

CHAPTER 2

THE FAILURE OF COLLECTIVE SECURITY

The peace-treaties gave Europe and Western cooperation a bad start. The reparation provisions, the territorial arrangements and the military clauses provided the worst possible basis for cooperation and reconciliation with Germany. The blow it dealt to the German people did not enable the Weimar Republic, as the successor to the German Reich, to rise above nationalism and resentment and make a new start as a democracy. The American hope to use the League of Nations as an instrument to redress the injustices of the peace treaties was destroyed by the refusal of the U.S. Senate to consent to America's membership of the League. Without American participation, the League's collective security system could not provide the necessary guarantees for upholding or – eventually – revising the Versailles order by peaceful means.

Unavoidably, the principal states fell back on traditional means to assure their perceived national interests. Germany looked east to seek support from Soviet-Russia in an effort to revise the Versailles peace order. France tried to protect its national security by a system of alliances between states bordering Germany, by hampering the resurgence of German power and by seeking a British guarantee for its security against Germany. All three efforts of France were bound to be counterproductive. Alliances such as the agreement with Poland¹ would involve France in a conflict with Germany rather than enhance its own security. Its policy to contain German power was resented and challenged by Germany from 1922 onwards. Britain invoked its

¹ See document I.2.1.

adherence to the collective security system of the League by refusing any commitment to guarantee France's borders.

SOVIET-GERMAN RAPPROCHEMENT: THE RAPALLO TREATY

At the Genoa Conference in 1922, convened with a view to the reconstruction of the European economy, France and Britain tried to trade tsarist debts for German reparations. Worried that such a scheme was meant only to pit the two powers against each other, the Soviet delegation invited their German counterparts for a secret meeting at Rapallo. On 16 April 1922, the two foreign ministers concluded an agreement in which Soviet-Russia and Germany established diplomatic and consular relations, renounced claims against each other and granted each other most favoured nations status.

The Rapallo Treaty together with the opening speech of Russian foreign minister Georgi Chicherin at the Genoa Conference² was an important step towards the rapprochement between the two states, which both had a major interest in revising the territorial arrangements of the peace treaties in East and Central Europe.

The news of the Rapallo Treaty was received with stupefaction and indignation in London and Paris. As George Kennan wrote:

"The news of its conclusion came as no less of a surprise to the government in Berlin than to the governments in London and Paris. Official sentiment in Berlin was by no means enthusiastic. The German President, in particular, was furious. Above all, the treaty was in no sense a precedent for the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of 1939 – an agreement which went much further and embraced elements which the German statesmen of 1922 would never have dreamed of accepting."

² Both reprinted in document I.2.2.

The conclusion of the Pact nevertheless was a major blow to the possibility of Western cooperation, for which the Western powers primarily were to be blamed. According to Kennan:

“For the Western Allies, Rapallo meant the forfeiture of the collaboration of Germany as a possible partner in a united Western approach to the problem of Russian Communism. But it also meant, though Western statesmen did not realize it at the moment, that their own policy of coupling debts and claims with recognition had been decisively undermined.

(...)

Rapallo could justly be described as the first great victory for Soviet diplomacy. It successfully split the Western community in its relation to Russia. It drove an entering wedge, on terms favourable to Moscow, into the problem of diplomatic recognition and the resumption of trade relations between Russia and the West.

(...)

The most important determining factor in this development was the weakness of the diplomacy of the Western democracies. To these shortcomings must be added the inexcusable denial of America's presence and interest at this crucial moment. The United States refused flatly to take any part at all in the Genoa Conference.”³

On 24 April 1926, the Soviet Union and Germany concluded a Neutrality Agreement in which they re-affirmed the Rapallo Treaty as the basis of their relations and pledged neutrality in a conflict between one of them and a third power as well as non-participation in a financial and economic boycott against one of them.⁴

France occupied the Rhineland in January 1923, which Britain considered illegal. As a means of pressure on Germany to pay reparations the occupation failed. The resulting stalemate was resolved with American assistance through the Dawes plan for a

³ George Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin*, Little Brown and Company 1961, p. 222-223.

⁴ Document I.2.4.

reduced schedule of German reparations payments. It opened the way for a more general and political settlement, known as the Locarno Treaties of 16 October 1925.

THE LOCARNO TREATIES

The complex of documents agreed to, consisted of the following instruments:

- (1) A covering declaration signed by the foreign ministers of Germany, Belgium, Britain, France, Italy, Poland and Czechoslovakia;
- (2) A treaty of mutual guarantee between Germany, Belgium, Britain, France and Italy;
- (3) Treaties of guarantee between France and Poland and between France and Czechoslovakia;
- (4) Bilateral arbitration agreements, between Germany and its four neighbours: France, Belgium, Poland and Czechoslovakia.⁵

According to the covering declaration, the representatives were convinced that the treaties would contribute to moral détente and to the solution of many political and economic problems between their nations; whereas they established peace and security in Europe, the treaties were deemed to be the appropriate means to effectively accelerate disarmament as provided in article 8 of the Covenant of the League of Nations.

The treaty of mutual guarantee covered the maintenance of the territorial status quo and the inviolability of the existing frontiers between Germany and Belgium and between Germany and France. In case disputes could not be settled by the means provided for in the treaty, they would be submitted to the League of Nations.

The four arbitration agreements provided for the peaceful settlement of disputes between Germany and its four

⁵ See document I.2.3 for the Locarno Treaties.

neighbours. Germany, however, refused to recognise the existing borders with its Eastern neighbours. The other signatories also refused to guarantee these borders, while Britain even refused to guarantee the arbitration treaties.

At the time, the Locarno Treaties were greeted with much enthusiasm. Foreign Ministers Gustav Stresemann of Germany, Aristide Briand of France and Austen Chamberlain of Britain received the Nobel Prize for Peace.

For no good reason, according to Henry Kissinger Locarno "gave international sanction to two classes of frontiers in Europe – those accepted by Germany and guaranteed by the other powers, and those neither accepted by Germany nor guaranteed by the other powers." As a consequence, writes Kissinger, "three tiers of commitment now prevailed in Europe." The first were traditional alliances between France and the new states in Eastern-Europe. The second were the special Locarno guarantees, "obviously deemed less binding than formal alliances." Third, "there was the League of Nations' own commitment to collective security, which was in practice devalued by Locarno. For, if collective security was in fact reliable, Locarno was unnecessary; and if Locarno was necessary, the League of Nations was, by definition, inadequate to assure the security of even its principal founding members."⁶

Locarno, of course, was necessary for a reason not mentioned by Kissinger. It paved the way for the admission of Germany to the League of Nations. The entry into force of the Locarno Treaties was made dependent on Germany's membership of the League. Much of the enthusiasm for the Treaties could be attributed to this fact. France's agreement to German membership and German acceptance of the League's collective security system was seen as a promising sign of French-German rapprochement and cooperation – a sign apparently confirmed in

⁶ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy*, Simon & Schuster 1994, p. 274-275.

the next few years and the agreement between Briand and Stresemann on a proposal for a federal union of Europe.⁷

In this perspective, Locarno did not give sanction to two classes of frontiers or three tiers of commitment. It would commit and enable Germany and France to solve their security problems in accordance with and in the framework of the League of Nations' collective security system. It was only later – in the light of the publication of the Stresemann papers and Hitler's assault on the Treaty of Versailles – that Locarno came to be seen in a different perspective. Stresemann embarked on his fulfilment policy aimed at a revision of the Treaty of Versailles in the wake of the French occupation of the Rhine land. Locarno and the Neutrality Agreement with the Soviet Union in 1926 were meant to enable Germany to prevail in its efforts to challenge and change its frontiers with Poland and Czechoslovakia.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ORDER OF VERSAILLES

Until the rapprochement between France and Germany in the late twenties – marked by the proposals for a federal union in Europe – Germany had been treated as an outcast rather than an equal partner in the Western approach to collective security and the problem of Soviet Russia.

By the time Stresemann and Briand found each other, it was too late to change the tide. The economic crisis of 1929 destroyed what was left of any sense of cohesion and confidence. Japanese aggression against Manchuria set the stage for the destruction of what was left of the post-war peace and security order.

On 30 January 1933 Adolf Hitler became German Chancellor, duly so appointed by President Paul von Hindenburg, to start his march of folly to the Second World War and the destruction of Germany. Hindenburg, according to extracts from his testament, saw Hitler's appointment as a step to bring the German people

⁷ See this author's *European Unification in the Twentieth Century*, p. 38.

closer to their unity and to the fulfilment of their historic mission "as the standard bearer of Western civilization."⁸ Hitler wasted no time to destroy both. Totalitarian rule was established immediately. In September 1935 the Nürnberg Laws on Citizenship and Race legalised the anti-Semitic campaigns and the road to Auschwitz.⁹

From the moment he took office, Hitler embarked on an aggressive foreign policy aimed at overthrowing the "Diktat of Versailles." Hitler withdrew from the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations in May 1935, two months after universal military service had been re-instituted by law (and in violation of the Treaty of Versailles).¹⁰ On 7 March 1936 his troops re-occupied the Rhineland, thus removing the last barrier in the West to revise Germany's Eastern borders by force. As General Jodl's testimony at the Nürnberg Trials in 1945 show,¹¹ these three steps were the first phase in a carefully planned policy of preparing for war. They were followed by the Austrian *Anschluss* and the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia. Britain and France reacted with a policy of appeasement.¹² After the German re-occupation of the Rhineland, Britain primarily sought to discourage France from military action. In Munich, both France and Britain opted for a policy of appeasing Germany as a way to preserve peace.

The outbreak of the Spanish civil war in July 1936 found Germany and Italy on opposite sides from the Soviet Union, France and Britain. As George Kennan wrote, there never was at that time a real possibility for a Western-Soviet coalition against Hitler and the two fascist regimes (Franco and Mussolini). This was not due to the French and British policies of appeasement in reaction to the Austrian *Anschluss* and the dismemberment and occupation of Czechoslovakia. The deeper answer was that Stalin's

⁸ Document I.2.5.

⁹ Document I.2.6.

¹⁰ Document I.2.7.

¹¹ Document I.2.9.

¹² Document I.2.8.

totalitarian regime – at that time fully occupied by the massive and savage purges – never was a possible partner for the West.

“The fact is that Stalin’s Russia was never a fit partner for the West in the cause of resistance to fascism. Russia herself was, throughout these years, the scene of the most nightmarish, Orwellian orgies of modern totalitarianism. These were not provoked by Hitler’s rise. They originated, as we saw, in 1932, at a time when Stalin did not yet have any proper understanding of the Nazi danger.”¹³

The occupation of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 signalled the end of appeasement for Britain and France and the beginning of the treacherous collusion between Hitler and Stalin towards the destruction of Poland. On 30 March 1939 Britain (and France) extended a unilateral guarantee to Poland.¹⁴

Stalin’s sign to Hitler that a Soviet-German rapprochement is possible and desirable was given in his speech to the XVIIIth Party Congress. It paved the way for the conclusion of the Molotov-von Ribbentrop Pact on 23 August 1939 and the joint invasion of Poland.¹⁵

WAR

The Molotov-von Ribbentrop Pact found the two totalitarian regimes in agreement that the “Diktat of Versailles” imposed upon them by the Western powers had to be undone by force of arms.

Hitler’s speech to the Reichstag on the day of the German invasion of Poland goes hand in hand with the Soviet statement to Poland on the day of their invasion of Poland from the East.¹⁶ The German invasion of Poland marked the outbreak of the

¹³ George Kennan, *op.cit.*, p. 312-313.

¹⁴ Document I.2.10.

¹⁵ Documents I.2.11 and I.2.12.

¹⁶ Documents I.2.13 and I.2.15.

Second World War in Europe. France and Britain declared war against Germany but not against the Soviet-Union.

By virtue of their Boundary and Friendship Treaty and the Supplementary Protocols of 28 September 1939, Eastern Europe was divided up between Germany and the Soviet Union. Poland was partitioned between Germany and the Soviet Union and had to be erased forever from the map of Europe. They agreed that:

"neither party will tolerate in its territories Polish agitation that affects the territories of the other party. Both parties will suppress in their territories all beginnings of such agitation and will inform each other concerning suitable measures for this purpose."

For two years, Hitler and Stalin subjected their Polish territories to a policy of unprecedented terror, carried out in mutual consultation and cooperation of their security services. According to the Declaration attached to the Treaty they had

"definitely settled the problems arising from the collapse of the Polish State and have thereby created a sure foundation for a lasting peace in Eastern Europe. (...) They mutually express their conviction that it would serve the true interests of all peoples to put an end to the state of war existing at present between Germany on the one side, and England and France on the other."

France and Britain did not move beyond declaring war to Germany alone. Poland was abandoned as victim of twofold totalitarian aggression and terror.¹⁷

In the West the period of the "phoney war" or *Sitzkrieg* came to an end when German forces invaded Denmark, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg and France. Prime Minister Chamberlain was driven from the House of Commons amid the hoots and chants of even his own supporters and replaced by Winston Churchill.

¹⁷ Document I.2.14.

THE AXIS POWERS

By virtue of the Treaty of Berlin of 27 September 1940, Japan joined in alliance with Germany and Italy, pledging mutual assistance in case of an attack by a power [meant was the United States] at present not involved in the European war or in the Chinese-Japanese conflict.¹⁸ German efforts to obtain Soviet adherence to the Treaty failed. The Soviet conditions were (meant to be) unacceptable to Hitler.¹⁹ Less than a month after receipt of the Soviet note, Hitler issued orders for the preparation of the attack on the Soviet-Union.

German efforts to obtain Spanish adherence to the Treaty equally failed, despite General Franco's declaration that he stood ready at Hitler's side, "entirely and decidedly at your disposal, united in a common historical destiny, desertion from which would mean my suicide and the Cause which I have led and represent in Spain."²⁰

Operation Barbarossa was launched in June 1941 and Poland now became a concentration territory for German terror and the extermination of the Polish and European Jews. On 7 December 1941 Japan attacked Pearl Harbor and Germany declared war on the United States of America. America entered the Second World War on the side of Britain and the Soviet-Union.

¹⁸ Document I.2.16.

¹⁹ Document I.2.17.

²⁰ See the exchange of letters between Hitler and Franco in document I.2.18.