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THE FAILURE OF PEACE BY NEGOTIATION IN 1917*

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I

The First¹ World War was launched in the belief that force could be an effective instrument of policy. Underlying the decisions of July and August 1914 was a hard core of calculation, based on the advice to governments that the fighting would be fierce but short, and that its political and economic repercussions could be contained. In addition, because the two sides were closer to military equivalence than in previous crises, both could believe that they had a reasonable prospect of victory. But such equivalence, given the weapons technology of the day, might also deny *either* coalition a speedy, surgical triumph. And it is from the prolongation of the war as well as its inception – from its not being over by Christmas – that its historical importance derives. Among the consequences were eight million dead, and the dislocation of the Western economic system. Without the war it is unlikely that either Lenin, or Mussolini, or even Hitler, would have come to office. As far as such things can be said with certainty, the First World War was a precondition of the Second. A four-month rather than a four-year conflagration would have had other, now unknowable, consequences. It would not, presumably, have had these.

None of this is said to denigrate research into the origins of the war. But to explain its outbreak without explaining its continuation is to leave half the historical problem unresolved. There are two very general reasons why the war went on in circumstances that seemingly invalidated every assumption prevalent at its outset. The first is that the process was one of incremental, sequential decision. The choice facing, say, the British leaders after the

* I should like to thank Karen Partridge for typing this article.

¹ Many of the points referred to in this article are discussed more fully in my book *The First World War and international politics* (Oxford, 1988) and my earlier *French war aims against Germany, 1914–1919* (Oxford, 1982). In the notes I have used the following abbreviations. *AMAE*: Archives of the *Ministère des affaires étrangères*, Paris. B & K: R. P. Browder and A. F. Kerensky (eds.), *The Russian provisional government, 1917* (3 vols., Stanford, 1961). CAB: British cabinet papers on microfilm in the Seeley historical library, Cambridge. *CAEC:AC*: *Commission des affaires extérieures* of the French Chamber of Deputies, hearings on *L’Affaire Czernin*, April–May 1918, Box C. 7491, *Archives nationales*, Paris. *CAES*: minutes of the *Commission des affaires étrangères* of the French Senate, Senate archives, Paris. FO: Foreign Office papers, Public Record Office. *FRUS*: *Papers relating to the foreign relations of the United States*. *JO*: *Journal officiel de la République française: Débats parlementaires: Chambre des députés/Sénat; Compte-rendu in extenso*. S & G: A. Scherer and J. Grünewald (eds.), *L’Allemagne et les problèmes de la paix pendant la Première Guerre Mondiale* (4 vols., Paris, 1966–78).

autumn of 1914 was not whether to go all-out for victory at the cost of four years' slaughter and three-quarters of a million British lives. It was rather whether to approve the next offensive or explore the latest peace initiative, in the knowledge that that offensive might yield breakthrough and that to negotiate might mean renouncing gains that a relatively small additional effort could bring in reach. And it was easier to sacrifice the second than the first 50,000 lives, especially if not to do so meant that those first 50,000 had certainly been lost in vain. Only afterwards, and with hindsight, could the cumulative cost of victory become evident.

The second general reason is more obvious: that the war became a stalemate. But this was a triple, self-reinforcing stalemate, in domestic politics and in diplomacy as well as in military operations. This article will deal primarily with the diplomatic variable, but it cannot be understood in isolation from the other two. Between 1914 and 1917 the bloodletting could be ended neither by victory, nor by revolution, nor by compromise. The impasse on the Western front was paralleled by the absence of decision in the more mobile theatres of war. In contrast with the Second World War, it was not until the last few weeks, after the turning-point of July–August 1918, that the ultimate outcome became certain, and until then neither side had reason to abandon hope of a military victory. Partly for this reason, for public opinion as for governments the 'short-war illusion'² of July 1914 continued to sustain morale. Until 1917 the reports of the French prefect of the Yonne, for example, suggested a rise in civilian expectations before each great attack.³ Within all the great powers until the Bolshevik revolution, the political forces that accepted the cost of fighting on prevailed over those that challenged it. The circumstances of the war's outbreak enabled all the principal belligerents to represent the struggle as defensive, provoked by aggression from the other side. It must continue in order to prevent such aggression from happening again. And public morale drew part of its resilience from the long germination of national consciousness before 1914. The pre-war generation was still a time of nation-building, through urbanization, telegraphs and railways, universal conscription, and compulsory elementary schools. Precisely because this had gone furthest in Western Europe, it was from the east – from the underdeveloped multi-national empires of Russia and Austria-Hungary – that the challenge of 1917 to domestic cohesion and alliance solidarity predominantly came.⁴

We may now return to the diplomatic variable. The principal attempts to end the war by compromise were concentrated between the central powers' and the American peace notes of December 1916 and the treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. The military and domestic context helps explain why this was so. Since the trench stalemate had become established, the allies had

² Cf. L. L. Farrar, Jr., *The short-war illusion: German policy, strategy, and domestic affairs, August–December 1914* (Santa Barbara, 1973).

³ J.-J. Becker, *The Great War and the French people* (Leamington Spa, 1985), p. 195.

⁴ Cf. E. Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of rural France, 1870–1914* (London, 1977).

attempted a succession of more or less well co-ordinated simultaneous attacks. The last of these, in the spring of 1917, was deprived of its Russian component by the fall of the tsar, while its French component – the Nivelle offensive – sparked off mutinies from which the French army took months to recover. The Germans, conversely, launched no major land offensive between the battle of Verdun and March 1918, and by the middle of 1917 it was becoming clear that their unrestricted submarine offensive would be unable to starve the British out before American power was brought to bear. The summer and autumn of 1917 therefore had many of the characteristics of a broken-backed war. This did not mean that either side had lost all hope of victory; but both were near exhaustion and the prospects for a purely military solution had never seemed so bleak. In the balance between military and diplomatic methods of gaining political objectives, diplomacy acquired new prominence. Only Russia's separate armistice in December 1917 made possible a new attempt to break the log-jam by military operations, and led to diplomacy again being relegated. It was also between the two Russian revolutions that domestic consensus right across Europe came under unprecedented strain because of growing support for the liberal and socialist left. The rest of this article will therefore focus on the months from March to November 1917, when diplomatic activity was at its height and the prospects for a compromise seemed greatest. It will pursue four themes: the Austro-Hungarian search for peace within the central powers' camp; the Russian search within that of the allies; the contacts within the Western European triangle of Germany, France and Britain; and the European implications of American policy.

II

As with Russia, if less dramatically, the Habsburg empire's new diplomatic assertiveness began with a shift in the domestic political balance. The emperor Karl came to the throne in December 1916. Both he and his new foreign minister, Czernin, were nervous activists, alarmed by Austria-Hungary's predicament, and anxious to terminate a policy of drift. Both were therefore willing to circumscribe the monarchy's war aims, and to sound out the enemy. Czernin told a crown council on 12 January that he still wished to modify the frontiers with Rumania, Serbia and Montenegro, but he placed most emphasis simply on maintaining existing Habsburg possessions.⁵ Karl himself was primarily responsible for the exchanges conducted via Prince Sixte de Bourbon between December 1916 and June 1917, which were the most extended Austrian contact with the allies. In a letter of 24 March, conveyed by Sixte to the French leaders, he promised that Serbia could regain its sovereignty and win access to the Adriatic, on the condition only of suppressing anti-Habsburg agitation. He also favoured restoring Belgium's independence and undertook to support 'by every means' France's 'just

⁵ G. Ritter, *The sword and the sceptre: the problem of militarism in Germany* (4 vols., London, 1969-73), III, 385.

claims relative to Alsace and Lorraine'.⁶ This was apparently to approve the most important of the publicly acknowledged British and French war aims. And although the allies' note of 10 January 1917 to the American president had spoken of 'the liberation of the Italians, the Slavs, the Rumanians, and the Czecho-Slovaks [*sic*] from foreign domination', in reality this did not reflect their policy.⁷ Lloyd George, the British prime minister, indicated to the Americans in February that Austria-Hungary could keep Bohemia and that he would welcome a separate peace with Vienna.⁸ Moreover, during the Sixte negotiations, the French president, Poincaré, and Jules Cambon, the secretary-general of the Quai d'Orsay, offered the Austrians not only survival but also territorial expansion, in the shape of Silesia and Bavaria.⁹ There appeared to be no direct contradiction between Austro-Hungarian and Franco-British war aims.

In a way characteristic of 1917, the Sixte initiative none the less failed at two levels: over a specific territorial issue and over the broader obstacle of alliance cohesion. The territorial issue was Italy's claim to the Trentino, the South Tyrol, and much of Istria and Dalmatia, to which the other Allies had pledged support in the 1915 treaty of London in return for Italy's entry into the war. Karl and Czernin were contemptuous of the Italians' war effort, and although in the final stages of the initiative Karl grudgingly offered to exchange the Trentino for compensation elsewhere,¹⁰ this was less than Vienna had promised Italy in 1915 simply for remaining neutral. Conversely, the Italian foreign minister, Sonnino, stood by the treaty of London obligations when he met Lloyd George and the French prime minister, Ribot, on 14 April at Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne. Lloyd George's offer of the Turkish province of Smyrna failed to move him. And although at this stage Lloyd George and Ribot could not disclose Karl's personal involvement, Sonnino remained unalterable when in July Ribot showed him all the correspondence from the affair.¹¹ After Saint-Jean-de-Maurienne, therefore, the contact became increasingly an attempt by each side to sow dissension in the opposite camp.

And this raises the second, broader problem. Whatever Lloyd George's exasperation with Sonnino, he did not follow up the Smyrna offer by applying pressure. And Ribot feared that if British and French good faith were compromised, not only Italy might be lost but also Serbia and Rumania and possibly Russia as well.¹² But if the British and French felt unable to throw over the Italians, this gave Karl little incentive to disengage from Germany,

⁶ Prince Sixte de Bourbon, *L'Offre de paix séparée de l'Autriche*, 5 déc. 1916-12 oct. 1917 (Paris, 1920), pp. 96-8.

⁷ For this declaration, J. B. Scott (ed.), *Official statements of war aims and peace proposals, December 1916 - November 1918* (Washington, 1921), pp. 35-8.

⁸ Page to Lansing, 11, 20, 21 Feb. 1917, *FRUS 1917 Supplement I* (Washington, 1931), pp. 41-4, 55-6. ⁹ *CAEC:AC*, Hearing of Jules Cambon, 7 May 1918; Sixte, *L'Offre*, pp. 67-8.

¹⁰ Sixte-Karl conversation, 8 May 1917, 'La Mission secrète du prince Sixte de Bourbon', *L'Opinion*, XIII (3 Jan. 1920), p. 22.

¹¹ A. Ribot, *Journal d'Alexandre Ribot et correspondances inédites, 1914-1922* (Paris, 1936), pp. 67-70, 125; C. J. Lowe and M. L. Dockrill, *The mirage of power: British foreign policy, 1914-1922* (3 vols., London, 1972), II, 225; Sixte, *L'Offre*, p. 262.

¹² Ribot, *Journal*, p. 67.

although it was the mirage of an Austro-Hungarian *separate* peace that accounted for the initial allied enthusiasm for the Sixte initiative. British policy in February 1917 was still to refuse contact with the Germans themselves or to discuss a general settlement with the central powers.¹³ And the French offers of Silesia and Bavaria made no sense unless Vienna were to break loose from its partner and become an independent Central European counterweight. But Sixte had overstated Austria-Hungary's separatist tendencies in his representations to the allies. True, Karl had told him that if Germany rejected 'just and equitable' terms (which presumably meant abandoning Belgium and Alsace-Lorraine) he would ultimately have to make a separate peace; Czernin similarly said that if Germany blocked a 'reasonable' settlement, Austria-Hungary would have to break up the alliance. But whereas the emperor expressed this willingness in writing, Czernin's memoranda during the Sixte initiative ruled out a separate peace, and during the foreign minister's contacts with the allies in 1917 he consistently offered only a general settlement.¹⁴ This implied a willingness to be the allies' spokesman within the central powers' camp, and even to threaten separate action, but not to act on the threat. If Karl was willing to do more – and he kept Czernin very imperfectly informed during the Sixte affair – he still kept on a minister in whom he did not fully place his confidence, and this indicates the difficulties he would have faced in trying to break with Germany. To have done so would have tested his authority to the limit, and his dilemma is captured in a letter of 15 May to Czernin. A dramatic German victory, he felt, would be disastrous for Austria-Hungary, which must pursue a settlement based on the status quo; but it could not abandon the German alliance.¹⁵ The Habsburg monarchy's approaches to the allies must therefore be seen as one prong of a dual strategy that included also a diplomatic offensive to soften up its stronger partner. But this was not a simple quest for peace at any price, and when Karl and Czernin failed to win the moderation of Germany's Western European war aims that was essential for a general compromise, they still drew back from the precipice of a separate negotiation.

The diplomatic offensive was pursued through discussions with the German government and through a broader 'paradiplomacy' designed to mobilize German opinion.¹⁶ But the more orthodox methods were tried first. At a meeting with the German chancellor, Bethmann Hollweg, on 16–17 March, Czernin pleaded that Austria-Hungary was 'at the end of her strength' and agreement must be reached on peace conditions. So far from sacrificing whatever was necessary in order to gain a cease-fire before disaster, however,

¹³ V. H. Rothwell, *British war aims and peace diplomacy, 1914–1918* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 66, 80.

¹⁴ 'La mission secrète', pp. 7, 11, 12, 20 (see note 10 above).

¹⁵ Ritter, *Sword*, III, 377. See also R. A. Kann, *Die Sixtusaffäre und die geheimen Friedensverhandlungen Österreich-Ungarns im ersten Weltkrieg* (Vienna, 1966), pp. 31–6.

¹⁶ For a discussion of 'paradiplomacy', R. F. Hopwood, 'Czernin and the fall of Bethmann Hollweg', *Canadian Journal of History*, II, 2 (1967), 49–61. See also K. Epstein, 'The development of German-Austrian war aims in the spring of 1917', *Journal of Central European Affairs*, XVII, 1 (1957), 24–47.

he had in mind a reorientation of the central powers' war aims in Austria-Hungary's favour, and his objectives remained flexible if circumstances should improve. Thus he proposed that if Germany gained peace on the basis of the status quo ante, Austria-Hungary should obtain the same (which implied trading allied territories conquered by the Germans for the restoration of those lost by Vienna). But if Germany did better, so should Austria-Hungary, and this meant particularly the larger share in a partition of Rumania. At a further meeting ten days later, the two sides indeed concurred that the minimum acceptable peace was the status quo ante in Western and Eastern Europe, but if the outcome were more favourable, the Habsburgs would expand primarily in Rumania, and Germany in Poland and the Baltic provinces. Bethmann appeared resigned to not regaining all of Germany's colonies, and to safeguarding its position in Belgium mainly through a railway and customs union, which was much less than had previously been thought necessary. When Karl met Wilhelm II at Homburg on 3 April, however, Czernin tried to go further, suggesting that Austria-Hungary should cede its province of Galicia to a German-dominated kingdom of Poland, in return for Germany ceding to France all of Alsace-Lorraine. German rejection of this over-ingenious arrangement forced him to change his tactics from offers of inducements to attempts at coercion.¹⁷

The problem, as the Austrians well knew, was that Bethmann faced conflicting pressure from the high command of Hindenburg and Ludendorff, or OHL, which had acquired the characteristics of a sovereign entity within the German government. Bethmann's preference since November 1914 had been for flexibility and vagueness over war aims, to permit him to follow up every opportunity to lessen Germany's enemies by bringing one or more of them to a separate peace. Hindenburg and Ludendorff, more optimistic, advocated total victory and by military rather than diplomatic means. They opposed territorial sacrifices made to split the allies that would compromise Germany's prospects in what they supposed was an inevitable future war. Co-ordination between these viewpoints was the task of Wilhelm, who instinctively sympathized with military and naval thinking about war aims, and feared a confrontation with the victors of Tannenberg, whose popular prestige rivalled his own. Thus he overrode Bethmann's objections to a closer definition when in April 1917 Hindenburg argued that the fall of the tsar had brought peace closer and that Germany must decide on its objectives before entering discussions with its allies.¹⁸ By implication, Hindenburg wished to go beyond the ambitious war aims already negotiated between the military and civilian leaders before the central powers' abortive peace note of December 1916. The Kreuznach programme duly emerged from a new military-civilian conference on 23 April. It was formidable. In the Baltic, Germany would annex Courland

¹⁷ Minutes on conferences of 16 and 26 Mar. 1917, S & G, II, docs. 20, 33. Ritter, *Sword*, III, 386-97.

¹⁸ Hindenburg to Bethmann, 5 Apr. 1917, Bethmann to Hindenburg, 16 Apr. 1917, Bethmann to Grünau, 18 Apr. 1917, Grünau to Zimmerman, 20 Apr. 1917, S & G, II, docs. 49, 71, 76, 82.

and Lithuania and preferably more. It would also annex extensively from the nominally independent Poland that the central powers had pledged themselves to in November 1916 and that in practice was intended for German political, economic and military domination. In the west it would annex Arlon, Luxemburg, and the main French iron-ore field, Longwy-Briey. Britain must accept German occupation of and transit rights across a disarmed Belgium in railway union with the Reich. The Flanders coast, wanted by the navy for U-boat bases, and Liège would be held in perpetuity or on a ninety-nine-year lease.¹⁹ It is true that Wilhelm, in authorizing the conference, had distinguished between what was desirable and what was realizable, but his personal *minimum* aims differed little from the Kreuznach programme.²⁰ So although Bethmann commented that these 'fantasies' would have meaning only in the improbable contingency of Germany being able to dictate its terms, and that he would continue regardless to seek a separate peace, he was vulnerable and isolated.²¹ And conventional intergovernmental discussions were therefore unlikely to achieve Czernin's objective of moderating German aims.

In April and May the Austrians duly attempted shock tactics. Czernin obliged OHL with the information that he found Bethmann impossible to work with. He appeared to welcome the German Social Democratic Party's (SPD's) opposition to annexations. On 12 April he sent to Wilhelm via Karl an apocalyptic memorandum predicting revolution against both dynasties if their countries had to undergo another winter of war.²² None of this cut much ice. Wilhelm doubted that revolution was likely in Germany; and Bethmann, who was not fighting for his independence from Ludendorff in order to surrender it to Czernin, replied that precisely submission to the enemy would be most likely to bring the monarchies down.²³ At a German-Austrian conference, again held at Kreuznach on 17-18 May, Czernin effectively called his paradiplomacy off, partly because the Dual Monarchy's position had now improved. A new agreement again provided that Austria-Hungary would expand primarily in Rumania, but Germany would have a predominant share in owing and exploiting the Rumanian oil industry and railways and the local Danube shipping. This bone without a marrow was little compensation for Czernin's failure to manoeuvre Germany into concessions in Western Europe, which was omitted from the document.²⁴ But even Bethmann was not prepared for complete renunciation in Belgium, and he remained committed to annexing Longwy-Briey and to resisting more than token border transfers

¹⁹ Grünau to Bethmann, 24 Apr. 1917, *ibid.* doc. 87.

²⁰ Grünau to Auswärtiges Amt, 13 May 1917, *ibid.* doc. 115.

²¹ Bethmann minute, 25 Apr. 1917, *ibid.* doc. 87. Bethmann written statement, 1 May 1917, G. D. Feldman (ed.), *German imperialism, 1914-1918: the development of a historical debate* (New York, 1972), doc. 10.

²² Hopwood, 'Czernin', pp. 51-3; Grünau to Bethmann (enclosing Karl letter and Czernin report), 14 Apr. 1917, S & G, II, doc. 68.

²³ Bethmann to Wilhelm II, 4 May 1917, *ibid.* doc. 104.

²⁴ Note by Bethmann and Czernin, 18 May 1917, *ibid.* doc. 123.

in Alsace. If the path was blocked towards a general peace, however, the Austrians had had little allied encouragement to venture on a separate one. The only remaining possibility of an accommodation in the central powers' position lay with a change in the German domestic balance.

In July 1917, precisely this seemed to occur, in the shape of Bethmann Hollweg's replacement as chancellor by Michaelis at the same time as the Reichstag passed a 'peace resolution'. But, if anything, these events marked a hardening of German policy. Matthias Erzberger of the pivotal Catholic Centre Party set the crisis going with a speech to the Reichstag main committee that gave a bleak depiction of Germany's prospects and called for a resolution against an annexationist peace. Erzberger had liaised earlier with Karl and Czernin and received a copy of their 12 April memorandum to Wilhelm, and to this limited extent the July crisis was a belated consequence of Czernin's paradiplomacy. But Erzberger's hope, like that of the Austrian foreign minister, was for a general peace that somehow would not entail defeat for the central powers and might even improve their position.²⁵ And although the Reichstag resolution condemned 'forced territorial acquisitions', its wording permitted indirect expansion through nominally independent buffer states.²⁶ The majority of the deputies who supported it could therefore later approve without contradiction the treaty of Brest-Litovsk, which deprived the former Russian empire of one third of its population while annexing none of the territory in question to Germany. The day after the resolution was passed, Erzberger recommended to Michaelis that Lithuania should become a nominally independent duchy with Wilhelm as its sovereign, in customs union with Germany. Alsace-Lorraine should become autonomous but remain under German sovereignty, and even Longwy-Briey might be obtainable within the resolution as part of an exchange.²⁷

In any case, the Reichstag no more controlled the executive after July than before. The decisive impetus for Bethmann's departure was not dissatisfaction in the legislature but a threat from Hindenburg and Ludendorff to resign if the chancellor did not go. Michaelis was not a puppet of OHL, but neither was he selected by the Reichstag, and he proved to be more conservative than his predecessor in domestic and foreign affairs. He accepted the peace resolution only 'as I understand it', and told the crown prince that he could now 'make any peace that one likes under its terms'.²⁸ At a third Kreuznach meeting on 9 August he agreed with OHL on even more draconian war aims than those of 23 April, including a possible German satellite in the Ukraine. Although Czernin had renewed his offer to abandon Galicia to a German-dominated Poland if Germany would make sacrifices in Alsace-Lorraine, Michaelis informed him on 14-15 August that Germany could make no important

²⁵ K. Epstein, *Matthias Erzberger and the dilemma of German democracy* (Princeton, 1959), pp. 173-4 and ch. viii.

²⁶ Text of the resolution in Feldman (ed.), *German imperialism*, doc. 12.

²⁷ Erzberger to Michaelis, 18 July 1917, S & G, II, doc. 169. Epstein, *Erzberger*, pp. 203-4.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 206.

concessions in the two provinces.²⁹ The cycle first undergone in April–May had repeated itself, and neither Austro-Hungarian diplomacy nor the political crisis in Berlin had softened the negotiating position of the central powers. Yet if this was one part of the 1917 conundrum, the allies, also, resisted either a breach in their diplomatic solidarity or a sufficient reduction in their war aims to permit discussion of a general peace. It is necessary to consider why, in spite of the impact of the Russian revolution, this was so.

III

Such authority as remained in Russia after the abdication of Nicholas II was divided initially between the provisional government under Prince Lvov, composed mainly of former Duma members, and the Petrograd soviet of workers' and soldiers' deputies. Neither gave absolute priority to domestic survival at the expense of international commitments. The all-Russian congress of soviets on 11 April appealed to the peoples of the world to press their leaders to abandon annexations and indemnities, but pledged its support to the Russian war effort.³⁰ The foreign policy of the Petrograd soviet was moulded by the so-called Siberian Zimmerwaldians, who wanted an international socialist conference and pressure on Russia's allies to scale down their aims, but accepted that socialists could support a democratic, non-annexationist war. This broadly became official policy after representatives of the soviet entered the government in May, and Tereshchenko replaced Miliukov as foreign minister.³¹ Miliukov, indeed, had remained loyal to the tsarist aim of annexing Constantinople, and even Tereshchenko may have hankered after some form of control over the straits, as well as gains from the Turks in Armenia.³² Lvov disarmingly informed the British ambassador that the phrase 'peace without annexations' was open to whatever interpretation the allies placed on it, and his successor, Kerensky, desired at least that the straits should be internationalized.³³ Despite these equivocations, however, and with the major exception of Poland, the provisional government was as near as any of the belligerents to fighting a purely defensive war in order to regain its 1914 frontiers. It came to occupy a position in the allied camp analogous to that of Austria-Hungary among the central powers, and it too engaged simultaneously in a diplomatic and paradiplomatic offensive against its partners' war aims and in peace contacts with the enemy.

These contacts foundered on the usual reefs of rival territorial claims and coalition solidarity. The most significant of them were the Erzberger-

²⁹ Minutes of Austro-German conference of 1 Aug. 1917; Lersner to Kühlmann, 15 Aug. 1917; Michaelis to Czernin, 17 Aug. 1917, S & G, II, docs. 181, 207, 211.

³⁰ B & K, II, doc. 948.

³¹ R. A. Wade, 'Iraki Tsereteli and Siberian Zimmerwaldianism', *Journal of Modern History*, XXXIX, 4 (1967), 425–31, and the same author's 'Why October? The search for peace in 1917', *Soviet Studies*, xx, 1 (1968), 36–45.

³² Miliukov press interview, 23 Mar. 1917, B & K, II, doc. 908. G. Buchanan, *My mission to Russia and other diplomatic memories* (2 vols., London, 1923), II, 117–18.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 116. *Daily Chronicle* interview with Kerensky, 22 Mar. 1917. B & K, II, doc. 922.

Kolyschko conversations in Stockholm in March and April. The two participants agreed on armistice conditions and on a peace that would restore Russia's pre-war frontier, although subject to extensive 'corrections' and to a plebiscite (expected by Erzberger to favour the central powers) in Poland. They could get this far only because neither man fully represented his government. Kolyschko's activities were acquiesced in by some members of the Russian cabinet, but others accused him of being a German agent. Erzberger went to Stockholm with Bethmann's sanction, but exceeded his instructions, which were only to listen. And by discussing not only a peace but also an armistice, he gave a legitimate pretext for intervention by Ludendorff, who sent his own representative to warn Kolyschko that OHL would never accept such moderate terms.³⁴ The foreign ministry and the high command agreed on 29 April that any cease-fire must give Germany 'frontier corrections' in Courland and Lithuania, and that Poland must be independent. New conditions approved by Bethmann in May specified that Poland must 'lean' towards the central powers and provided for the '*Anschluss*' of Courland and Lithuania with Germany.³⁵ The German civilian and military positions were now aligned, and in the following month contacts with the provisional government ended.

The territorial stumbling blocks were therefore Courland, Lithuania and, especially, Poland. Although Bethmann had publicly undertaken in April 1916 not to retrocede Germany's conquests in the Baltic provinces,³⁶ there was still some flexibility in the German position here. But he himself considered in retrospect the November 1916 proclamation of independence for Russian Poland to be the one war-aims commitment of his chancellorship by which Germany was irrevocably bound.³⁷ Even if the country remained a subject of Austro-German dispute, there was no doubt of its destiny as a satellite of the central powers. Conversely, the essential tsarist war aim, apart from annexing Constantinople, had been to incorporate the central powers' Polish provinces into a reunited Poland in personal union with the Russian empire that would constitute a buffer state under Russian, rather than hostile, domination.³⁸ The provisional government declared that Poland should be independent, but in 'free military alliance' with Russia, and remained committed to absorbing into it the Habsburg and Hohenzollern Polish provinces.³⁹

Beyond this loomed a still more intractable issue. Kolyschko went to Stockholm to seek a general peace; Erzberger a separate one. Both the

³⁴ Epstein, *Erzberger*, pp. 166–78, for a general account. See also Erzberger to Zimmermann, 31 Mar. 1917; Erzberger to Langwerth, 21 Apr. 1917; Grünau to Zimmermann, 25 Apr. 1917; Zimmerman to Grünau, 26 Apr. 1917, S & G, II, docs. 40, 85, 88, 90.

³⁵ Lersner to Zimmermann, 29 Apr. 1917; Leopold of Bavaria to Dragomirow, 12 May 1917, *ibid.* docs. 98, 114.

³⁶ F. Fischer, *Germany's aims in the First World War* (London, 1967), p. 238.

³⁷ Bethmann to Hertling, 26 Jan. 1918, Feldman (ed.), *German imperialism*, doc. 28.

³⁸ A. Dallin et al., *Russian diplomacy and Eastern Europe, 1914–1917* (New York, 1963), ch. 1.

³⁹ T. Komarnicki, *Rebirth of the Polish Republic: a study in the diplomatic history of Europe, 1914–1920* (London, 1957), p. 156.

provisional government and the Petrograd soviet were committed to the inherited coalition with the western allies embodied in the September 1914 pact of London that had pledged its signatories against separate negotiations. And just as Austria-Hungary did not break loose over Germany's intransigence, so Russia's loyalty to Britain and France survived their evasiveness over war aims. Like Czernin, the provisional government failed to move its partners either by intergovernmental contacts or by paradiplomacy, but its efforts under the first head were half-hearted anyway. It began by issuing a war-aims declaration and forwarding this to the other allies for comment. The document was a compromise between Miliukov's and the Petrograd soviet's views. It denied that Russia wished to dominate other countries, or seize their national possessions; but it would fight on for a peace based on self-determination, and honour its alliance obligations. The British replied that they were not fighting a war of conquest, although they welcomed Russia's intention to liberate all parts of Poland. The French said that they were fighting for Alsace-Lorraine, for 'reparatory indemnities', and guarantees against renewed enemy provocation, and that only victory could bring a lasting peace.⁴⁰ But both governments were willing to talk about their war aims, and on this unpromising basis Tereshchenko on 13 June proposed an inter-allied conference to revise the coalition's war-aims agreements. But by expressly excluding from this the September 1914 pact of London and its renunciation of separate negotiations he deprived himself in advance of his main bargaining weapon. He never received a reply, and in July suggested himself that the conference should be postponed.⁴¹ He had hoped his partners would be more accommodating if Russia revived its military effort, but with the defeat of the summer 'Kerensky offensive' this prospect also evaporated. His one remaining card was publicity, and he suggested to the French that the March 1917 'Doumergue agreement', exchanging a free hand for Russia on its western borders for French annexation of the Saarland and for a system of buffer states on the left bank of the Rhine, should be made known. Ribot countered by proposing to link this with the publication of the March 1915 inter-allied agreement promising Russia Constantinople, and Tereshchenko backed away. By the time the idea of a war-aims conference was relaunched in the autumn, the provisional government was in its death throes.⁴²

The Russians therefore lacked the strength and single-mindedness to impose a general war-aims reduction on the allies through diplomatic channels. But a more serious challenge was presented by the Petrograd soviet's support for an international socialist conference at Stockholm. Since 1914, European socialism had become fragmented into three broad ideological tendencies. The patriotic Right supported the national war efforts (though not necessarily

⁴⁰ For the declaration (forwarded on 18 Apr.) and the British, French and Italian replies (26-27 Apr.), B & K, II, docs. 909, 964, 972-4.

⁴¹ Tereshchenko note of 13 June 1917; Tereshchenko to Bakhmetev, 28 July 1917, *ibid.* docs. 986, 989.

⁴² Sevastopoulo to Jules Cambon, 5 July 1917; Ribot to Noulens, 13 Aug. 1917; Noulens to Ribot, 17 Aug. 1917, *AMAE A 'Paix'* (164). Tereshchenko to Sevastopoulo, 24 Sept. 1917, *FRUS 1917 Supplement II*, i. pp. 506-7.

annexations), voted war credits, and sometimes entered bourgeois cabinets. It included a majority of the SPD, the Labour party, and the French socialists, the SFIO. By 1917 it was rivalled by the Centre, or 'minority', who mustered nearly half the vote in SFIO congresses, split off from the SPD as the Independent Socialists, and included most of the Italian PSI as well as the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in Russia. The centrists opposed annexations, refused to vote war credits, and wanted to revive the pre-war Second International, although they acted by constitutional means. Finally, the revolutionary Left, represented principally by Lenin and the Bolsheviks, wished to transform the conflict into an international civil war, and to construct a new international summit organization. But in most of Europe the Centre gained more than the Left from the socialist resurgence in 1917, and it was the Centre that launched the Stockholm appeal, beginning with an invitation in April by the neutral socialists in the Bureau of the Second International. The Petrograd soviet made a parallel proposal on 15 May, and joined forces with the neutrals in a combined invitation on 11 July. By doing so it gave Stockholm allied as well as neutral socialist backing, and, given the prestige that the Russian revolutionaries enjoyed, the Right was now liable to shift into the Centrist camp over the issue.⁴³

In the event, although elements of the revolutionary Left met at Stockholm in September, the more broadly representative conference initially envisaged never convened. The German and Austro-Hungarian governments were willing to let their socialists attend, and proximate responsibility for the stillbirth of the conference therefore lay with the allies. The American president thought such a gathering 'likely to make a deal of mischief', and withheld passports for the conference called on 11 July.⁴⁴ On the American home front this caused little difficulty; but it eased the more delicate task facing Woodrow Wilson's coalition partners. In Italy, given the PSI's desire for immediate peace negotiations, it was unsurprising that passports should be refused. But in Britain and France there were larger numbers of patriotic socialists whose loyalty to the war effort might be jeopardized, and therefore larger scope for Russian paradiplomacy. In Britain, the foreign-policy consideration of relations with the Russians was probably the principal influence on the cabinet's handling of the issue. After the May 1917 Petrograd soviet invitation it decided British representatives could attend, both for the favourable effect in Russia and to prevent a *lêve-à-lêve* between the soviet and the SPD.⁴⁵ But at this stage only Ramsay MacDonald and the British counterparts of the French *minoritaires* wanted to go. After the July joint invitation, however, Arthur Henderson, the leader of the parliamentary Labour party

⁴³ Generally on Stockholm see D. Kirby, 'International socialism and the question of peace: the Stockholm conference of 1917', *Historical Journal*, xxv, 3 (1982), 709-16; H. Meynell, 'The Stockholm conference of 1917', *International Review of Social History*, v (1960), 1-25, 202-25; A. J. Mayer, *Political origins of the New Diplomacy, 1917-1918* (New Haven, 1959).

⁴⁴ *FRUS, The Lansing papers 1914-1920* (2 vols., Washington, 1940), II, 17. M. Fainsod, *International socialism and the World War* (repr., New York, 1973), pp. 113, 140.

⁴⁵ War cabinet, 21 May 1917, CAB 23/2.

and a member of the war cabinet, also favoured acceptance, as did a special party conference. But the cabinet now refused passports and accepted Henderson's resignation. This was partly because ministers felt he had misled them, but also because of unanimous opposition to Stockholm from Britain's allies, including reportedly Kerensky, who had now replaced Lvov as Russian premier, although he could not openly admit his views.⁴⁶ Like Tereshchenko's war-aims conference, then, Stockholm came to grief in part because of the Russians' own tergiversations. But it was in France, more vulnerable than Britain to the revolutionary contagion, where the most agonizing choices had to be made. After two socialist deputies, Cachin and Moutet, returned from a mission to Russia with new revolutionary fire in their bellies, a special SFIO National Council voted on 27–29 May to accept the conference invitation. The two deputies also brought back knowledge of the Constantinople and Doumergue agreements, and a delegation went to Ribot to ask for these to be annulled.⁴⁷ Ribot had already decided not to scale down French war aims in the hope of reviving Russia's war effort.⁴⁸ But he now had to decide whether France itself was governable without socialist co-operation, for the SFIO's *volte-face* coincided with a quasi-revolutionary strike wave and the peak of the French army mutinies. Given the British attitude, he at first hesitated,⁴⁹ but the conservative parties in the chamber of deputies objected to granting passports, and the new commander-in-chief, Pétain, warned that if the socialists went to Stockholm he could not answer for military discipline.⁵⁰ There remained the question of the secret treaties, and on 6 June the chamber passed the Dumont resolution, which repudiated conquests but called for reparations, for Alsace-Lorraine, and for 'lasting guarantees of peace and independence to be obtained...in an organization...of the League of Nations'.⁵¹ But this did not mean that the League in itself was a sufficient guarantee, and in a secret session in the senate Ribot not only claimed the Alsace-Lorraine of 1790 (which included much of the Saar coalfield) but also accepted that a neutral and autonomous Rhineland buffer state 'cannot be considered a conquest; it is a protective measure'.⁵² Like the Reichstag resolution, Dumont's was a piece of sticking plaster to hold national consensus in place, and neither declaration inhibited veiled expansion through buffer states as opposed to more naked annexationism. But precisely such veiled expansion was the outstanding characteristic of the belligerents' European war aims. And if neither the Austrians within the central powers' camp nor the

⁴⁶ War cabinet, 8, 10 Aug. 1917, CAB 23/3. D. Lloyd George, *War memoirs* (6 vols., London, 1933–6), iv, 1881–1924.

⁴⁷ Ribot, *Journal*, p. 138.

⁴⁸ M. Paléologue, *La Russie des tsars pendant la Grande Guerre* (3 vols., Paris, 1921–2), iii, 313–18. A. Ribot, *Lettres à un ami: souvenirs de ma vie politique* (Paris, 1924), pp. 234–5.

⁴⁹ Minutes of Anglo-French conference, 28–9 May 1917, CAB 28/2.

⁵⁰ Paul Cambon to de Fleuriau, 2 June 1917, P. Cambon, *Correspondance, 1870–1924* (ed. H. Cambon) (3 vols., Paris, 1940–6), iii, 171–2. Ribot, *Journal*, p. 138. R. Poincaré, *Au service de la France. Neuf années de souvenirs* (10 vols., Paris, 1926–33), ix, 149.

⁵¹ Printed in G. Bonnefous, *La Grande Guerre (1914–1918)* (2nd edn, Paris, 1967), p. 265.

⁵² Ribot speech, 6 June 1917. Appended to *JO (Sénat)*, 1968, pp. 764–7.

Russians among the allies could reduce those aims, the remaining question was whether compromise could be achieved by direct bargaining between the governments of Britain, France, and Germany themselves.

IV

The contacts within the Western European triangle reached their culmination in the wake of a further attempt at open diplomacy. This was Pope Benedict XV's peace note, published by the Vatican on 16 August 1917. It had been preceded by secret consultations, but with Germany only. Pacelli, the papal nuncio in Munich, had spoken to the Kaiser and to Bethmann, who had said that Belgium could not regain its independence if this made Britain and France predominant there.⁵³ The papal note duly proposed that Belgian independence should be guaranteed 'against any power whatsoever', but within the context of a general return to the status quo ante both in Europe and overseas (Germany would regain its colonies) and conciliatory settlements of the Franco-German and Austro-Italian territorial disputes that would heed, as far as possible, the wishes of the populations concerned. Little was said about Eastern Europe, although there was sympathy for Poland. But in sum this would be a peace without annexations and indemnities, as incompatible with the western allies' war aims as with those of OHL.⁵⁴

The note was a first diplomatic test for the new leadership in Berlin, where Bethmann Hollweg's successor was engaged in an initial round of war-aims consultations with the Austrians and the High Command. Michaelis was inexperienced in external affairs, and relied heavily on the advice of his foreign minister, Kühlmann. The latter was therefore Bethmann's true heir. Kühlmann accepted that Germany could not realistically expect large territorial gains, and must extricate itself by pursuing a separate peace with one or other of its enemies – although unlike Bethmann he saw Britain as the potential weak link in the allied chain. But in August he still felt that a peace initiative would be premature, and his and Michaelis's first reaction to the papal note was to delay and to reply in generalizations in order to avoid entanglement in peace discussions.⁵⁵ Early in September, however, two developments persuaded the Germans to launch a diplomatic offensive after all. These were the British reply to the Vatican, and the news of the Armand-Revertera conversations.

The latter began as another Austro-French contact, although they had wider repercussions. In June Count Revertera, a highly placed figure at the Austrian court, made known to the French general staff that he wished to meet one of their intelligence officers, Armand Painlevé, the French war minister, won the consent of Ribot and Lloyd George, and in Switzerland on 7 and 22 August two meetings followed. Armand offered the Austrians Silesia, Bavaria,

⁵³ Grünau to Bethmann, 3 July 1917; Zimmermann note, 24 July 1917, *ibid.* docs. 157, 175. T. von Bethmann Hollweg, *Betrachtungen zum Weltkrieg* (2 vols., Berlin, 1919), II, 210–14.

⁵⁴ Text of the note in Scott (ed.), *War aims*, pp. 129–31.

⁵⁵ Michaelis to Grünau, 21 Aug. 1917; Kühlmann to Wedel, 27 Aug. 1917, *ibid.* docs. 216, 225.

and a reunited Poland with its 1772 frontiers, in return for a separate peace, although in a general settlement with the central powers much less generous conditions would be available. He also proposed a further meeting, between Painlevé and Czernin themselves.⁵⁶ In itself, all this mattered little. The extravagant offers made to Revertera had been authorized in general terms by Painlevé, but no higher, and even the war minister felt afterwards that Armand had been 'too absolute'.⁵⁷ Ribot himself had stipulated that Armand should merely listen to Revertera, and he was never forwarded the dossier on the affair.⁵⁸ On the Austrian side, Czernin remained uninterested in a separate Franco-Austrian deal. But he did use Armand's 'terms' and Painlevé's reported willingness to meet him as a lever on the Germans, and it is here that the episode's main significance lies. Painlevé's was a rising political star, and in September–November 1917 he briefly succeeded to Ribot as French prime minister, though keeping Ribot on as minister for foreign affairs. German agents in Switzerland had received reports that if Painlevé reached the premiership he would be prepared for a 'reasonable understanding', on the basis of commercial and colonial concessions in exchange for Alsace-Lorraine.⁵⁹ So when at the end of August Czernin proposed to the Germans that he should take up Painlevé's offer to meet him, Kühlmann was startled and rushed to Vienna. The affair, he concluded, was a clever and dangerous bid to split the central powers. Rather than let Austria take the lead in representing Germany in general negotiation the Berlin government must start an initiative of its own.⁶⁰

At the same time as Kühlmann gained a motive to act, Britain's response to Benedict XV gave him an occasion. Neither the French, nor the Italian, nor the American government wished to follow up the Vatican appeal. But when Lloyd George's cabinet met on 20 August, a fissure in this unanimity opened. Ministers had been much sobered by the allies' military disasters during the year, and they authorized Balfour, the foreign secretary, to reply that it was for the central powers to take the lead in disclosing their objectives. This was evidently to leave the door ajar, especially as Balfour's telegram to his Vatican representative, de Salis, singled out Britain's primary concern by noting that the enemy had indicated no intention either to restore Belgium's full sovereignty or to make good the damage that the country had suffered. Ribot, without having seen the message and to his subsequent regret, asked to be associated with it. And de Salis actually handed the document over rather than following his instructions to communicate its contents orally.⁶¹ When

⁵⁶ See articles on the conversations in *L'Opinion*, xiii, 10, 24, 31 July 1920.

⁵⁷ Undated report by Col. Goubet, *L'Opinion*, xiii, 24 July 1920, p. 87.

⁵⁸ *CAEC:AC* Hearings of Ribot and Painlevé, 30 Apr. 1918.

⁵⁹ Kessler to Zimmermann, 14 Mar. and 17 Apr. 1917. S & G, II, docs. 18, 72. Cf. B. Szeps, *My life and history* (London, 1938), pp. 177–92.

⁶⁰ Kühlmann to Michaelis, 30 Aug. 1917, Kühlmann notes, 2 and 3 Sept. 1917, S & G, II, docs. 231, 233, 235.

⁶¹ War cabinet, 20 Aug. 1917, CAB 23/3. Balfour to de Salis, 21 Aug. 1917, with note by 'C.H.S.', 22 Aug. 1917, FO 371/3083. Ribot, *Journal*, p. 188.

Pacelli forwarded the telegram on 30 August,⁶² then, the Germans might well suppose themselves recipients of an official Franco-British request for terms at the very moment when it had become imperative to pre-empt Austro-Hungarian mediation. The attempts to end the war by compromise now reached their climax.

During September 1917 both the French and British governments received approaches from Berlin: the French through the so-called Briand-Lancken affair, and the British in response to the de Salis overture. But for Kühlmann it was the opening to London that mattered, and he hoped to counter the Armand-Revertera danger by trying to divide Britain and France. At the Bellevue crown council on 11 September he won authority from the Kaiser and OHL to reply to the de Salis message and to diminish Germany's Belgian demands. Rejecting the papacy as an appropriate conduit, he approached the Spanish diplomatic representative in the Low Countries, Villalobar. But instead of acting himself, Villalobar notified the Spanish foreign minister, who eventually conveyed to the British ambassador in Madrid the bald information that 'a very exalted personage' in Germany wished to make 'a communication relative to peace'.⁶³ This was a less authoritative and explicit signal than Kühlmann had intended, and it said nothing about Belgium. None the less, Balfour correctly divined its author, and felt that to ignore it might risk demoralizing British opinion and strengthening the Pan-Germans in Berlin. But he also felt that any answer must spell out that Britain could not engage in even the most non-committal conversations without first informing its partners, and on this crucial principle the cabinet, for a second time, wavered. On 24 September, after a difficult discussion, it decided to reconsider after a meeting to be held on the following day between Lloyd George and Painlevé, now newly installed as French prime minister, at Boulogne.⁶⁴

The Boulogne meeting had also to consider the second German feeler: the Briand-Lancken affair. Lancken was the head of the political department of the German occupation administration in Brussels, and had served in the German embassy in Paris before the war. In April 1917 he had been authorized to sound out French politicians and officials with offers of token concessions in Alsace-Lorraine, and had soon concentrated his attention on Briand, as a former wartime prime minister who was now out of office.⁶⁵ Contacted via Belgian intermediaries who included the prime minister of the Belgian government-in-exile, de Broqueville, Briand agreed in principle to meet Lancken in Switzerland, and seems genuinely to have supposed that the whole of the lost provinces might be obtainable. When he spoke to Ribot, now

⁶² Pacelli to Michaelis, 30 Aug. 1917, S & G, II, doc. 230.

⁶³ See generally L. L. Farrar, Jr., 'Opening to the west: German efforts to conclude a separate peace with England, July 1917 - March 1918', *Canadian Journal of History*, x, 1 (1975), 73-90. Lloyd George, *War memoirs*, IV, 2083 ff.

⁶⁴ Balfour, 'Peace negotiations', 20 Sept. 1917, *ibid.* pp. 2093-7. War cabinet, 24 Sept. 1917, Lowe and Dockrill, *Mirage*, III, doc. 121.

⁶⁵ O Freiherr von der Lancken Wakenitz, *Meine dreissig Dienstjahre, 1888-1918* (Berlin, 1931), p. 258. Lancken to Zimmermann, 28 Apr. 1917, S & G, II, doc. 97.

foreign minister, he found him hostile, but Painlevé himself was willing to approve a meeting if the other allies agreed.⁶⁶ In contrast with the situation only a few months previously, therefore, neither the French nor the British objected any longer to the principle of talking to the Germans, unless this meant divisive separate conversations.

But from here on, the waters were muddied by personal rivalry between Briand and Ribot and by acts of bad faith by the two men. Asked by Ribot to prepare a memorandum for discussion with the allies, Briand presented a letter on 20 September that specified there could be no separate agreement but omitted the claims of France's partners from its proposed terms. Ribot then sent a circular to his ambassadors in which he distanced himself from Briand, and gave the impression that the latter had wished to proceed without consulting the allies.⁶⁷ This predetermined a critical allied response, which Lloyd George echoed at the Boulogne meeting,⁶⁸ but on the 23rd Briand had already been told that the meeting with Lancken could not take place. The other channels of communication lasted little longer. After the Boulogne meeting the British cabinet met again, and this time permitted Balfour to inform the allied representatives in London about the Villalobar feeler.⁶⁹ At a meeting with the ambassadors on 6 October it was agreed to tell the Germans that Britain would be willing to receive any communication about peace and to discuss it with the other allies. Kühlmann never replied. And a fortnight later the Austrians suspended the Armand-Revertera contact on the grounds that the French conditions were too severe and the Habsburg monarchy's position had improved. The shutters were now down.

Once again, territory and alliance cohesion were the principal points at issue. Both France and Germany had become more flexible, but insufficiently. Ribot doubted the value of a permanent French occupation of the left bank of the Rhine, although he favoured a buffer state.⁷⁰ Painlevé may have felt some form of Rhineland demilitarization would be enough.⁷¹ Michaelis differed from Bethmann in not insisting on the annexation of Longwy-Briey, as long as Germany had secure access to the iron ore. But Ludendorff still wanted both the orefield and a protective glacis, and over Alsace-Lorraine he and Kühlmann could agree that only small frontier changes were possible.⁷² On 9 October the foreign minister told the Reichstag that Germany would

⁶⁶ G. Suarez, *Briand: sa vie - son oeuvre* (6 vols., Paris, 1938-52), iv, 226-62. Lancken to Zimmermann, 4 July 1917, S & G, II, doc. 160.

⁶⁷ Briand to Ribot, 20 Sept. 1917, Suarez, *Briand*, iv, 272-4. Ribot circular telegram, 20 Sept. 1917, read by Ribot in *JO (Chambre)*, *Comité secret* of 16 Oct. 1917, appended to *JO (Chambre)* 2 Apr. 1933, pp. 547-8.

⁶⁸ Paul Cambon and Barrère to Ribot, 21 Sept. 1917; Ribot, *Journal*, pp. 212-14. Jusserand to Ribot, 26 Sept. 1917, *AMAE* Jusserand MSS (48). Minute by Col. Helbronner on Boulogne conference, 25 Sept. 1917, G. Pedroncini, *Les Négociations secrètes pendant la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 1969), p. 114. ⁶⁹ War cabinet, 27 Sept. 1917, Lowe and Dockrill, *Mirage*, III, doc. 122.

⁷⁰ Ribot, *Journal*, p. 95, and see above, note 52.

⁷¹ This was the proposal in the Armand-Revertera conversation of 22 Aug. 1917.

⁷² Minutes of Prussian crown council, 4 Sept. 1917; Ludendorff memorandum, 14 Sept. 1917; Kühlmann memorandum, 3 Sept. 1917, S & G, II, docs. 236, 251, 235.

never make the smallest concession over the two provinces: Ribot replied by reasserting France's claim, and Lloyd George gave somewhat ambiguous support.⁷³ Lancken's sounding got as far as it did only because Briand was misled by the Belgian intermediaries and apparently persuaded Painlevé himself that 'nine-tenths' of Alsace-Lorraine might be available.⁷⁴ It was not.

There was also a continuing clash of Anglo-German interests. Kühlmann envisaged a German declaration satisfying Britain over Belgium being conditional on an allied commitment to Germany's territorial integrity as of 1914, including the restoration of its colonies.⁷⁵ On this last point he was willing for some compromise, as might Lloyd George have been, although the prime minister would have had to take into account the claims on Germany's overseas possessions by the Dominions, the French and the Japanese, as well as the Admiralty's anxiety to deprive the enemy of potential bases for U-boats and commerce raiders that could threaten British imperial communications.⁷⁶ The gap between what Lloyd George could offer and Kühlmann could accept was therefore likely to be wide, even leaving aside the German navy, which British official thinking took for granted must be destroyed.⁷⁷ And what could Kühlmann offer Britain? Wilhelm told him after the Bellevue council that he had a free hand to get peace by Christmas, but this was really authority only to drop the German navy's demand for Flanders coastal bases.⁷⁸ Perhaps because of the pressure on his troops from Haig's murderous third Ypres offensive, Ludendorff conceded that the issue did not justify prolonging the war for another winter, and the navy found itself isolated.⁷⁹ Wilhelm, though sympathetic to the admirals and afraid of Pan-German agitation, said at Bellevue that the Flanders coast should not prevent a 'decent' peace, provided Belgium and Germany were closely integrated economically.⁸⁰ Michaelis wanted to keep a special position at Antwerp, retain influence over the Flemish autonomists, and occupy Liège and a strip protecting the Ruhr until economic ties had grown so close that Belgium could not go to war against Germany.⁸¹ Hindenburg and Ludendorff favoured all of this and a prolonged occupation, doubting whether economic ties alone could ever be an adequate security guarantee.⁸² Yet restoring Belgium to its pre-war status remained the most unequivocal British objective on the continent of Europe, and over this

⁷³ Kühlmann in Reichstag, Scott (ed.), *War aims*, p. 159. Ribot in Chamber of Deputies, 12 Oct. 1917, *JO (Chambre)*, 1917, pp. 2695-7. Lloyd George statement, 11 Oct. 1917, Scott (ed.), *War aims*, p. 161. ⁷⁴ Lloyd George, *War memoirs*, IV, 2100-1.

⁷⁵ Kühlmann memorandum, 8 Sept. 1917, in W. Michaelis, 'Der Reichskanzler Michaelis und die päpstliche Friedensaktion von 1917: Neue Dokumente', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, XII, 7 (1961), pp. 418-34, doc. 2.

⁷⁶ W. R. Louis, *Great Britain and Germany's lost colonies, 1914-1919* (Oxford, 1967), esp. ch. III.

⁷⁷ Rothwell, *War aims*, pp. 32, 51-2, 262.

⁷⁸ Ritter, *Sword*, IV, 52-4.

⁷⁹ Ludendorff memorandum, 14 Sept. 1917, S & G, II, doc. 251.

⁸⁰ For Wilhelm, Michaelis, 'Neue Dokumente', doc. 3; and the same author's 'Der Reichskanzler Michaelis und die päpstliche Friedensaktion', *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht*, VII, 1 (1956), p. 19.

⁸¹ Michaelis to Hindenburg, 12 Sept. 1917, S & G, II, doc. 247.

⁸² Hindenburg to Michaelis, 15 Sept. 1917, *ibid.* doc. 251.

the cabinet, for all its war weariness, was not prepared to compromise. The de Salis telegram, after all, invited German concessions rather than proposing British ones.

Behind the Anglo-German and Franco-German disputes lay, once again, the question of alliance solidarity. Lancken's feelers were intended to test the prospects for a separate peace, but Briand envisaged, or said he envisaged, any meeting in Switzerland as a stepping-stone to a general settlement. Painlevé, at first enthusiastic for the interview, changed his mind after consulting his ministers, apparently not because too little was on offer but because he 'doubted whether France would continue fighting if it were offered both nine-tenths of Alsace-Lorraine and the whole of Belgium'.⁸³ Ribot's conduct was governed no doubt in part by antipathy towards Briand but also by his suspicion that the feeler was a 'snare': that Briand's visit to Switzerland would at once be publicized, with possibly fatal damage to allied unity and French civilian morale.⁸⁴ In fact the evidence from the German side vindicates neither view. The channel was of secondary importance to Kühlmann, who told Lancken to 'offer little' and play for time until the fate of the Villalobar feeler had been clarified. An 'ocean of hate' separated France from Germany, and little or nothing could be conceded in Alsace-Lorraine. But the French war effort depended on the British, and a deal with London might be the mechanism for bringing France to terms. Further, he had information that the Lloyd George government, which he thought ruthlessly committed to victory, was under challenge from more moderate figures such as, supposedly, Asquith and Balfour.⁸⁵ The British had indeed been consulted only cursorily over French ambitions in the Rhineland, and were not committed to their support.⁸⁶ Nor, much to French chagrin, would Lloyd George pledge himself unequivocally even over Alsace-Lorraine.⁸⁷ But France was too central to British interests for it to be allowed to be defeated or estranged, and the cabinet was agreed that Painlevé must be informed about the Villalobar feeler. The doubt came not over France but over Russia, and it was not Balfour but Lloyd George himself who led the sceptics about alliance solidarity. On 24 September he and several other ministers wanted to delay communicating with the allies other than France until Germany's exact proposals were known. If Russia dropped out of the war, felt the prime minister, it should pay the territorial price. Lord Milner countered that Germany would leave the conflict more powerful than it had entered, if it won a free hand in the east. And Balfour feared the Russians would drop out all the sooner if they learned of peace conversations going on behind their back. When discussion resumed three days later a cabinet majority formed against

⁸³ See note 74 above.

⁸⁴ Suarez, *Briand*, IV, 270-1. Ribot testimony in *CAES*, 14 Nov. 1917.

⁸⁵ Kühlmann note for Lancken's conversation, 20 Sept. 1917; Kühlmann memorandum, 3 Sept. 1917; Rosen to Michaelis, 7 Aug. 1917, S & G, II, docs. 259, 235, 189.

⁸⁶ Balfour to Bertie, 2 July 1917, F.O. 371/2937; Paul Cambon to Ribot, 10 July 1917, *AMAE* Pichon MSS (4).

⁸⁷ Poincaré, *Au service*, IX, 208. Bertie to Lloyd George, 24 Sept. 1917, F.O. 800/169.

Lloyd George's position and Balfour was permitted to tell the Russians as well as the other allied ambassadors about the German approach.⁸⁸ Not even Kerensky was to be abandoned, let alone Painlevé, and until the Bolshevik revolution intervened Kühlmann was stalemated.

V

A final element must be added to the equation. In the long term, American intervention was the most decisive of the events that broke the European stalemate and made possible the conclusion of the war. But in the short term it reinforced and prolonged that stalemate, at both the military and the diplomatic level. When the Americans declared war on Germany, Britain had the wherewithal to finance only three weeks' further purchases in the USA.⁸⁹ Without American entry, economic paralysis, coupled with the February revolution, would probably have driven the allies into, at best, an unfavourable compromise. American assistance during 1917, however, was primarily naval and economic, and even in this form it was deliberately rationed. By October the American troops in France still numbered only 80,000.⁹⁰ Wilson did enough to keep the allies in the war, but the German leaders could still suppose that Russia's disintegration made possible a military victory. Michaelis judged in August that Germany could continue for another year, and at the time of the Bellevue council Ludendorff advised that the central powers' position was stronger than that of their enemies.⁹¹ Conversely, Lloyd George, at least in retrospect, considered American aid a reason for persevering in 1917, and Ribot telegraphed to his ambassador in Washington that 'until the United States has made the decisive effort it is preparing, we shall not be in a favourable position to negotiate'.⁹²

The European allies therefore gambled that American intervention would allow them to impose their war aims. They did so even though Wilson publicly distanced himself from those aims, notably in his message of 27 August – issued unilaterally and without consultation – in reply to the Pope. The president did not, however, press his partners to negotiate. If he had advocated 'peace without victory' while America was neutral, he now intended to defeat and democratize Imperial Germany as a precondition for the general reformation of international politics that he desired. The allies' growing dependence on

⁸⁸ War cabinet, 24 and 27 Sept. 1917, Lowe and Dockrill, *Mirage*, III, docs. 121 and 122. D. R. Woodward, 'David Lloyd George, a negotiated peace with Germany, and the Kühlmann peace kite of September 1917', *Canadian Journal of History*, VI, 1 (1971), 75–93.

⁸⁹ K. Burk, 'Great Britain in the United States, 1917–1918: the turning point', *International History Review*, I, 2 (1979), 233.

⁹⁰ A. Kaspi, *Le temps des américains: le concours américain à la France en 1917–1918* (Paris, 1976), p. 75. W. B. Fowler, *British–American relations, 1917–1918: the role of Sir William Wiseman* (Princeton, 1969), p. 37.

⁹¹ Michaelis to Czernin, 17 Aug. 1917; Ludendorff memorandum, 14 Sept. 1917, S & G, II, Docs. 211, 251.

⁹² Lloyd George, *War memoirs*, IV, 2104; Ribot to Jusserand, 30 Sept. 1917, *AMAE Jusserand MSS* (32).

American help would be used if necessary to break their resistance also, but at a time and in circumstances of the United States's choosing. Thus he vetoed a proposal by his treasury secretary that American loans should be made in part conditional on their being used to accomplish American war aims,⁹³ and noted in July that 'when the war is over we can force them [i.e. France and Britain] to our way of thinking because by that time they will, among other things, be financially in our hands'.⁹⁴ Similarly, in his reply to Benedict XV he both implicitly condemned his partners' plans for 'the dismemberment of empires' and yet also rejected a return to the pre-war status quo.⁹⁵ And although he denied American passports for the Stockholm conference, his presence on the allied side helped maintain labour and socialist support in Western Europe for the war effort. So far from American diplomacy reducing allied objectives, therefore, it contributed to a more subtle and largely cosmetic readjustment, of which the allied commitment to the League of Nations and the British espousal of a Jewish national home in Palestine were both products. Neither militarily nor diplomatically did the American factor yet operate in favour of a compromise peace.

The European holocaust was therefore prolonged in 1917 for the same reasons as it had begun: both sides had political objectives that they considered too important to abandon, and both supposed there was a chance of victory if they carried on. Another incremental decision was made – to keep going for 'ten minutes longer' than the enemy, as Ludendorff put it, or, in Clemenceau's words, 'until the last quarter of a hour'.⁹⁶ Although the cohesion of the home fronts fractured, the leading beneficiaries were the centrist socialists rather than the revolutionaries, and they failed, in Germany, Britain, France, and Italy, to win more than a superficial alteration in war aims. Karl in Vienna and the new authorities in Petrograd lacked the power and ruthlessness to impose moderation on their coalition partners; it did not yet suit Woodrow Wilson to make the attempt. The technical difficulties of clandestine feelers through amateur intermediaries were not the primary reason for the failure to compromise in 1917. The obstacles were real and deep. Austria-Hungary and Italy were at loggerheads over the Adriatic and the South Tyrol; Russia and the central powers over the Baltic littoral and Poland; France and Germany over the Rhineland and Alsace-Lorraine; Britain and Germany over Germany's colonies and Belgium. Overriding all of this were the complexities of decentralized decision-making in a coalition war, in which to make a gesture to the enemy might threaten alliance solidity. And if peace feelers were made public they might enfeeble military and civilian morale and start an irreversible process that would eventually suspend operations along the existing fronts. It was no accident that in Western Europe

⁹³ Fowler, *Wiseman*, pp. 43–4.

⁹⁴ L. W. Martin, *Peace without victory: Woodrow Wilson and the British Liberals* (New Haven, 1958), p. 141. My emphasis.

⁹⁵ Wilson to Benedict, xv, 17 Aug. 1917, Scott (ed.), *War aims*, pp. 133–5.

⁹⁶ Fischer, *Aims*, p. 414. Clemenceau in chamber of deputies, 8 Mar. 1918, *JO (Chambre)*, 1918, p. 857.

feelers were initiated by Germany, which had most to gain from freezing the existing map of war, and that such a freezing was most acutely feared in Paris. But both territorial war aims and the priority attached to the alliances were manifestations of a more generalized and deeply rooted insecurity. This was, in part, inherent in an international system based on sovereign states, and that system bears its portion of responsibility for the tragedy of 1917. If all the belligerents had renounced their contradictory objectives and been content to live in harmony on the basis of the pre-war status quo, the slaughter need not have continued. But the long growth in international tension and suspicion since the turn of the century, and the impact of three years of total war, ruled this out. A Germany where Ludendorff had acquired a veto over foreign policy, and was already looking to the next round, was close to Kissinger's archetype of the 'revolutionary power' for whom only absolute security could suffice, at the price of absolute insecurity for its neighbours.⁹⁷ Conversely, Lloyd George argued afterwards that the allied decision to hold on should be judged by the durability of the 1919 settlement in comparison with the likely durability of one negotiated – if negotiation was possible – with this Germany two years earlier.⁹⁸ 'Peace without victory' was not the basis of the relatively lasting settlements after 1815 and 1945, and the sacrifices of the allied armies in 1918 won at least the possibility of constructing such a settlement, even if the opportunity was squandered. At all events, what Wilson promised would be 'force, force to the utmost, force without stint or limit'⁹⁹ would now decide the issue.

⁹⁷ H. A. Kissinger, *A world restored: Metternich, Castlereagh, and the problem of peace, 1812–1822* (London, 1957), p. 2.

⁹⁸ Lloyd George, *War memoirs*, IV, 2107–9.

⁹⁹ Speech at Baltimore, 6 Apr. 1918, Scott (ed.), *War aims*, pp. 309–12.