

German Cabinet Meeting on Diplomatic Effects of the Treaty of Rapallo (April 18, 1922)

Abstract

On April 16, 1922—two days prior to this cabinet meeting—Germany and the new Soviet government in Russia had signed the Treaty of Rapallo. This treaty normalized diplomatic relations between the two countries and stated that each one waived all financial claims against the other for damages that may have resulted from the war. The treaty both surprised and outraged the Allied powers in Europe, and this cabinet meeting was convened to discuss how Germany should reply to protests by Britain, in particular.

Germany and Russia had surreptitiously negotiated the Treaty of Rapallo on the sidelines of a much larger conference that British Prime Minister David Lloyd George had convened among European countries to deal with issues concerning postwar central and eastern Europe, especially the reintegration of Soviet Russia into the European economic and political order. The conference took place in Genoa, Italy, to where much of the German cabinet relocated in April, and where this particular meeting took place. The town of Rapallo, where the Germans and Russians met, is about 30 kilometers east of Genoa.

The minutes from this cabinet meeting reveal the fear among German officials that they were being excluded from the most important proceedings of the Genoa Conference and that any resulting agreement between the Allied powers and Soviet Russia would leave Germany out in the cold. Germany characterized its decision to negotiate a separate treaty with Russia as an attempt to circumvent this diplomatic exclusion. The Treaty of Rapallo marked a first step for Germany out of its postwar isolation and was thus greeted by the governing coalition as a welcome diplomatic “victory” in the midst of the otherwise pessimistic domestic news cycle. Business leaders especially welcomed the rapprochement with Russia because it opened up that potentially lucrative market for German exports at a time when western European nations were increasingly restricting access to theirs. Many on the German left, meanwhile, greeted the treaty for reasons of sentimental or ideological attachment to Russian culture or to Bolshevism itself. Even territorial revisionists welcomed the treaty as a way to ratchet up the pressure on the newly created state of Poland, which encompassed many regions that had been a part of Germany until 1918.

To Britain, however, the Treaty of Rapallo appeared as a significant disruption to its vision for the financial and economic reintegration of central and eastern Europe, and to France the treaty represented a fundamental security threat by apparently freeing Germany from the strategic containment that France had so painstakingly erected around it after the war. Largely because of these disruptions, the Genoa Conference itself ended in complete disharmony, with Germany expelled, France and Belgium withdrawing early, Russia rejecting the final document, and the remaining participants ultimately having achieved little more than a partial return to the gold standard.

One of the most interesting parts of the document is the lengthy summary of the private meeting that had just taken place between Chancellor Wirth and three other German officials, on one side, and Prime Minister Lloyd George and three British officials on the other. In the summary, which was written entirely from the German perspective, Lloyd George presented himself as trying to restrain French animosity toward Germany and then feeling frustrated in his goal of achieving an overall European agreement by Germany’s clumsy overtures to Russia, which had upset his delicate statesmanship. Rathenau, in turn, expressed German suspicions that it was being excluded from key negotiations at the Genoa Conference and, thus, from the emerging European order.

The summary mentioned conversations with British officials conducted by the German diplomat Adolf Georg Otto “Ago” von Maltzan, who directed policy toward eastern Europe in the German Foreign Ministry and played a guiding role in bringing the Rapallo Treaty to fruition. Maltzan was initially aghast at the success of the Bolsheviks in the Russian Revolution, but he soon adjusted to the new reality of a Soviet regime in Moscow and began in early 1920 to advocate for diplomatic accommodation toward it. Maltzan saw the treaty not only as furthering Germany’s immediate interests in eastern Europe, but also as a means of pressuring the Allies to relax the schedule of reparations payments that they had laid out in London in May 1921 [the so-called “London Demands” discussed in another GHDI document]. Maltzan also fanned concerns among his German colleagues that France and Russia might grow closer, thereby tapping into Berlin’s half-century-old fear of geopolitical encirclement.

After reporting on his meeting with Lloyd George, Chancellor Wirth then discussed the conversation that he had immediately thereafter with Georgi Tschitscherin, Russia’s Commissar for Foreign Affairs. Germany and Russia pledged to work in coordination throughout the Genoa Conference, and they agreed on the messaging that they would employ with Great Britain.

Foreign Minister Rathenau then gave an account of his meeting with the British Secretary for Overseas Trade, Philipp Lloyd-Greame, at which Rathenau flatly refused to annul the Treaty of Rapallo but did suggest that it might be incorporated into any agreement that might emerge from the Genoa Conference. That being the case, Lloyd-Greame reiterated the British position that Germany should therefore not have any part in the negotiations over an agreement to be concluded between the other countries and Russia. (A later note, dated April 20, 1922, from Chancellor Wirth to the German President Friedrich Ebert in Berlin, seemed to contradict—or perhaps whitewash—Rathenau’s report on the British position, though, with Wirth reassuring Ebert that Germany *would* still take part in the larger conference negotiations between Russia and the rest of Europe.)

The cabinet thus faced a choice between two alternatives presented by Britain: Germany either annulled its treaty with Russia, after which Britain then promised that it could take part in the larger conference commission’s negotiations with the Russians, or Germany stood by its treaty and then faced exclusion from the rest of the conference proceedings as outlined in what the minutes referred to as the “conference note” that Germany had just received from Britain.

The fact that the cabinet considered four different drafts of its response to the British underscored the perceived ramifications of even subtle shifts in tone and word choice.

Source

[...]

Present:

Joseph Wirth, Reich Chancellor (Center Party)

Walther Rathenau, Foreign Office (DDP)

Andreas Hermes, Finance (Center Party)

Robert Schmidt, Economics (SPD)

Karl von Stielor, State Secretary, Transport

Franz Schroeder, State Secretary, Finance

Julius Hirsch, State Secretary, Economics

Ernst von Simson, State Secretary, Foreign Office

Adolf Georg Otto (Ago) von Maltzan, Baron zu Wartenberg and Penzlin, Ministerial Director, Foreign Office

Oscar Müller, Head of the Government Press Department

Friedrich (Wilhelm Otto) Gaus, Head of the Legal Department, Foreign Office

Oscar Weigert, Ministerial Councillor, Labor
(Johannes) Heinrich Hemmer, State Secretary of the Reich Chancellery (Minutes)

General circumstances:

The chancellor reports on his visit with Lloyd George...

[A footnote in the digitalized archives cites a separate written record created during the visit with British Prime Minister David Lloyd George. It took place in the Villa de Albertis in Quarto, near Genoa. The other German civil servants who accompanied Chancellor Wirth during this visit were Rathenau, Maltzan, and Albert Dufour, who served as counsellor in the German embassy in London. The British delegation that received the Germans included, in addition to Prime Minister Lloyd George, Philipp Lloyd-Greame, the secretary of overseas trade, and two secretaries for the meeting, Maurice Hankey and Edward Grigg. The written minutes of the meeting, which are not signed and filed in the records of the German foreign ministry, read as follows: “Lloyd George opened the discussion with a reference to statements made by M. [French diplomatic official Louis] Barthou concerning the German–Russian treaty and explained that it had been his utmost aim to bring about a successful outcome at the Genoa Conference. His efforts had been constantly impeded by obstacles set before him by the French. He was well on the way to eliminating these obstacles, and now this German–Russian treaty had come about, threatening to obliterate all the successes up to this point. There was only one path for Germany to restore these relationships, [Lloyd George declared], namely, Germany should openly admit that a mistake had been made. In anyone’s life, and in the life of entire countries, mistakes were unavoidable, and in the interest of peace, in the interest the relaxation of reparations, which Germany was hoping for, it would be necessary to retract the treaty which Germany had concluded with Russia. The Germans should declare that a new agreement should be negotiated with the remaining European countries and Russia. Otherwise Germany would, of course, be excluded from the meetings of the first commission regarding Russian affairs. [...] Speaking next of the German–Russian Treaty of Rapallo, Rathenau described the events of the recent weeks in exact detail, leaving no doubt that the German delegates had unequivocally informed representatives from the British delegation that if no concessions were made to Germany on several points contained in the expert memorandum from London that were entirely unacceptable to the Germans, the German government would be compelled to reach an agreement with other parties, i.e., the Soviet government, so that Germany might avoid the uncomfortable position of falling between two stools if the other European states, especially the Entente states, should reach an agreement with the Soviet government that did not include Germany. The first commission of the Genoa Conference had only held one plenary session and then, without consulting the German representatives, proceeded to private conferences among the four powers who had convened the Genoa Conference. Representatives of the Soviet government had, according to reports, been summoned to these private meetings once or twice. The German delegation had received credible reports that an agreement between the aforementioned four states and Russia was impending, and thus the German government had had no alternative in the interest of self-preservation but to move closer to its own agreement with Russia. This treaty could have been signed weeks ago in Berlin. But the German government had wanted to travel to Genoa unbiased and without prejudice, and to openly and sincerely negotiate with all the nations on a equal basis those questions which were to be addressed in Genoa. It was not Germany who had deviated from this path, but the Entente states who had left the common table and elected to hold private negotiations behind Germany’s back. — As for the German–Russian treaty itself, it was naturally not possible under any circumstances to think of its withdrawal. But it could be possible to find a method whereby the treaty might be incorporated into an agreement that the other states might reach with Russia (at this Lloyd George shook his head and said that such a route was hardly advisable.) [...] Now the German chancellor spoke, saying that he had assumed leadership of the German government on May 10, 1921, and, as surely no one could deny, given his utmost to support every effort to appease Europe. The obstacles set before him regarding the issues of finances and disarmament had been straight out atrocious. He had even

succeeded in disarming Bavaria despite the inner political difficulties which had presented themselves to him there. He had come to Genoa inspired by high hopes and was greatly disappointed by the withdrawal of the Entente states into their private discussions. These private meetings had instilled a great degree of mistrust in him and the other German delegates. This mistrust had grown immensely as a result of a communication which had reached him and the foreign minister in person via a representative of the Italian delegation, Dr. Giannini [*Dr. Francesco Giannini, economic advisor to the Italian delegation*], who had visited him on Friday, April 4, in a semi-official capacity, at any rate at the bidding of Schanzer [*Carlo Schanzer, Italian foreign minister*]. Giannini had told him in person and unequivocally that the Entente states were about to reach an agreement with Soviet Russia. He had subsequently decided to seek closer contact with the Russian delegation in Rapallo. There had been a long discussion on the afternoon of April 15 between Baron von Moltke and Wise [*Frank Wise, Russian affairs advisor to the British delegation*], in which Wise was unambiguously informed that, if no willingness was shown to compromise with Germany on the questions that were of concern to it, the German delegation would be compelled to seek support elsewhere. Baron von Moltke then outlined in detail the conversation he had had with representatives of the British delegation. —Lloyd George then said that the English gentlemen who had been mentioned were not even authoritative individuals. He, at least, had had no knowledge of these discussions and reproached them for not having simultaneously contacted his secretary.”]

... and so about the discussions that he had afterwards with Tschitscherin [*Tschitscherin was the Russian commissioner for foreign affairs*]. In the discussions with Tschitscherin, the following points had been drafted:

1. Lloyd George desires the cancellation of the German–Russian treaty. We have informed the Russians of this fact.
2. Russia rejects the cancellation.
3. Russia does not intend to reject negotiations with England for the purpose of finding a phrasing agreeable to that country, but this cannot consist in the nullification of the treaty; it might, however, be possible for it to contain a postponement of the treaty’s terms until after the conference’s end.
4. Such an arrangement, however, can only be reached with our consent and may not be such that Germany is left behind as the refusing party.
5. Russia will demand concessions for every formal modification, and not just for its own sake, but also for Germany and in consultation with Germany.
6. Should the documents from Genoa or any part of these documents, with the shared consent of Germany and Russia, supersede parts of the existing treaty, there is mutual consent that those parts of the treaty which are not included in the relevant documents will be maintained in the form of a special agreement.

The German delegation shall not communicate points 3–6 to the English for the time being. On point 3, it should be stated that there was an expectation that Russia is inclined to negotiate with England. It is furthermore possible to tell the Allies that segments of the treaty might well be incorporated into a general document, but that the remaining segments of the treaty shall remain in force regardless of the general document.

Minister Rathenau reports on a discussion that he has just had with Lloyd Grean [*sic, should be Lloyd-Greame*]. During this discussion he, Rathenau, declared that the treaty could not be retracted, first, because this would infringe upon the principle of the sanctity of treaties, and, second, because the Russians did not desire this. The English insisted upon the retraction of the treaty and referred to this as a precondition for the continued admittance of Germany to the negotiations with the Russians. He rejected this combination, but had for his part indicated that it might be possible to insert the treaty into the general document, but allow the treaty to go into effect only after Genoa. He added thereby that he did not know what position the Russians would take on this matter. It had then become clear that the

English were of the opinion that a refusal to nullify the treaty, the note [i.e., demands] of the conference on Germany are to remain in full effect. ...

[A footnote in the digitalized archives cites here from the text of a note from April 18, 1922, which is published in the collection of materials from the Genoa Conference. It is neither fair nor appropriate, according to the note, “that Germany, having reaching a separate agreement with Russia, should participate in the discussions over an agreement between their countries and Russia; they concluded from this that the German delegates, by acting in this way, had proclaimed their renunciation of further participation in the discussions over the clauses of an agreement between the various countries present at the conference and Russia.” A telegram from Wirth to the German president and imperial chancellery on April 20, 1922, explains the note thus: “The opposition’s collective note does not require our exclusion from the political commission but rather only says that we are no longer interested in those points of the commission’s daily order of business that have already been settled for our part in the German–Russian treaty. This understanding can be accepted without hesitation on the part of the Germans, if only because we thereby avoid the unfortunate necessity of supporting Russia in all other matters vis-a-vis the other powers. We will continue to participate in the discussion on all questions not related to our treaty. As long as the Russians are negotiating with the other powers without us, we have the assurance that we will be kept informed continuously. Their view on the reach of article two of the treaty and the impossibility of presenting the treaty for approval is shared. We will, however, in the answering note, refer to the obvious impossibility of inserting the treaty into the general stipulations of the Russian question decided by the conference.”]

... It is therefore the case that the English were making alternative proposals: Withdrawal of the treaty—participation of Germany in the commission’s negotiations over the Russians, refusal to withdraw the treaty—retention of the conference note.

Minister Hermes warns against phrasing these things too formally and suggests consideration of the possibility that a negative attitude on the part of Germany might lead Lloyd George to cause us further difficulties.

Minister Rathenau indicates that it is, in fact, entirely possible that, should negotiations between the Allies and Russia fail, Lloyd George could take out his ire on Germany. Furthermore, Lloyd George is unpredictable, he pursues only his own interests, and he has every opportunity to abuse Germany.

A discussion of the answering note follows.

Maltzan describes a telephone call that had just taken place with Lloyd George’s secretary, in which the Germans were asked to refrain from too harsh wording of their answering note in order to avoid complicating the matter further.

Privy Councilor Gaus reads aloud the draft of the answering note. ...

[A footnote in the digitalized archives point out that the records of the foreign ministry contain three different drafts of the written response from April 18, 1922, referred to above: one as a carbon copy marked as a first draft, which displays only small changes in language in comparison with the final version from April 21, 1922; second, a comprehensive draft bearing the note “from Genoa by State Secretary Dr. Hemmer, May 24, 1922,” which goes into more detail about the prehistory of the treaty and the situation of the German delegation which resulted from the negotiations between the other powers and Russia from which Germany had been excluded; third, a draft marked as material for the note, which is significantly harsher in tone and portrays the conclusion of the Rapallo Treaty as an emergency measure taken to counter being outnumbered by the other participants in the conference.]

... After suggestions from the chancellor and Ministers Rathenau and Hermes, some changes are made to

the wording. It is planned to hold another meeting of the cabinet about the note on the following day. ...

[A footnote of the digitalized archives adds here: On April 20, 1922, at 10 a.m. there convened a half-hour meeting in Genoa (present Wirth, Hermes, Schmidt, Hirsch, von Simson, Hemmer, von Maltzan, Müller, Gaus, Weigert, Meinel, Fellingner) at which, following the passage of some editorial changes, a decision was reached to make final revisions after Rathenau's return.]

End of the meeting: 10:30 p.m.

Source of original German text: *Die Kabinette Wirth I/II*, Band 2, Dokumente, Nr. 249 Kabinettsitzung vom 18. April 1922, 21.20 Uhr in Genua. (R 43 I/2451, s. 998-1001), in „Akten der Reichskanzlei.

Weimarer Republik“. Available online:

https://www.bundesarchiv.de/aktenreichskanzlei/1919-1933/0000/wir/wir2p/kap1_1/kap2_14/para3_1.html

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