THE ENFORCEMENT OF THE TREATY OF VERSAILLES,
1919–1923

Alan Sharp

This paper uses the episode of the Kapp putsch in March 1920 to isolate and analyze a number of high policy themes that dominated the period from the signature of the Treaty of Versailles through to the Franco-Belgian invasion of the Ruhr. These included: the questions of what mechanisms existed to enforce the treaty; the sanctions available to the victorious governments to enforce their will; the position and problems of the German government; the relationship and suspicions existing between Britain and France and the differing aims, ambitions, and approaches of the major participants.

On June 28, 1919 the peace treaty between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany was signed in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, the location itself one more episode in the humiliation and counter-humiliation of Germany by France and vice versa. After six months of intensive inter-allied negotiations the treaty was complete.1 A British delegation member, James Headlam-Morl ey, anticipated that “No doubt things will become more orderly, but they will be much duller.”2 He was wrong on both counts. Drawing up the treaty represented the easy part, enforcing it would be harder. As always, the devil was in the detail—working out precisely what the wording of the clauses meant when they encountered the real world—not least because, even as they were being drafted, those clauses meant, sometimes accidentally, sometimes deliberately, different things to the different parties involved. The treaty was the product of compromises seeking to meet as many of the national interests of the main negotiators as possible. It had been drawn up under great pressure occasioned by the complex and interlinked nature of the problems it sought to address and the simultaneous need, in a world struggling to return to “normalcy,” for the leaders to return to tackle pressing domestic concerns in the capitals they had abandoned for the conference. The peace conference’s lack of organisational clarity also meant that maximum demands, intended for subsequent revision after dialogue with the Germans, were often incorporated unaltered when no
such negotiation occurred. There were sometimes clashes between the high moral ideals set by the American president, Woodrow Wilson (and, perhaps, also the British premier, David Lloyd George) and the need to reach conclusions—“Il faut aboutir” as the formidable French prime minister, Georges Clemenceau, was wont to observe.

Where the negotiations had involved three, four, and sometimes more parties, enforcement fell mainly to two, Britain and France. Much of the treaty existed because the United States had significantly influenced the outcomes, often against the wishes of Britain or France, and sometimes both. Now they found themselves enforcing a treaty that they would not necessarily have drafted, increasingly bereft of American counsel, presence and support, and without a common interpretation of what they hoped to achieve. Lloyd George’s attempt in June 1919 to modify the draft treaty terms had, with the major exception of the plebiscite in Upper Silesia, largely failed but many British decision-makers did not accept this as final. On the other hand they were aware that the French too might wish to modify the treaty—but in a different direction. Further complications arose from the continuing negotiations to draft treaties with the other defeated powers, at least one of which, the rejuvenated Turkey, refused to lie down. Additionally there was the huge uncertainty represented by the former Tsarist empire of Russia, now rent by secession, foreign intervention and civil war, but increasingly in the grasp of the revolutionary force of bolshevism. It was, however, the central relationship between Britain and France, and their differing perspectives, aims and objectives coupled with their joint and individual relationships with Germany, which dominated the high politics of treaty enforcement.

This paper uses the episode of the March 1920 Kapp Putsch to introduce a number of issues that dominated the early years of enforcement but any such brief and schematic account must oversimplify the complexities. The “real world” was not a vision shared by the major states, nor even by individual representatives from the same country. There were disputes as to what was actually happening, disputes as to how this should be interpreted and disputes about how to deal with the disputed consequences. There were disputes between countries and between conflicting agencies within countries. From this tangle governments were supposed to create coherent policies and order.

The treaty’s entry into force required the ratification of Germany and three of the main allies. The Germans deposited their ratification on July 10. Arthur Balfour, Britain’s foreign secretary and chief representative in Paris after the departure of Lloyd George, expected the process would be complete by mid-August, but only on January 10, 1920 did the treaty enter into force. Some delay was convenient to Britain because, although technically the king could ratify the treaty, it was thought wiser to have an
Act of Parliament. This received royal assent on July 31, but now raised a further complication. The Dominions would be affronted if the British parliament was consulted but not theirs, given their growing sense of separate identities. All had approved by October 3. On October 14, President Poincaré ratified the treaty for France. Like George V, he might have acted without parliamentary approval but did not do so. The treaty underwent the scrutiny of committees of the Chamber and the Senate, both accepted that Clemenceau had achieved the best attainable deal for France and the two houses approved the ratification law. Since the King of Italy had ratified the treaty on October 6, the allies were in a position to let the treaty enter into force but they did not do so.

This was not for the lack of the various bodies and agencies required to enforce the treaty. Germany had already agreed to the allied proposals for an Inter-Allied Rhineland Commission to supervise the government of the Rhineland during the occupation. In July 1919 the new major allied body replacing the Council of Four, the Heads of Delegation—the representatives of the five major allied powers, Britain, France, Japan, Italy and the United States—had approved a commission to deal with the execution of the treaty with Germany and a pre-Reparations Commission to act until the treaty was in force. It also agreed the composition of three separate disarmament control commissions for air, sea and land, with appropriate internal sub-divisions. The French Secretary-General of the conference, Paul Dutasta, drew up a list of the actions required by the treaty, with a note of the time limits and interested countries. This was circulated on July 23. A plan for the Rhine Occupation Army proposed by the French commander-in-chief of the allied armies, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, was approved on July 26. Once the peace conference ended it was envisaged that an allied commission would undertake the overall supervision of the execution of the treaty and an outline of what became the Conference of Ambassadors was approved on July 28. The mechanisms were ready.

The allies were not. There were concerns that, once the coercive powers available under the armistice were superseded by the treaty, it might be impossible to enforce unfulfilled armistice conditions or to force German troops to evacuate the Baltic provinces. The major issues related to German failure to deliver compensation for the June scuttling of the High Seas Fleet at Scapa Flow and alleged war criminals (including important figures like Bethmann Hollweg, Hindenburg, Tirpitz and Crown Prince Rupprecht—the Kaiser having already fled to Holland which refused to surrender him). Foch suggested allied occupations of Frankfurt or the Ruhr District unless the Germans agreed to meet the allied conditions. Most allied leaders in Britain and France believed Germany would concede before such drastic action was necessary but there was panic in London when Clemenceau’s draft note of December 6,
1919 threatened “to place Germany in face of a rupture of armistice with all consequences which would follow therefrom” unless Germany agreed to the conditions for final ratification. Lloyd George summoned George Curzon, Balfour, Andrew Bonar Law and Winston Churchill to a late evening meeting at 10 Downing Street which sent Lloyd George’s private secretary, Philip Kerr, to Paris to negotiate an amended draft. This was accomplished, though more on Clemenceau’s terms than Lloyd George’s. The Germans, as expected, backed down and, after some further tinkering, terms were agreed and the treaty entered into force on January 10, 1920.

This increased Lloyd George’s determination to terminate the Paris peace conference and replace it with regular meetings of allied leaders. In early December Clemenceau accepted it would end within a fortnight of the deposit of ratifications. Thereafter “large questions of policy” would be dealt with by direct exchanges between governments and “questions of detail” would be the concern of a Conference of Ambassadors, meeting in Paris but “large questions of policy,” and “questions of detail,” were not defined. The Paris conference thus ended on January 21, 1920, one year and three days after its opening, but Headlam-Morley’s expectation of greater order was still not fulfilled.

On March 13, 1920, there was an attempted coup in Germany, nominally led by Wolfgang Kapp, a civil servant. Such elements of the German army that were not actively supporting Kapp’s Putsch refused to help the government, which fled to Stuttgart and then re-established its authority by calling a general strike, paralyzing Kapp’s regime. This led to the first major confrontation of treaty enforcement and it revealed a series of issues, themes and attitudes that encapsulated the essence of the problems involved and which would be a constant presence throughout the execution of the treaty. These included: the questions of what mechanisms existed to enforce the treaty; how the different agencies interacted and the nature of authority within and between them; the sanctions available to the victorious governments to enforce their will; the position and problems of the German government; the extent to which there was a single will or vision amongst the allies about the role, intentions and good faith of the Germans and their government; the relationship and suspicions existing between Britain and France and the differing aims, ambitions and approaches of the major participants.

The aftermath of the putsch caused more problems than the event itself. A mixture of a real and imagined communist threat in the Ruhr led both the legitimate and insurrectionary governments to request permission for extra troops to be allowed into the demilitarised zone to restore order. This revealed confusions in the allied ranks about authority and control. Although Kapp’s request was ignored that of the legitimate government
received contradictory answers from two allied meetings, each believing it had the overall authority. In Paris the Ambassadors’ Conference heard Foch oppose the German request and suggest an allied occupation of the Ruhr. It decided to refuse the German request. In London the now peripatetic Supreme Council was simultaneously meeting to discuss the treaty with Turkey. It agreed to recommend approval of the request. Curzon was anxious to maintain the authority of the Supreme Council, but in Paris the French premier, Alexandre Millerand, argued vigorously (though unsuccessfully) that the ambassadors had the power and duty to act for the allies. Curzon commented acidly, “M. Millerand not only regards the Peace Conference as sitting in Paris, but as I have before remarked, he regards himself as the Peace Conference.”

The veteran French ambassador in London, Paul Cambon, wrote on March 29 to his brother Jules in Paris, encapsulating this confusion. “There has never been such a shambles of a conference. Here we have the supreme council which thinks it is the Peace Conference. Then there is the Council of Ministers and Ambassadors that Curzon chairs. Finally we consider that the Peace Conference still remains in Paris. Its existence is entirely imaginary, it is a phantom, but we cling to it as if it were reality. In addition there is the Ambassadors’ Conference, chaired by yourself or sometimes by Millerand. I’m not sure what its powers are. I just see that it undertakes the same business as we do and that the two bodies often have contradictory opinions. I don’t understand any of this, and I’m not asking you to explain what’s what. It’s inexplicable.” There was thus chaos at the highest level about the overall control of peace enforcement, contributing, in this instance, to isolated action by the French, who occupied five German towns, Frankfurt, Darmstadt, Hanau, Homburg and Dieburg on April 5/6, 1920.

This confusion was ominous because the crisis revealed that the British and French governments intended to keep matters of treaty enforcement in their own hands. Lord Robert Cecil, one of the main architects of the League of Nations and a passionate believer in the new body, argued that the German troops in the forbidden area represented a threat of war that should be, according to the treaty, referred to the League. The Foreign Office admitted the strength of his case but brushed it aside—such matters were for the allied governments to settle, not the League. The League might be useful for finessing the issue of self-determination when it was felt necessary to provide France with the coal of the Saar and Poland with the use of Danzig as a port without awarding either state sovereignty over the respective inhabitants. It was convenient to brush responsibility for minority protection in eastern and central Europe under the League carpet. Only when driven to desperation by their failure to reach agreement did Britain and France ask a League committee in 1922...
to convert the result of the Upper Silesian plebiscite into territorial dispositions. This was an unusual and exceptional involvement of the League in treaty execution (and the British cabinet secretary, Sir Maurice Hankey’s disparaging description of the committee as consisting of “Two dagoes, a pro-French Belgian and a Chink” hardly augered well). More normal was the Anglo-French rejection in 1921 of the League as a credible replacement for the Inter-Allied Military Mission Control Commission as the major enforcer of German disarmament and their continued scepticism about its potential as a future monitoring agency, despite the provisions of Article 213 of the treaty. The 1923 Corfu incident was a further example of the exclusion of the League from matters arising from treaty enforcement.24

Britain and France intended to keep control of treaty execution in their own hands but Lloyd George in particular distrusted traditional diplomatic methods and preferred to deal in person with his fellow allied leaders at meetings and conferences. The aftermath of the Kapp Putsch initiated the era of “casino diplomacy” as inter-allied and, exceptionally, international gatherings involving the Germans, were held in desirable seaside resorts, capitals and watering places. Beginning “sous le ciel bleu de San Remo”25 the next three years saw successively gatherings of various sizes in Hythe, Boulogne, Brussels, Spa, London, Paris, London, Cannes, Genoa, London, and Paris. Conference diplomacy suited Lloyd George’s style and enabled his skills of communication and persuasion to be used to great effect, at least in the context of the meeting itself. However, as Curzon told the new British government in November 1922, Lloyd George’s “superior cleverness” might be a short-term asset but was frequently a long-term liability in that his conference successes could create later resentments.26 A further potential problem was that conference diplomacy might be an effective way to round off longer-term negotiations or to force an issue to a head but it also needed to be incorporated into a continuous process of review and implementation. Frequently these high profile gatherings were not always effectively linked to the more mundane business of day-to-day diplomatic exchanges.27 There was also the consideration that conferences, where the appropriate experts were readily available, could sometimes translate rhetoric rapidly into actual figures and forecasts, depriving diplomacy of both time and ambiguity—that was not necessarily advantageous. Conferences frequently broke up with expressions of goodwill but without discovering lasting solutions to the persistent problems of treaty execution.

The relationship between the framers of high level policy and the agencies enforcing the treaty represented a further complication. The allies had postponed the setting of a total reparations bill in Paris in 1919 because the matter was too complicated, too divisive, and too dangerous. They set up a Reparation Commission to report in 1921 “with wide latitude as to its
control and handling of the whole reparation problem” but, at different times, and for differing motives, Britain and France spent much of 1920 and the early part of 1921 trying to pre-empt the functions and decisions of that commission. For the British, the commission, in the absence of the intended American chairman, was now too deeply under French control. The French insisted that they must now hold the chair, giving them an additional casting vote should the four powers usually involved in west European reparations (Britain, Belgium, France, and Italy) reach an evenly split decision. The commission, although consisting of delegates nominated by the appropriate governments, was intended to be independent of allied government control, but, when it was convenient to them, both the British and French governments, either independently or in collusion, sought to direct its deliberations. The commissioners were often resentful of such government interference. This impacted more on the French than the British because several of the succession of French delegates named to the commission were prominent politicians—Raymond Poincaré and Paul Doumer in particular. The British delegate throughout this period was Sir John Bradbury, a Treasury official without the political influence of his French colleagues. Nonetheless his “quaint diplomatic methods” were a frequent cause of Foreign Office resentment, as was his reluctance to accept guidance—“He behaves as if he were an independent state” complained Curzon.

As with the workings of the Inter-Allied Military Commission of Control, charged with the disarmament of Germany and the monitoring of the treaty provisions, there was always an element of compromise between the theory of commission autonomy and the reality of political control. In 1921 it suited French premier Aristide Briand to insist upon the Reparation Commission’s independence in the face of Lloyd George’s pressure to bypass it, fearing that French influence in the commission would produce an impossibly inflated demand upon Germany. Lloyd George wanted the two governments to name a total for German indebtedness, because he believed he had a greater chance of influencing the French government than the commission. In fact the sums proposed by Britain at conferences in Boulogne in June 1920 and Paris in January 1921 were higher than the total named by the commission in May 1921. On this occasion Lloyd George could be glad that his persistent campaign against the commission in 1920 and 1921 had failed. Agencies like the Inter-Allied Rhineland High Commission were rarely themselves matters for high level diplomacy, though they might become involved in the complexities of Anglo-French relations—the threat of withdrawal from various inter-allied bodies was considered by Britain on several occasions, including the aftermath of the Kapp episode, but never actually used.
In April 1920, faced, as they interpreted it, with a German infraction of the treaty, the French, as noted previously, acted independently and occupied five German towns. It was an act of disputed legality and, as such, typified the problem of the sanctions legitimately available to the allies in the case of German non-compliance with the treaty or of deliberate acts of defiance against it. The treaty was remarkably vague about penalties and sanctions, and was especially weak when it came to measures that might, by the immediacy of their threat, encourage Germany to act with any urgency. Article 430 of the treaty allowed an extension of the occupation of the Rhineland beyond the original fifteen years if Germany did not comply with allied reparations demands and the implication of Article 429 was that such an extension could also be justified by concerns about the adequacy of guarantees against unprovoked German aggression. Neither was calculated to be of major immediate concern to a German government in the early 1920s.

Many of the actions taken by the allies in various combinations between 1920 and 1923 were of dubious legality, relying upon adaptations of clauses intended for other purposes or upon interpretations of treaty provisions disowned by their original authors. In March 1921, Article 270, which permitted the allies to make special customs arrangements for their occupied areas of Germany “to safeguard the economic interests of the population of those territories,” was invoked to justify a customs barrier around the Rhineland designed to penalise the German government for not making an adequate effort to comply with the treaty. It was used again for a similar purpose during the Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr beginning in January 1923. That occupation was itself justified by an interpretation of Part VIII (reparations) Paragraph 18, Annex II. The paragraph stated that the allies had the right to take measures in the event of a voluntary reparations default by Germany which “may include economic and financial prohibitions and reprisals and in general such other measures.” The French argued that “such other measures” could include territorial occupation, whereas the British government, and one of the original drafters, the American lawyer, John Foster Dulles, argued that the phrase clearly applied only to sanctions of an economic or financial nature.

British legal objections to the 1923 Franco-Belgian occupation of the Ruhr were compromised by Lloyd George’s exasperated agreement in March 1921 to an allied occupation of three German towns, Duisburg, Ruhrort and Düsseldorf. He had agreed, despite his own eloquent arguments that “from a technical point of view the Allies’ case might be weak” because he perceived no other way of persuading a German government he saw as intransigent. H.W. Malkin, the Foreign Office’s deputy legal adviser, believed the treaty did not cover the sanctions taken...
and suggested “It may be that some of the means of pressure adopted are of such a nature that Germany would be entitled, if she thought fit, to treat them as involving a state of war.” The British Attorney General, Sir Gordon Hewart, hardly produced a ringing endorsement of their actions, suggesting that they “recite Germany’s continued violations of the terms of the Treaty of Peace . . . and . . . state that these violations . . . give the Allied Governments the right to take any measure of compulsion they consider necessary or proper . . . “ The problem was, as Lloyd George had already conceded in 1920, occupying the Ruhr was the only effective sanction: “. . . there was no other method available for enforcing the Treaty.” The legality under the treaty of such an occupation was highly controversial. The allies could show a whole string of German infractions of the treaty but they had not written adequate penalties into the settlement to justify the use of force that was, ultimately, the only recourse against its breach.

This was partly because the British and Americans in Paris had feared that too specific and powerful sanctions and penalties within the treaty would be used by the French to justify future harsh actions against Germany. An enduring British suspicion of French motives and objectives complicated treaty enforcement, in particular, the belief that the French had not accepted as final the treaty’s verdict that the Rhineland, albeit under occupation and with conditions and limitations, would remain German. In addition British observers believed that each French demand to occupy the Ruhr to force German compliance, or to punish a German infraction of the treaty, was really also an attempt to rectify their earlier failure within the treaty to deprive Germany of this valuable asset. Sydney Waterlow’s comment during the Kapp crisis was typical of many uttered by politicians and diplomats alike both before and later— “The French Government are evidently working to use the situation as a pretext for occupying the Ruhr basin and detaching the Rhineland.” British suspicion of “the lure of the Ruhr” was a constant presence lurking on, or just below, the surface of every Franco-British encounter. There were always deep misgivings about France’s possible intention to encourage separatism, undertake annexations of German territory and even to destroy the German state though British observers were divided as to whether France was driven by the desire to dominate the continent or by fear.

The British faced a further dilemma—should they seek to allay French insecurity by offering a military guarantee, thus encouraging greater Anglo-French cohesion in their dealings with Germany (which meant greater French willingness to acquiesce to British proposals) or would a France, secure in the knowledge of British support, pursue policies the British considered more, not less, intransigent? The matter was the subject of prolonged debate in the early 1920s without leading to a firm
Franco-British agreement. The French found this particularly unsatisfactory, believing they had already fulfilled their side of Lloyd George’s bargain in March 1919 when he offered a British guarantee to France in return for Clemenceau abandoning French claims in the Rhineland. He carefully linked his guarantee to a parallel undertaking by the United States and, when the Americans failed to deliver, the British were, in their own eyes at least, relieved of their responsibility. Britain’s refusal to honour its moral, if not legal, obligations reinforced French frustration with a partner that did not, in their eyes, recognise the realities of the European power balance. “The misfortune” lamented Paul Cambon “is that the English are not yet aware that Napoleon is dead.”

Sir Eyre Crowe, the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office encapsulated the overall dilemma in late 1921: “From the point of view of general foreign policy, the maintenance of the Entente remains of supreme importance. Some of the Treasury and Downing Street tendencies are towards the substitution of an Entente with Germany in place of that with France. This is a chimera under present conditions and must remain so for a long time to come. What we, and what the whole world wants, is peace. Peace must for the present rest on the execution of the peace treaties. These would hardly survive a breach between England and France at this moment.” Britain and France had to work together if the treaty was to be executed but the reality was that each had different visions of the post-war world and different routes to achieve those visions. The Belgian ambassador to France, Edmond de Gaiffier, himself symbolic of the part-player, part-onlooker role attributed to the lesser allies, identified two broad allied strategies. The British, Japanese and Italians wanted concessions to Germany and a revision of the treaty, whilst the French wanted its complete execution. Gaiffier thought neither practicable but these differences of viewpoint were a persistent feature of inter-allied relationships and helped to create a stalemate of mutual frustration between the two principal treaty enforcers.

Once again the post-Kapp crisis illustrated a wider theme. Crowe, in April 1920, offered Curzon the alternatives of a definite breach with France—an “heroic solution” that he rejected—or that the matter should be treated as a “lover’s quarrel” and that Britain should seek “. . . to build golden bridges for the retirement of the French from their present false position.” Curzon appreciated Crowe’s advocacy of a general clearance of the air with France but added “. . . After so flagrant a case as this . . . I am not very enthusiastic about ‘kissing again with tears.’” Yet the relationship had to survive, whatever its frustrations, personal dislikes and thorny problems of which there were many. Lloyd George and Millerand met at San Remo and papered over the cracks, with Millerand promising no further French independent action.
Kapp highlighted another constant problem: the treaty required a German government to enforce it, yet amongst the issues driving the coup were highly unpopular Allied demands for the disarmament and disbandment of Germany’s armed forces and for the surrender of war criminals. This placed the German government under extreme pressure from the right to resist and then helped to promote the coup, exposing the fragility of the alliance between Weimar and the army when the revolutionary threat was from the right. The Reichswehr commander, Hans von Seeckt, refused to send troops to help the government, stating “Reichswehr does not fire on Reichswehr.” The aftermath of Kapp suggested that the republic was also threatened by communist revolutionary forces in the Ruhr and elsewhere. When the threat was from the left the Reichswehr did intervene vigorously, causing some British observers to blame the Ruhr problems on army brutality. Could German governments withstand such pressures, retain sufficient authority to fulfil their treaty obligations and survive? Lloyd George might be provoked at times by a Stinnes or Simon but the British view tended to be somewhat patronizing, the German government was weak but doing its best and was, generally, acting in good faith. The British therefore favoured concessions to enable German governments to survive. The French believed that Germany was cheating and wanted stronger measures taken to ensure treaty execution. When the Germans said they could not execute part of the treaty the British generally accepted this; the French believed the Germans could, but would not, fulfil their obligations.

The disarmament of Germany illustrated some of these problems. In Paris all agreed to German disarmament but Foch favoured a larger conscript army, Lloyd George a smaller, long-service, volunteer force. The compromise of a long-service volunteer army of 100,000 men was not one of the more contentious issues of treaty negotiation. The British doubted whether this was a sufficient force to guarantee German internal and external security and London sympathised with Germany’s 1920 requests for extra time to reduce its forces to the required levels and even for larger German forces. The French were normally anxious to press execution issues to the limit but their policy could be complicated when, as in Bavaria, there might be advantage in terms of encouraging Bavarian particularism by turning a blind eye to the paramilitary forces there. Britain was unsure however whether this was to provide support for Bavarian separatism or to create an excuse for further action against German infractions of the treaty. In October 1920 Curzon did unofficially warn the German ambassador, Friedrich Stahmer, “that Bavaria was building a bridge for the French to the Ruhr.”

By the end of 1922 most of the major disarmament issues were settled as far as they were going to be. A number of problems remained about the
police, the reconversion of munitions factories, the surrender of unauthorized war material and Germany also faced the very difficult task of accounting for weapons that had either been lost or deliberately hidden in the aftermath of defeat and of trying to locate and destroy arms held by a wide variety of groups, many of whom were hostile to the treaty and often also to the government. As we have discovered since in both Northern Ireland and Iraq such matters are not easy. The final decision as to whether Germany was disarmed was always going to be political, especially since the military experts did not agree, and, ultimately, would be conditional.\(^5\)

Reparations were a more difficult proposition, involving the more tangible individual self-interest of each of the allies and some awareness that, as Sally Marks would express it seventy-five years later, “If the Allies, and especially France, had to assume reconstruction costs on top of domestic and foreign war debts, whereas Germany was left with only domestic debts they would be the losers, and German economic dominance would be tantamount to victory. Reparations would both deny Germany that victory and spread the pain of undoing the damage done.”\(^5\) France needed Germany to pay its reconstruction costs, but there was the added bonus that this would also diminish Germany’s ability to seek revenge. For Britain reparations were economically and financially important, for France they represented, in addition, security. Both were anxious to achieve the maximum receipts possible, but for Britain this was tempered by a greater concern than France for the survival of the German economy, which it saw as an important element in British prosperity. The economics and technicalities of reparations probably defeated the ability of most politicians to understand them; what they all grasped was the enormous potential political fall-out from such a highly contentious and charged question. Lloyd George frequently castigated French leaders for not confronting their population with the truth about probable reparations receipts, but he was never anxious to lead by example.

From 1919–1923 the victors confronted the problem that, if the treaty was not executed, their only real and immediate sanction was force. Allied agencies reported German infractions and deficiencies and high level conferences tried to interpret German actions and intentions and to encourage Germany to fulfil its obligations. The fundamental questions were always the same: were German failures a matter of intent or inability—would not, or could not, Germany execute the treaty clauses? Should force be used? If so, when, and what sort of force? Was there a credible alternative? Inter-Allied conferences produced rousing speeches and sometimes actions intended to be decisive—at Paris in March 1921 a punitive customs regime was decreed to separate occupied from unoccupied Germany. These were the points at which high level diplomacy met
the real world—the study of which forms the main theme of the other papers in this collection. The British Rhineland Commissioner, Arnold Robertson, was required to institute the customs barrier along a substantial frontier without new resources or any clear directive as to the aims, objectives and mechanisms of the exercise. Disgruntled, he suggested that his only solution was to place a collecting box at the border with a notice: “England expects every German to pay his duty.” 56 The problem was that some of the victors expected every German also to do his duty by the treaty and execute it in its entirety. The inadequacies of the sanctions and incentives contained in the treaty partly explained why this was an equally unrealistic expectation. The deeper problem, however, lay in the failure of the British and French to agree a common strategy and then to abide by it. They could neither agree to enforce the treaty, nor to redraft it. Their tragedy was that this contributed to the conditions that created, ultimately, what neither wanted, a renewal of hostilities on a continental and world scale.

NOTES


3. See Lentin Guilt at Versailles, pp. 132–54 and his later “The Worm in the Bud: ‘Appeasement’ at the Peace Conference” in Lloyd George and the Lost Peace: From Versailles to Hitler, 1919–1940 (Basingstoke, 2001), pp. 67–88. Headlam-Morley suggested to Kerr, Dec. 13, 1919, that “there was a party in France led by Foch” who wanted to force a breach with Germany, to denounce the armistice and begin war again. “What is the object of this? Is it not that they think that the Treaty is in some points unduly favourable to Germany and want really to scrap the Treaty itself...?” Letter in GD 40.17.216 Lothian Papers, Scottish Record Office.


6. Crowe told Clemenceau, 30.9.19, that “constitutionally we might not be bound to do so ... [but] it would ... be a practical impossibility for HMG to act before the Dominions had signified their assent.” Crowe, Paris, tel. 1393, DBFP Vol.V, pp. 599–600.
13. HD 70 Minute 6, Oct. 15, 1919. Ibid. pp. 961–2. This particular fear proved unjustified and the Germans evacuated the provinces in December 1919 and January 1920.
14. The allies notified the Germans of eleven headings they wanted fulfilled before the treaty came into effect. These ranged from the 42 missing locomotives (from the original demand for 5,000); 4,600 wagons (from the original 150,000); missing French and Belgian works of art; to the compensation demanded for Scapa Flow (five light cruisers and 400,000 tons of floating docks and cranes). HD 80 Appendix C, Nov. 1, 1919, Ibid. pp. 131–7. See also Willis, James F. Prologue to Nuremberg: The Politics and Diplomacy of Punishing War Criminals of the First World War (Westport, Conn., 1982). The earliest allied demands amounted to over 1500 men (and one woman) but these were reduced to 854 by the allied conference in Paris, Jan. 20, 1920, ICP 22, Minute 1, Ibid. pp. 927–8.
16. Bonar Law, Lord Privy Seal, was the Conservative leader, Churchill, then a Liberal, was Secretary of State for War. Balfour and Curzon had swapped offices in October 1919, with Curzon confirmed as Foreign Secretary and Balfour now Lord President. Kerr was also present. Cabinet 12, Appendix VI in CAB23/18.
20. Curzon, minute, Apr. 6, 1920, Ibid. N1, p. 328. The German habit of addressing all notes to Millerand as president of the peace conference was a constant source of irritation to the Foreign Office, e.g., minutes on 188765/4232/18 in FO 371/3781.
21. The London conference ran from Feb. 12, 1920 to Apr. 10, 1920. Its main business was the treaty with Turkey. It split into two groups, the main allied leaders met with Lloyd George at 10 Downing Street, the foreign ministers and ambassadors met, under Curzon’s chairmanship, in the Foreign Office. DBFP Vol. VII, p iv.
23. Cecil wrote to Curzon, Balfour and Lloyd George, Apr. 12, 1920, arguing that the German troop movements could be construed as contraventions of Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty constituting a threat of war and hence the League should be summoned. Waterlow commented: “. . . Either we must sooner or later find an occasion to promote recourse to this machinery, or we must reconcile ourselves to the Covenant becoming a dead letter.” 191340/4232/18 in FO371/3783.


27. Headlam-Morley noted Oct. 18, 1920: “. . . the Prime Minister did not in fact before going to a Conference consult those who were or ought to have been in a position to give him sound advice, and the decisions arrived at or the information which came out . . . was not communicated to the Foreign Office or to the diplomatic representatives of the country. . . . Looking back over the last two years it would be difficult to point to a single problem, of real importance that has been settled; what has been done is to postpone the problems, to effect a temporary makeshift or modus vivendi; this no doubt is often the best thing to do, but the fact remains that our relations with France have been getting steadily worse. . . . Conferences are no more a sovereign specific for avoiding international conflict than avoiding a coal strike.” FO800/149.


31. FO tel. 401, Apr. 1, 1920. DBFP Vol. IX, p. 292. See originals on 189367/4232/18 in FO371/3781 for Curzon’s addition, “. . . if the French Government persist in acting without . . . consultation of their Allies, we may have to re-examine our position and to consider whether it is worthwhile for us to continue in occupation of Rhine area.”

32. Article 279, The Treaty, p. 559. See Curzon’s revealing remark to the French Ambassador, Sainte-Aulaire, Mar. 25, 1921: “The more I looked into [this particular sanction] the more did it seem to be fraught with great difficulties and perils, not the least of which was that, in our desire to hit Germany, we might injure and even ruin the occupied territories themselves.” FO desp 887 to Paris, C6247/2740 in FO371/6020. Briand and Lloyd George had both suggested this was not an appropriate use of the Article, DBFP, Vol. XV, p. 8.


38. An official in the Foreign Office’s Central Department.
40. Curzon to the Imperial Conference, June 22, 1921. E4 in CAB32/2.
50. Sir Harold Stuart (Koblenz) tel. 103 Apr. 12, 1920: “. . . until the Reichswehr advanced, the greater part of the Ruhr was quiet.” and report by Lt.Col. Ryan included in Stuart desp. 254, Apr. 17, 1920, DBFP, Vol. IX, p. 388 and pp. 418–27.
51. See Lorna S. Jaffe, The Decision to Disarm Germany; British Policy towards Post-war German Disarmament, 1914–1919 (Boston, 1985).
56. Robertson (Koblenz) desp. 159, Apr. 18, 1921, DBFP, Vol. XVI, p. 544.