

Gustav Stresemann on the Occupation of the Ruhr (March 7, 1923)

Abstract

Gustav Stresemann (1878-1929), the founder and leader of the center-right German People's Party (DVP in its German acronym) gave the following speech to the Reichstag on March 7, 1923, just two months after the French and Belgians had begun their occupation of Germany's industrial Ruhr area in order to force compliance with reparations payments. That occupation had so outraged Germans that the leadership in Berlin immediately ceased reparations payments, called for a general strike throughout the Ruhr, and discouraged local government and railway officials from cooperating with French or Belgian authorities in any way. Moreover, the German government promised to compensate its citizens for the income that they lost through their participation in the "passive resistance" campaign, a promise that sent the already-high rate of inflation skyrocketing to hyperinflation heights and further destabilizing a shaky economy.

Stresemann went on to lead Germany through the worst period of the Ruhr Occupation and accompanying hyperinflation, serving as Chancellor from August to November 1923. He continued to serve as Germany's foreign minister for six more years, a period often referred to as the "Stresemann era," marked by Germany's reconciliation with its neighbors, especially France. In this speech, though, Stresemann advocated taking a hard line against France for what he presented as its flagrant move to seize and annex German territory on a flimsy pretext. He seemed to direct his words not only at his fellow members of the Reichstag, but also to leaders outside Germany, warning them of what he portrayed as France's neo-Napoleonic ambitions. Stresemann also appealed to foreign leaders' sense of fairness when it came to including Germany in reparations talks, alluding to the fact that open diplomacy was the first of President Wilson's Fourteen Points that were to have guided the postwar order. Moreover, the fact that Wilson's principles shaped the Versailles Treaty obligated the United States to uphold it, Stresemann argued, if the U.S. declined to ratify it.

Source

With the invasion of the Ruhr, France began to enforce its claims to the political and economic domination of Europe. The term armory used to refer to the Ruhr plays a particular role here. Who was the intended target when people now speak openly of France being in possession of this armory? Perhaps Germany? The world has been left in doubt about Germany's disarmament. I do not believe that there can be any doubt about this anywhere in the world after what the Germans have suffered in the Ruhr without the German government being able to protect them. After all, no government in the world would tolerate this disregard for the sovereignty of the state and this brutality towards its citizens, unless it finds itself in a condition of complete defenselessness. This resolves any talk of an alleged threat to France from Germany, which compels France to take some measure or another.

The fact remains: Versailles has made France the greatest and indeed virtually the only relevant military power on the European continent. Even at the height of his fame, Napoleon I never possessed such power as present-day France does. Like him and the French rulers of previous centuries, in the awareness of this power France has once again succumbed to the temptation to disregard the mental disposition of the peoples.

The Rhine and the Ruhr—therein lies the significance of these words— are perhaps the first stages on this

path towards stabilizing French hegemony. In the minds of some, the armory of the Ruhr is apparently also destined to pave the way for further stages whose setting will not necessarily be Germany.

It now appears as if French public opinion is becoming somewhat restive at the outcome of these six weeks. We see that the official French press is being deployed against the speeches of some German members of parliament, who are getting on the nerves of the gentlemen in power. In response to a speech I gave in Dortmund, the Agence Havas was asked to publish a notice stating that it was not a matter of Germany ever having offered a firm proposal in Paris. They refer to the Yellow Book^[1] and point out that this was not even a written proposal (“il ne s’agit pas d’une proposition écrite”), but only a step announcing a future visit (“seulement une démarche annonçant une visite”). The notice continues, stating that the German government has made no definitive proposal. Just to add a touch of humor to the matter, “Temps” did me quite an honor in saying that they refuse to impeach me, as I have fallen victim to untruths from Wilhelmstraße.

In response, I would like to underline what the Reich Chancellor said yesterday. For the facts are being falsified here. It was not a matter of Mr. Bergmann^[2] wishing to discuss reparations with the gentlemen, but that he wanted to present a firm, written German proposal for the ultimate resolution of the reparations question, with the German government however quite rightly requesting that it be able to participate in the discussion of its own proposal, so that it not be reported to the public in distorted form as a result of an ambiguous interpretation, and without itself being in a position to comment. Just as one can state without any chauvinism whatsoever that this entire type of international conferences, where Germany’s fate is being discussed without hearing the German side, flies in the face of all the ideas for which the gentlemen allegedly fought when they took up arms against Germany.

For me, the question of economic guarantees is as follows: As long as there is no final solution to the reparations question, it would be a completely wrongheaded policy to proceed, for reasons of domestic policy, to some kind of property-based tax scheme, which would merely prove a burden seized upon by the entente, upon which to build new, extortionate claims on Germany. The very moment, however, where taxation of personal property can be used to gain Germany’s freedom and self-determination, it naturally becomes the duty of the government to demand it, and the duty of these circles to provide what is needed to guarantee the German debts Germany has incurred. This was the underlying idea. This idea was presented to the Paris conference and the gentlemen who did not even discuss it have no right to blame either the German government or German business.

The German proposal is roughly known to the party leaders in the house, as far as I am aware, and it is also familiar to some members of the reparations commission, and we would greatly underestimate the French intelligence service if we were to assume that Mr. Poincaré^[3] is not quite well-informed about it. If he believed this German proposal by the Cuno government^[4] to be new evidence of Germany’s ill intent to shirk its reparations duties, this view would long since have been publicized. No! Because they wanted not reparations but to invade the Ruhr, this could not be mentioned, which is why for France this German proposal was merely an initiative intended to announce a certain gentleman’s visit!

The Reich Chancellor said yesterday that this proposal would have provided France with the proceeds from an international bond issue, but ultimately with the firm, impartial measure of what one believes a people capable of achieving. He could have added that he also offered interest payments by Germany for that part of the offer that was not immediately covered by an international bond issue. He could have added that for the years in which a moratorium was demanded, there was a prospect of a retroactive payment by Germany, and further, that in 1932 a third installment, if the world accepted it on the basis of international credit, would have accrued to the Interallied [Reparations Commission]. I would like to ask Mr. Benesch^[5] if he is a friend of France who wishes to prevent the disintegration of French finances, whether he could not have persuaded his friend Poincaré to discuss this proposal instead of marching into the Ruhr, if France was concerned with the question of reparations and the recovery of the French

finances.

No reasonable person in Germany will oppose reaching an understanding with France. But France has destroyed all the preconditions. I would be pleased if we could trust those French statesmen who are always assuring us that they never even considered annexations and conquests. This is mere word play, since for us this means cutting off German territory, and it does not matter whether this annexation is overt or covert. The nations that signed the Treaty of Versailles, but also the intellectual authors of the Treaty, even if they did not sign it, have an obligation to us morally and under international law. Fourteen days ago in the “Echo de Paris” General de Castelnau[6] still pointed quite openly to France’s old aspirations to detach the Rhine region from Germany. The Reich Chancellor was quite correct when he said that we stand alone in the world. Economically speaking, there will be no victory in the struggle foisted upon us, the only question is where more economic assets will be destroyed. There has never been a greater deliberate destruction of economic assets. It is an unequal battle. But I nevertheless believe that France has suffered great economic losses thus far. The “talk of negotiations” as the Reich Chancellor said, or the “sniveling about negotiations,” as Minister Severing[7] emphasized, will get us nowhere. What we need instead is to engage in unanimous resistance to force France to stop resisting the international negotiations on the reparations question.

NOTES

[1] Official French documents were usually printed on yellow paper.

[2] Germany’s chief reparations advisor, Carl Bergmann.

[3] French Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré.

[4] Chancellor Wilhelm Cuno had been in office for three months, appointed because he was seen as an expert on economic issues and reparations.

[5] Czech foreign minister Edvard Benesch/Beneš.

[6] General Édouard de Castelnau was a French general during the war and a member of France’s Chamber of Deputies at this time.

[7] Prussian Interior Minister Carl Severing.

Source of original German text: *Gustav Stresemann Vermächtnis. Der Nachlass in Drei Bänden*, ed. Henry Bernhard, mit Wolfgang Goetz und Paul Wiegler, Bd. 1, Vom Ruhrkrieg bis London. Berlin: Ullstein, 1932, pp. 39-42.

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