In his recent book, *French war aims against Germany, 1914–1919*, David Stevenson comes to the heart of the problem relative to the diplomatic prolongation of World War I. ‘No Government’, he asserts, ‘was willing to jettison its war aims in the interest of a compromise peace, or to place itself at the enemy’s mercy while a chance of victory remained’. His work is to be applauded, therefore, for he has given us the first succinct and judicious account of the course of official French war aims from 1916 to 1919, enlarging upon a topic heretofore treated in scholarly articles. Using the wealth of archival documentation now available, and the private papers of numerous participants, Stevenson has made a major and much-needed contribution to our knowledge of the subject by tracing the relationship between official war aims policy, peace diplomacy and the diplomatic impact of allied policy on French war aims from their inception to the Versailles settlement.

If this valuable book has a shortcoming, it lies in the area of failure to discuss the impact of internal pressures prior to 1916 on policy formulation. While Stevenson is sensitive to the impact of the Socialist left on the partial retreat from expansive war aims in 1917 and defines that role very well, he does not attempt to deal to any extent with the basic configuration of political forces within French society which led to the initial formulation of aggressive war aims in late 1916. Obviously one book cannot do everything, but to justify such an omission by arguing, in diplomatic terms, as Rothwell has done for the British, that so far as the formulation of war aims was concerned, the opinions of interested groups ‘were less important than the preconceptions of the leaders and their response to the military situation and to the policies of their allies’, is to fall far short of the mark in the French case, particularly...

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3 Stevenson, *War aims*, p. vi.
during the period of policy formulation. While Rothwell’s conclusion may hold in the British case, where relatively strong cabinet government prevailed, and the relationship between business, press and policy was more formalized, it is much less credible for France, where the weakness of cabinet government and the intrusion of the bureaucracy into the formulation of policy gave a much greater weight to the voice of powerful pressure groups. Christopher Andrew and A. S. Kanya-Forstner, for example, have demonstrated this to be particularly true in the colonial sphere, where the colonial lobby in fact made French colonial policy. Likewise, Marc Trachtenberg has illustrated the decisive role of the French ministry of commerce in the development of French economic war aims. To explain French demands on the Rhine in 1916 as simply an expression of the French quest for security without considering the role of the French foreign ministry in laying the diplomatic groundwork, or the impact of powerful political, economic, military and intellectual groups on the formulation of policy, is to misapprehend the entire process of policy formulation in Third Republic France. The purpose of this essay is to trace the development of war aims policy within one powerful interest group, the French army, and to relate it, at least tentatively, to the operation of other forces which form the background to the government’s adoption of an aggressive war aims policy in the fall of 1916.

The discussion of military war aims began very early in the French army. During the campaign in 1914, General Joseph J.-C. Joffre, the French commander-in-chief, according to Major Maurice Gamelin, his closest aide-de-camp, was preoccupied with the question of France’s future defensive system, once the war had been won. The question appears to have had some currency in allied military circles. As early as 25 September 1914, for example, just after the Battle of the Marne, at a time when General Joffre anticipated an early victory against the German flank in the so-called ‘Race to the Sea’, Sir John French, the commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force, heard rumours that discussions were under way between the Russian commander-in-chief and the French government as to the extent to which Germany was to be ‘reduced’ after the war. The rumour apparently had some substance in fact, in the wide-ranging, if tentative, conversations between Sazonov, the Czar, Paléologue, the French ambassador, and Buchanan, the British ambassador, in Russia on 13 and 14 September 1914. In these talks, probably undertaken on Paléologue’s personal initiative, Sazonov and the Czar outlined Russia’s ambitious peace programme for the extension of Poland’s frontiers westward and Russian expansion on the Straits on the under-

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7 French diaries, 25 Sept. 1914, Imperial War Museum, 75/46/2, vol. F.
standing, as Sazonov allegedly told Paléologue, that ‘France would recover Alsace-Lorraine and add as much of Rhenish Prussia and the Palatinate as she wished’.8

General Ferdinand Foch, appointed coordinator of the Northern theatre by Joffre on 4 October 1914, however, appears to have been the first high-ranking French military official to engage in unofficial lobbying on the subject. Foch, of course, had long been noted for his right-wing political and military views.9 On 29 November 1914 he expressed these to his old friend, Paul Cambon, the French ambassador in London. The French attempt to outflank the German army in the so-called ‘Race to the Sea’ had undeniably failed and the German drive towards the Channel had resulted in the hard-fought Battle of Ypres, but Foch was optimistic about the future. ‘Quand nous serons sortis de l’impasse, et cela grace à la solidarité et au rendement de nos alliances, il faudra prendre nos précautions pour ne pas avoir à courir le même danger, à nous seuls’, wrote Foch to Cambon. The general then outlined his peace programme. ‘Il faudra défaire l’Empire à tête Prussienne, c’est évident’.10 This concept was entirely in line with the consensus of the French government formed in September to win a victor’s peace and crush Prussian militarism.11 Foch, however, was also concerned about the resurgence of German power under the leadership of another German state, Bavaria, for example. He thus demanded that Germany be significantly reduced and pushed back to the Rhine:

Il faudra surtout l’enfermer dans des frontières naturelles, barrières infranchissables, à l’ouest le Rhin. Appuyer sur la rive gauche de ce fleuve des nations militaires: la France d’une part; la Belgique instruite par l’expérience...

Voilà le programme qui pousse déjà chez tous les soldats des tranchées d’Ypres aujourd’hui, opinion publique de la France demain. Les nations à la guerre tiennent très haut leurs revendications et veulent une large rémunération de leurs sacrifices.12

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10 Personal letter, Foch (at Cassel) to Paul Cambon, 29 Nov. 1914, Foch papers, Archives of Henri Fournier-Foch, Chalet St. Nicolas, Cordon, 74700-Sallanches, France, dos. ‘Paul Cambon et F. Foch’.


12 Foch to P. Cambon, 29 Nov. 1914, Foch papers, dos. ‘Paul Cambon et F. Foch’; cf. Wilson diaries, 28 Nov. 1914, v, Imperial War Museum, DS/Misc/80, ‘Foch told me that after the war he was going to ask for the Command of the troops between the Meuse & the Rhine & establish his HdQr at Metz! He wants me to come & stay with him’.

Foch claimed to see an official tendency in support of his views on the future settlement. ‘Le discours de notre Président remettant la médaille Mme au Général Joffre, m’est guarant que le gouvernement entre dans ces vues, et se fait déjà une mentalité de vainqueur – exigeant, opiniâtre, tenace.’ (Foch to P. Cambon, 29 Nov. 1914, Foch papers, dos. ‘Paul Cambon et F. Foch’.)
The future marshal thus expressed a view, just four months since the outbreak of war, which would be held consistently by the French Army throughout the conflict. To ensure French security, not only would Germany have to be thrust back across the Rhine, but the Left Bank would have to be under French military control.

Foch's views were a close reflexion of those of the French right. The expression of these views seems to have been little impaired by instruction from the censor in February and April 1915 which forbade the publication of articles on the future peace unless their intent was to ensure 'le triomphe de la Justice et du Droit'. Already by February and March 1915 right-wing conservative and military newspapers, L'Intransigeant, La Liberté, and l'Echo de Paris, had begun a campaign for the detachment of the Rhineland. Maurice Barrès of the l'Echo de Paris, a Jingoist clerical newspaper with a circulation of 350,000, was the chief protagonist of this view. His paper was the organ of military circles. In a series of articles appearing in February, March and April, Barrès argued that France must have 'une zone de défense contre les infiltrations allemandes'. German sovereignty west of the Rhine would thus have to be extinguished. The population on the Left Bank after the war would have to make a choice between annexation to France or a status of perpetual neutrality. The royalist Action Française went even farther, calling for the outright annexation of the Left Bank.

The French general staff were equally prompt in the formulation of their demands. Following up on his earlier concerns, Joffre had Gamelin and André Tardieu, deputy and head of the Second Bureau's Section d'Information, undertake a study in early 1915 on a possible line of defence for the post-war era. Their conclusions were 'qu'à défaut du Rhin sur tout son cours', a secondary line of frontier defences could be built along the valleys of the Lauter, the Blies, the Saar, the Sauer, and the Our, ending at Liège. The plan assumed not only the return of Alsace-Lorraine, but annexation of that portion of the Saarland south of the Saar river (including Saarlouis) and the inclusion of Luxemburg and Belgium in the French defensive system.

Joffre, however, was not satisfied with this preliminary study as a final solution. In the spring of 1915 the French commander-in-chief was particularly optimistic about the prospects of a breakthrough in the Artois offensive, and an early conclusion of the war. Unprepared even to go to the telephone alone
for fear of being taken unawares,\(^19\) he thus commissioned a study of the future armistice in April 1915, well in advance of the spring offensive. The immediate task he again confided to André Tardieu, journalist, editor of the press *communiqué*, and later, that member of the French delegation who would draw up and present the French point of view on the Rhine settlement at the Paris peace conference.\(^{20}\) Tardieu in turn delegated to Captain Pichot-Duclos of the Third Bureau the specific task of studying the French frontier with Germany in the event of an armistice. Basing his views on the assumption that one must be prepared as the Romans ‘de porter la guerre chez les Samnites’, Pichot-Duclos demanded the Rhine as the French military frontier. He further concluded:

Afin de pouvoir livrer bataille sur sa rive droite, j’indiquais l’avantage lié à l’occupation de têtes de pont d’un rayon à fixer au dernier moment selon les accroissements de portée que l’artillerie serait susceptible de réaliser pendant la suite de la guerre.\(^{21}\)

This study, rendered inoperative by the failure of the Artois offensive in the spring of 1915 and the Artois-Champagne offensive in the fall to breach the German lines, gathered dust in the files of the *Section d’Information* at G.Q.G. until November 1918, when it was brought to the attention of Foch’s staff just before the Armistice.\(^{22}\) The terms of the Armistice drafted by Foch in 1918 concerning allied occupation of the left bank of the Rhine and bridgeheads across the river show a remarkable resemblance to this early draft.

At the same time the French foreign ministry, with Delcassé at the helm, had begun to lay the diplomatic basis for a peace settlement favourable to French security on the Rhine. While telling Isvolsky, the Russian ambassador to Paris on 13 October 1914, that it was too early to ‘vendre la peau de l’ours’, he none the less signified his general assent to the views expressed by Sazonov and the Czar on 13–14 September which would allow France to expand into Rhenish Prussia and the Palatinate in exchange for Russian extension westward and into the Straits: ‘Prenez la rive gauche du Rhin, prenez Mayence; prenez Coblenze: allez plus loins si vous le jugez utile’, the Czar told Paléologue on 3 March 1915\(^{23}\) during the Straits negotiations. Without spelling out the specifics of French demands, Delcassé thus maintained in reserve the crucial element of Russian support for French expansion on the Rhine in whatever form it might take, a much-needed guarantee, as the British

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\(^{22}\) Pirerefeu, *GQG*, I, 169–70.

would almost certainly be opposed to any extension of French control beyond their own borders.

Powerful economic and patriotic groups likewise took up the cause. The coal and steel lobby, the powerful Comité des Forges, constituted a study group in the spring of 1915 to study the desirability of annexing the Saar Basin. On 28 October 1915 Robert Pinot, general secretary of the Comité, expressed their views to the Senatorial commission on economic expansion. The return of Alsace-Lorraine was assumed. As a result, the iron of Lorraine would require the coal of the Saar for its proper exploitation. But the increase of two million tons of steel production per year regrettably would greatly depress the market. Concern for the general interest was thus the main reason, he said, which led them to ask for annexation of the Saar. The Comité d'études économiques et administratives relatives à l'Alsace-Lorraine, was another influential patriotic body concerned with long-term planning for the lost provinces. With Jules Siegfried at its head, it included 'Barthou himself, Jules Meline of the Fédération républicaine, Jules Cambon, Frédéric-Albert Kammerer from the Quai d'Orsay, and leading representatives of the coal, iron and steel, and textile trades'. The Comité agreed that 'if France regained Alsace-Lorraine, it must annex the Saar coal fields to the north'. Jules Cambon, a member of this group, later co-authored with his brother Paul the document on French war aims which was finally accepted by the cabinet in January 1917, and which demanded return of Alsace-Lorraine with the frontiers of 1790 (including the Saar), detachment of the Rhineland from Germany, its 'neutrality' and 'provisional occupation'. The very close connexion between the shapers of policy and powerful economic, political and military circles is here all too apparent.

Official policy in the course of 1915 nevertheless was to stifle debate on war aims within both the press and the government, so as not to upset the internal modus operandi of the Union Sacrée. The question was thus dealt with only in muted terms until Briand's ministry, flushed with the hope of victory in the field in mid-1916, was prepared at last to study the dual question of war aims and the conditions of peace. With the relaxation of censorship a full-fledged debate of these issues ensued. This debate came at a time when the most recent sequence of military events - the combined offensive of the British, French, Russian and Italian armies, the entry of Rumania into the war, and the apparent crisis of manpower in Germany gave rise to a great deal of optimism.

Various interest groups made their interests felt at once. The Comité des Forges,
concerned with the acute shortage of French coal which would follow upon
the return of Alsace-Lorraine, adopted a further resolution in July not only
asking for the return of the lost provinces and annexation of the Saar, but also
expressing the view that

Toute extension de notre territoire ou de notre domaine économique au-delà de
l’Alsace-Lorraine et de la Sarre ne peut que simplifier la solution des problèmes que
soulève pour notre industrie, la reprise ou l’annexion de ces provinces, en lui offrant
des débouchés nouveaux, des ressources plus grandes en combustibles ou des facilités
de transport par la voie du Rhin.30

In the Paris press campaign of September–October 1916, the centre and
right-wing press were nearly unanimous in making similar demands: the return
of Alsace-Lorraine, annexation of the Saar, and the detachment and
neutralization of the Rhineland. The extreme right represented by Charles
Maurras demanded the dissolution of the German federal bond and the
dissolution of all economic ties between German states in a series of articles
in Action Française in the fall of 1916. Maurras, surprisingly, found a favourable
response in at least part of the conservative press, notably La Croix, Le Matin
and Le Figaro. His plan, however, was resisted by Le Journal des Débats, La
Victoire and the socialist press.31

Not all Frenchmen, however, entertained such expansionist views. The chief
debate among socialists and leftist radicals of the Ligue des droits de l’homme in
1915 and 1916, all of whom (except Renaudel in 1916) opposed annexation
of the Saar and detachment of the Rhineland, was to decide if Alsace-Lorraine
should be returned with or without a plebiscite. Only a minority favoured a
plebiscite.32

The French army was brought into the debate by Poincaré, the French
president, who asked Joffre on 12 August 1916 to prepare a study of the terms
of an armistice with the Central Powers. Unfailingly optimistic throughout his
period as French commander-in-chief that the next big battle would bring
victory (one of his most serious faults, in fact), Joffre was particularly optimistic
in the summer of 1916, in spite of the terrible French losses at Verdun. The
Russian and Italian offensives had been going well, Haig had just agreed to
closer British co-operation with the French in their attacks on the Somme, while
Rumanian entry in the war in support of the Allied side appeared imminent.33
He was therefore pleasantly surprised to learn from Poincaré on 12 August 1916
that the Allies were closer to victory than even Joffre had supposed. Poincaré,
relating a piece of gossip he had gleaned from the pope via Monseigneur
Duchèsne, his colleague in the French Academy, just returned from Rome,

30 Ibid. p. 10; McDougall, France’s Rhineland diplomacy, p. 19; Georges Suarez, Briand (6 vols.
Paris, 1939), iii, 407–12.
32 Ibid. pp. 11–12.
33 Joffre, Mémoires, ii, 252.
informed Joffre ‘que la situation de l’Autriche était précaire et qu’un armistice serait demandé par les Empires centraux en octobre’.\(^{34}\) In order to avoid a surprise peace, Poincaré thus asked Joffre to begin at once a study of the military terms for an armistice with the Central Powers.\(^{35}\)

Joffre, however, characteristically went far beyond his mandate and, on his own initiative, enlarged the terms of reference of his study. He thus commissioned Colonel Dupont, head of the Second Bureau at Grand Quartier Général, to study not only the terms of an armistice, but ‘les conditions de paix à imposer à nos ennemis’.\(^{36}\) A victors’ peace aimed at guaranteeing the military security and economic well-being of France after the war, Joffre’s peace plans thus defined in the most expansive terms the war aims of the French army in Europe.

Joffre’s political connexions were with the Radical centre, the Sarraut brothers and the Radical Dépêche de Toulouse.\(^{37}\) The close connexion between the French army and the political centre and right in the early twentieth century and their community of viewpoint on a number of military and political issues\(^{38}\) was here further illustrated on the question of French war aims. Dupont, who submitted his study to Joffre on 26 August,\(^{39}\) made no attempt to disguise the source of his inspiration, echoing in his justification Maurice Barrès, who had waged a vigorous press campaign (as far as the censor would allow) since 1915 for the detachment and neutralization of the Rhineland. He reiterated Barrès’ rather dubious argument that the racial, spiritual and cultural affinity of the Rhenish population with France would lead them, ultimately, once separated from Germany, to request annexation with France.\(^{40}\) On the need for a secure French military frontier on the Rhine as a guarantee against future invasion, Dupont acknowledged his debt by quoting Barrès directly: ‘Trèves est bien l’Arles du Nord, la proue latine que battent les flots du nord’.\(^{41}\)

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\(^{34}\) *Journal de Marche* (du General Joffre), vol. II, 12 Aug. 1916, Fonds Joffre, AG, 14N2; cf. Joffre, *Mémoires*, II, 253. The ministère des affaires étrangères confirmed the growing opposition to the war effort within the Hungarian parliament in a telegram of the same evening and, basing its information on a report from Berne, foresaw the possibility of the fall of the Tisza ministry if Russian successes were to continue. (*Journal de Marche*, vol. II, 12 Aug. 1916, Fonds Joffre, 14N2.)

\(^{35}\) *Journal de Marche*, vol. II, 12 Aug. 1916, Fonds Joffre, 14N2.

\(^{36}\) Joffre, *Mémoires*, II, 363. Joffre’s entire armistice and peace plan, though edited, was related in his memoirs. When these were translated into English, however, the translator Colonel T. Bentley Mott, decided that they were of ‘a purely academic interest’ and omitted them. ([General Joseph J. -C. Joffre], *The personal memoirs of Joffre: Field Marshal of the French army*, tr. by Colonel T. Bentley Mott (2 vols. New York and London, 1932), II, 517, n. 17.)


\(^{38}\) See, for example, Richard D. Challener, *The French theory of the nation in arms, 1866–1939* (New York, 1965).

\(^{39}\) *Journal de Marche*, vol. II, 26 Aug. 1916, Fonds Joffre, 14N2.


The armistice proposal, which was intended by its authors to lay the basis for later peace negotiations (as was the proposal prepared by Foch in 1918) was little more than an update of the 1915 plan, carefully corrected and revised by Joffre. It provided for allied occupation of the left bank of the Rhine with bridgeheads at Huningue (near Basel), Keyl, Speyer, Mainz, Koblenz, Cologne and Duisburg on the right bank, each with a bridgehead thirty kilometres in radius. While the Rhineland would be administered by the Allied military authorities, permanent French administration indicative of French intentions, would be installed in Alsace-Lorraine. This proposal, remarkably similar to the Armistice finally signed in 1918, also called for the maintenance of the allied blockade to prevent the Germans from renewing their war effort. So far as the armistice was concerned, the French staff had long made up their minds.

The proposed peace settlement attached to the armistice proposal called for the return of Alsace-Lorraine and the French frontier of 1790, including Saarlouis and Landau, which had pledged their allegiance to France in 1790. But for economic reasons the plan also called for annexation of the coal basin of the Saar and two enclaves in Baden across the Rhine at Keyl and Germersheim to provide bridgeheads for the French. The Rhineland would be detached in order to protect France and Belgium against renewed aggression and would be constituted as 2, 3 or 4 satellite states, depending on the wishes of the population. These states would be brought permanently within the French orbit by a perpetual customs union and a 31-year military occupation, while their share of the indemnity was being paid, during which time France would exercise control over their finances, administration and foreign relations. The expectation à la Barrès was that new Rhenish states at the end of 31 years would request annexation to France.

L’Union douanière assurera l’Union économique. Le temps, nos qualités d’attirance feront le reste et amèneront l’Union Morale. Sous le reveil lent des souvenirs historiques communs, sous l’influence des mêmes besoins économiques, du contact, mais surtout de l’exemple de la Sagesse française, les peuples demanderont leur rattachement à nous.

While the French staff accepted the demand of the centre and moderate right for a secure military frontier on the Rhine, they none the less rejected the demand of the extreme right which called for the outright annexation of the Rhineland. The sensitivity of the French staff to the economic needs of France, once Alsace and Lorraine were restored, suggests a marked affinity with the French industrial community. As early as May 1916 Joffre’s staff had argued

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44 Ibid.
in a memorandum which found its way into the French foreign ministry that the Saar should be annexed as its coal was indispensable to the prosperity of France’s eastern industries.47 As Robert Pinot, secretary general of the Comité des Forges, warned the government in July 1916: without solving France’s coal problem by the extension of French economic control into the Rhineland (in order to find suitable coal for French coking and metalling), France would become a second-rate military power.48

The chief obstacle to outright annexation of the Rhineland immediately, asserted the French general staff, was the great ‘principes de la Révolution Française d’après lesquels les peuples ont seuls le droit de disposer d’eux-mêmes’.49 The French army’s lip service to the principle of nationality, however, was a convenient dodge concealing an important element of French vindictiveness. Delayed integration of the Rhineland, the Second Bureau pointed out, would allow the population to pay their share of the war indemnity and also provide for the gradual dissolution of the pan-germanism taught in the schools. ‘Les hommes qui auront fait la guerre qu’ils nous ont faite’, asserted the Second Bureau, ‘ne sont pas dignes de faire partie de l’Armée Française’.50 That told the whole story. Union with France would thus have to wait another generation.

French military war aims with regard to Belgium were remarkable, rivalling the aggressive war aims of the Germans. Enlarged by the left bank of the Scheldt and Dutch Limburg, at the expense of the Dutch (to be compensated by Prussian East Friesland), Belgium would also receive border cantons (which she actually received later), Eupen, Malmédy and St Vith, and would be brought into the French economic and political orbit by an economic zollverein and integration of the Belgian defence system into that of France. If Belgium thus gave up her neutral status and accepted an intimate alliance with France, France would renounce her claim on Luxemburg, and leave open to the population of the duchy the choice, in a plebiscite, either of annexation to Belgium or independence under French economic and military control.51 The French in either case would exercise complete economic, political and military control up to the Rhine.

The French army’s approach to ‘reparations’ was fairly rigorous. The several German states would pay a war indemnity of 60 billion francs, over 31 years (the value of the Saar mines to be deducted from an initial payment of 6 billion), during which time the Rhineland, to ensure payment, would be occupied by allied troops at German expense. Allied bridgeheads would be maintained on the Rhine and a band of territory 50 kilometres on the right bank of the Rhine would be demilitarized.52 The annual payments of 1·8

47 Stevenson, War aims, p. 39.
52 Ibid.
billion francs, after an initial payment of 6 billion, argued the French staff, were not excessive, as the German military and naval budget alone had been 1·3 billion in 1913 and 2·3 billion in 1914.53

The French staff’s plan for the future status of Germany was submitted to Joffre by Dupont almost six weeks later, on 6 October, 1916.54 It was an extremely aggressive and rigorous plan. Reflecting the views of the extreme right wing on the question, the French headquarters, with unbounded optimism in complete victory, demanded the dismemberment of Prussia and the dissolution of the German Empire into nine small states. By the French plan, Prussia would lose all her conquests since the time of Frederick the Great and be reduced to a state of 11·5 million inhabitants, centred on rump Prussia. The eight remaining states, Saxony, Westphalia, Hanover, Bavaria, Silesia, Hesse, Wurttemberg and Baden, each constituted as a significant counterweight to Prussia, would have a combined population of 41·8 million, 12 million having been detached from the Reich – 3 million in favour of Poland, 620,000 to Denmark (Schleswig), 2,000,000 to France, 5·72 million in the Rhineland and 270,000 to the Netherlands. The whole purpose of this readjustment was to solve once and for all the German problem of 65 million in the German Empire, 40 million of whom were Prussians (against 39 million French), while at the same time to ‘conserver aux peuples leur indépendance et une vie nationale’. ‘La solution consiste à disloquer la Prusse et à reconstituer les Allemagnes.’55

Each state, provided it did not choose a ruler from the house of Hohenzollern, would be able, subject to French approval, to choose its own monarch and form of government. As only Prussia and Hanover would have navies, with access to the Baltic and North Seas respectively, German naval strength would no longer be a threat. Prussia’s immediate neighbours Silesia, Saxony and Hanover, constituted as the strongest states, would serve to curb Prussian ambitions.56

The French staff was somewhat ambivalent with regard to the future settlement with Austria-Hungary. While dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire into successor states based on nationality was deemed contrary to French interest, it was considered inevitable. The French Staff thus envisioned four successor states, Austria, Hungary, and two other states, drawn largely along the lines of nationality and roughly equivalent to the Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia which later emerged. The prospect of an Austrian state of 6·5 million Germans, which would probably be drawn into the German orbit, was considered undesirable, but a question to be dealt with in future generations.57

The French staff was even more ambivalent about the future of Poland. In

57 Ibid.
attempting to group the Poles along linguistic lines, without specific reference
to the partitions of 1772, 1793 and 1795, one would constitute a Poland of 22
million. The big question was that of Russian domination. In view of the
Russian policies of orthodoxy, autocracy, russification, and the Czar’s
probable demand for control of the state, the French staff feared that Russia
might not allow an enlarged Poland enough autonomy for a meaningful
national existence. The French staff thus expressed serious doubts whether it
was in the Polish interest to enlarge Poland beyond her current borders, dating
from the Congress of Vienna in 1815.58

The total peace plan of the French staff was thus remarkably aggressive.
Reflecting the inflated optimism of the French command and their belief in
total victory, it attempted not only to ensure French military security and
economic prosperity after the peace but, by shattering the unity of the German
empire, to return France to the favourable situation of a divided and weak
central Europe which prevailed in the heyday of French power. The French
army was but little more self-denying than the German.

The impact of Joffre’s proposed armistice and peace plan on the formulation
of the government’s war aims has been difficult to ascertain.59 Obviously
Joffre’s voice in favour of detaching the Rhineland, frontier rectification in
Europe, and a stiff war indemnity was one of the many voices being heard in
the fall of 1916. The solution adopted tentatively by the Briand government
on 7 October, however, so far as French frontiers was concerned, was very much
like that of the military. The basic war aims of the French government in
Europe, as outlined at that point were, at a maximum, outright annexation
of the Rhineland (including Alsace-Lorraine), and at a minimum, return of
the lost provinces, the French frontier of 1790 (to include the Saar), and
detachment and neutralization of the Rhineland.60 The minimum programme,
which was later embodied in a document drawn up by Paul and Jules Cambon
and accepted by the cabinet in January,61 was negotiated in all sincerity with
the Russians, behind the back of the British, in the spring of 1917, not simply
as a means of propping up the ailing Czarist regime, as Renouvin supposed,
but as a means of securing French aims on the Rhine at the peace table.62 The
Paléologue–Pokrovsky letters exchanged on 14 February 1917, by which
France was to receive her minimum programme – return of Alsace-Lorraine,
the frontiers of 1790 including the Saar, and detachment and neutralization
of the Rhineland (to be under French occupation until all the terms of the
treaty were met) in exchange for granting the Czar a free hand in determining

58 Ibid.
59 Poincaré’s ‘Notes Journalières’, Bibliothèque Nationale, NAF 16024–39, a valuable source
which might have allowed one to tie this all together, unfortunately has a gap for the period 1
January 1916 to 30 March 1916.
61 Stevenson, War aims, pp. 48–9 fl. Albert Thomas, the one remaining Socialist in the
government, appears to have been absent during these discussions. (Ibid.)
Russia's western frontier in Poland, were thus a fundamental expression of the French government's war aims in Europe.63

No echo was heard of the French staff's plan for the dismemberment of the German Empire. Joffre's memorandum, ready only on 6 October, was probably too late to form the basis for deliberations on 7 October, and in any case the demands which it formulated were so far right on the political spectrum that it could have commanded only limited support from the moderate government of Aristide Briand.

The more moderate demands of the general staff, however, were inextricably linked with those of the interests of many other groups, the political centre and right, the iron and steel industry and various patriotic groups, all of whom had close connexions in the government. What seems to emerge, in fact, is a model not dissimilar to that suggested by Andrew and Kanya-Forstner regarding colonial matters, in which a series of close-knit and interlocking groups, many of whose members held important positions in government, were in a position to formulate policy. The existence of a united opposition in the form of a parliamentary left to the traditional power elites and their conservative approach on matters of French security was a basic element in the equation which gave policy makers great pause in the enunciation of policy, especially as the support of the left was necessary for the conduct of the war.

The further impact of the French general staff on the diplomacy of war aims and peace plans is beyond the scope of this essay and is better treated elsewhere.64 Suffice it to say that in July 1917, even under pressure from the socialist left and the Anglo-Americans for a less aggressive stance, one of the memoranda read to the cabinet before a meeting intended to discuss war aims with the British was one prepared by Foch, now chief of the newly constituted general staff.65 His role in the formulation of official war aims policy under Clemenceau as embodied in the Armistice and later in the peace negotiations is well known.66 The problem was not that the French did not know their own minds, but that the diplomatic framework would not allow the realization of their goals.


64 See Stevenson, War aims, pp. 36–44. For the later impact of the French army on the formulation of policy, see ibid. pp. 72–4, 117–27ff.
