east in the USSR, and to its west in the **Low Countries** and France. In order to strengthen Germany's diplomatic position, Stresemann pursued a two-handed approach to foreign policy, in which he sought agreements with Germany's former enemies, but also played them off against one another.

One of the most important parts of this two-handed diplomacy was the need to find a way of improving relations with France. With French troops still occupying parts of the Ruhr, Stresemann examined ways in which agreement could be reached guaranteeing that Germany's borders would not again be invaded from the west. In the

autumn of 1924, Stresemann began to develop a plan first put forward by the German government in 1923 to conclude a pact between Germany, Italy, France and Britain, in which each power agreed not to wage war on the others. But in the event of war breaking out, each of the signatories to the pact could count on the support of the others in coming to their defence.

### **Locarno diplomacy**

The plan, which also gained the support of the French foreign minister, Aristide Briand, the British foreign secretary, Austen Chamberlain, and the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, formed the basis of a treaty signed in the Swiss resort of Locarno in October 1925. This treaty — which all of the statesmen involved regarded as the high point of their careers — incorporated the 1923 German plan and included an undertaking by each power that they would not wage war for 30 years. The Locarno Pact also confirmed the legality of Germany's western borders with France and Belgium. In this way, Stresemann acknowledged that the provinces of **Alsace and Lorraine** would remain French permanently. As the frontiers had been originally drawn up in 1919 by the peacemakers in Paris, by accepting the Locarno Pact, Stresemann was also acknowledging the legality of that part of the controversial Treaty of Versailles. This is something for which Hitler was later to criticise him.

The Treaty of Locarno was viewed by contemporaries as the greatest achievement in European

diplomacy in the 1920s. It did pave the way for the further acceptance of Germany by the British and French governments through Germany's admission to the **League of Nations** in 1926. On this issue Stresemann drove a very hard bargain, insisting that when Germany joined it should have the same status as Britain and France, countries which were founding members of the League. This was because Stresemann believed that Germany had a right to be among the first rank of nations in Europe, and ought not to be weighed down by feelings of guilt about causing the First World War, as the infamous **War Guilt Clause** of the Treaty of Versailles had claimed.

Stresemann's diplomatic successes were made possible by a period of unprecedented stability and prosperity within Germany. No country concentrates on foreign affairs when its internal affairs are in crisis, and Stresemann's remarkable 6-year period as minister for foreign affairs, during which he was given a free hand by his cabinet colleagues, is an indication of this. Had the reparation question not been settled by the Dawes Plan, it is doubtful if Stresemann would have had as much time to address these wider issues of peace and reconciliation with Germany's former enemies.

However, Stresemann was not only concerned with improving relations with the British, French and Italians. Another important aspect of his strategy was relations with the USSR. Germany had signed a **mutual assistance treaty** with the USSR in 1922 at Rapallo, which had proved to be a useful bargaining tool with the Allies. Fearing the possibility that a close relationship with the USSR might lead to a communist revolution in Germany, the

## Weblink

Stresemann won the Nobel peace prize in 1926 after Locarno. <http://nobelprize.org> has a useful profile, plus the text of his acceptance speech, which outlines his vision for European peace — the public version, at least.

For a general overview of the man and his career, *Spartacus* is good as always, with a useful selection of quotations from his speeches and his diaries, at [www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk](http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk). It also has links to articles about other Weimar politicians.

For a more A-level approach to the same thing, seek out *Wikipedia*'s piece at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav\\_Stresemann](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gustav_Stresemann), which is very detailed, especially on his two cabinets, and gives you plenty of ammunition to spread your knowledge of Weimar beyond just the usual names.

Allies tried to discourage Stresemann from signing an additional mutual assistance treaty with the Soviets. But they failed. In April 1926, Stresemann renewed the Rapallo Treaty — a development that sent shock waves around western Europe. During the negotiations of both the Locarno Treaty and the 1926 agreement with the USSR, Stresemann used the mutual suspicion between the Allies and the Soviet Union to secure further concessions for Germany. So a question we need to ask is, how committed was Stresemann to improved relations

**League of Nations:** established in 1919, and intended to be the body acting as arbitrator to the world's problems. With its emphasis firmly on finding peaceful resolutions to conflicts, it was at the heart of the powerful movement of the interwar period centred on making war illegal.

**War Guilt Clause:** Article 231 of the Treaty of Versailles stated that Germany had been responsible for the First World War.

**mutual assistance treaty:** agreement by which the participating powers promise to offer each other help (usually economic or military) in return for similar or other forms of assistance.

### Walther Rathenau (1867–1922)

German Jewish statesman and industrialist; his family owned AEG, a company which makes electrical equipment.

- 1916–18** Organises German war economy, controlling raw materials and labour to counter the British blockade.
- 1919** Enters politics and founds the Democratic Party.
- May 1921** Serves as minister of reconstruction.
- 1921** Serves as minister of foreign affairs, securing financial settlements with the USA and France, being broadly responsible for the 1922 Treaty of Rapallo with the USSR.
- June 1922** Assassinated by anti-Semitic nationalists.

## Questions

- Did it really make economic sense (or any other kind of sense) to plunge Germany into crisis in order to attract foreign investment? And even if it did make sense, was it ethical?
- Was Stresemann right in thinking that Germany needed to protect itself from foreign invasion?
- Which was more in Germany's interests: good relations with the USSR or good relations with the West?

with the Allies or to Germany's eastern ally, the USSR?

## Conclusion

Despite the promise of a new dawn in Germany's relations with its former wartime enemies, Stresemann and the other Locarno statesmen were not able to capitalise on their successes of 1925 in the long term. Some additional agreements were concluded, such as that between Stresemann and Briand at Thoiry in 1928, but they were insignificant in comparison with the Locarno Pact.

So how should we assess Stresemann? He was an able and influential statesman who succeeded in restoring some of Germany's status as a major European power. He played a clever diplomatic game between the countries of western Europe and

with the USSR to secure the beginnings of a better diplomatic deal for Germany. However, he was in failing health during his final year in office and died in October 1929, just as the world was about to be plunged into the greatest economic crisis it had ever known — the Great Depression. We can only speculate what the impact of that crisis would have had on his diplomatic strategy.

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## Further study

Hidden, J. (1996) *The Weimar Republic*, 2nd edn, Longman. A good general history of the period that places Weimar foreign policy in its wider context.

Kolb, E. (1988) *The Weimar Republic*, translated by P. S. Falla, Unwin Hyman. The Weimar Republic from the German perspective.

Nicholls, A. J. (2000) *Weimar and the Rise of Hitler*, 4th edn, Macmillan. The standard work on the subject and also a good read.

Wright, J. (2002) *Gustav Stresemann: Weimar's Greatest Statesman*, Oxford University Press. Despite his importance, Stresemann has not attracted a great deal of specific attention in recent years. This is the latest biography of Stresemann and by far the best.

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