

The Weimar Republic's Policies Towards the Baltic Germans

Written by Agne Cepinskyte

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/03/16/the-weimar-republics-policies-towards-the-baltic-germans/>

AGNE CEPINSKYTE, MAR 16 2019

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Perceiving a state as a living creature could well be seen as insane. However, this was precisely the idea of Friedrich Ratzel, a German geographer and ethnographer, also known for coining the now infamous term '*Lebensraum*,' which was later misused by Nazis. Ratzel's concept of the state's borders as a naturally evolving chief 'organ' of the state was his suggested rationale for Germany's potential territorial expansion. He wrote: 'A nation does not remain immobile for generations on the same piece of territory: it must expand, for it is growing.'^[1] In the 1920s, for Germany, such an approach was acceptable, as it gave hope to the German people that their state's decline was only temporary and there was still a prospect of territorial expansion.

Following similar thinking, Manfred Langhans-Ratzeburg insisted that regardless of its miserable post-war state, Weimar Germany still belonged to the Great Powers and was only temporarily 'disabled' by the Allies.^[2] Its status as a recovering Great Power was implicitly recognised by the League of Nations in 1926, when Germany was given a permanent member's seat on the League's Council. In April of that year, several months before Germany was admitted to the League, Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann (1923–29) explained in his speech at the national assembly of the German People's Party (*Deutsche Volkspartei* – DVP) that one of the conditions that Germany raised for its entrance to the League was 'the obvious recognition of the German Great Power status (*Großmachtstellung*).'^[3]

There is thus something volatile about a 'handicapped' Great Power. Even during the times when such a state complies with unfavourable international demands and humiliating constraints out of necessity, its self-perception as a Great Power (even if a temporarily restrained one) is likely to be as solid as ever and its domestic nationalists may be feeding on revanchist theories. Indeed, ideas invigorating the myth of the Third Rome and the mission of 'special civilisations' spread in Germany in particular during the 1920s.^[4] Such theories, at first aimed at merely remedying the dissatisfaction of the masses, may acquire a whole new intensity when political, economic and historical circumstances change and enable those in power to turn ideas into reality.

The ambivalent nature of the interwar German Great Power status is evident in the Weimar Republic's approach and policies towards the Baltic States. On the one hand, pressed by economic demands and troubled international and domestic circumstances, post-WWI Germany had to quickly shift its wartime annexationist plans. This was necessary for pursuing pragmatic cooperation with the newly independent Baltic States that would potentially open the doors to Eastern (primarily Russian) economic markets. On the other hand, revanchist and imperialistic discourse was quietly but steadily streaming below the surface of the carefully considered diplomatic efforts.

For most of the 1920s, Gustav Stresemann led German foreign policy. At first, as the *Reich's* Chancellor for a hundred days in 1923, then as foreign minister from 1923 to his death in 1929, Stresemann guided the devastated state throughout its most difficult years. Historians have disagreed as to whether he was a pioneer of European diplomacy or an adamant advocate of pan-German expansion. For his diplomatic achievements Stresemann has

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been named Weimar's greatest statesman and the founding father of the German politics of international law (*Völkerrechtspolitik*).[5] Nevertheless, historian Fritz Fischer for one suggested a so-called continuity thesis (*Kontinuitätsthese*). He argued that Stresemann's policies, particularly those towards national minorities abroad, formed a bridge between the pan-German imperialism of the Wilhelmine era and the *Lebensraum* doctrine of the *Third Reich*. [6]

This paper takes a discursive approach to foreign policy and proposes that with regards to Weimar *Ostpolitik*, both positions are correct. That is, the political discourse of the Weimar Republic towards the Baltic States had several 'layers' operating simultaneously. The study builds on the analytical model developed by Ole Wæver, who introduced the idea of layered discursive formations. According to him, the deeper discursive structures are more abstract and more solidly sedimented. For that reason they are more difficult to politicise and change.[7] Therefore, the change usually happens on the surface level of political discourse, while on the deeper level continuity may persist. Thus, analysing political discourse as a layered structure allows discovering a complex picture: instead of simply tracing the change or establishing continuity, one can specify 'change within continuity.' [8]

This study focuses on the first half of the 1920s. While German *Ostpolitik* was dynamic throughout the whole Weimar period, the most radical shift in its policies towards the Baltic States occurred precisely in the early years of the Weimar Republic. The study analyses political discourse as it appears in Gustav Stresemann's speeches and policy documents. However, the remainder of the study that outlines the context that this political discourse operated in relies on various other sources, both secondary (studies by other scholars) and primary (memoirs, diaries, archival material etc.).

The first part of the study addresses the issue of revisionism and revanchist ideas in post-WWI Germany – something that was reflected at the 'deepest' level of political discourse. The second part discusses the shift in German policies towards the Baltic States that were constructed at the surface level of political discourse. The final part analyses political discourse as it appeared in Stresemann's speeches and policy documents. The aim is to unearth the aforementioned discursive layers that enabled the co-existence of revisionist ideas and pragmatic policies. The most attention will be paid to Stresemann's minority discourse that played a significant role in reconciling the two extremes.

Imperialistic revisionism in the mutilated Weimar Republic

You must carve in your heart

These words as in stone:

What we have lost

We will restore![9]

– Paul Warncke, '*Was wir verloren haben*,' 1920.

Post-WWI Germany, the successor of a defeated empire, faced the challenge of coming to terms with a significant decrease in population and territory, the loss of military might and the consequent sense of injustice and humiliation. This provoked a desperate search for an explanation as to why it had failed. Such an explanation was offered by geopolitical theory that pointed to other Great Powers, the Allies, as responsible for the German fall. Perhaps even more importantly, ideas of classical geopolitics suggested that the 'wrongful' outcome of the war could be reversed.

Geopolitical thought in Weimar Germany was developed and popularised around the claim of the injustice of Germany's newly redrawn territorial borders. The theory took advantage of widespread resentment towards the Treaty of Versailles. The Treaty deprived Germany of roughly one-eighth of its pre-war territory, one-tenth of its population and, in the German view, imposed 'dictated peace.' [10] At the time, when Germans might have been divided on many issues, their hatred of the Treaty of Versailles was the common ground. In March 1921, Stresemann cast doubt on the Treaty's legal implications: 'The Treaty of Versailles is devoid, morally speaking, of any legal basis (...) The fact that we signed the Treaty under compulsion after being disarmed does not alter in any way the legal position.' [11]

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Similarly, despite their differences, all German political parties agreed that the Peace Treaty had to be revised. Historian Bastiaan Schot wrote in his study that all German political parties were of the position that 'at all costs the impression should be avoided that the *Reich* recognised the 1919 territorial provisions as binding.'^[12] Grievances against the Treaty were also widespread among the German people. Count Harry Kessler, a German diplomat and writer, described in his diary the mood in Berlin in summer of 1919, a few days before the Treaty of Versailles was signed:

This morning, students and soldiers removed the French flags we are supposed to surrender from the Arsenal and burned them in front of the statue of Frederick the Great. This afternoon, since the Entente has declined to accept our signature under reservation, the military leaders have announced their resistance to the government, the Centre Party has withdrawn its Agreement to signature, and the government has decided to resign. This evening the ultimatum expires. The tension is terrific. Very oppressive weather. Counter-revolution war, insurrection threaten us like the nearing thunderstorm.^[13]

New geopolitical ideas provided the German people with hope that results of the war need not to be permanent. Historian David Thomas Murphy accurately noted that the geopolitical criticism of the Treaty (i.e. that it violated the 'natural' political geography of Central Europe, that it unjustly excluded millions of Germans from their homeland etc.) – was not particularly unique or significantly different from the criticism made by non-geopoliticians. However, geopoliticians at the time argued that their critique was scientific and therefore it was accepted as more objective and credible than other critiques.^[14] As American geopolitician Nicholas Spykman would later say: 'Geography does not argue. It just is.'^[15]

In 1920s Germany, geopolitical ideas were not limited to narrow academic and political circles. They were introduced in German schools in order to persuade the new generation that the emergence of new states in the East was unnatural and unjust and therefore their existence was only temporary. Likewise, geographical institutes at German universities offered lectures and seminars on geopolitics. Geopolitical rhetoric in educational institutions not only suggested that the borders in East Central Europe were illegitimate, but also included teachings that the German people outside Germany's borders were still a part of the homeland.^[16]

The overall idea about territorial borders in the geopolitical theory was that natural and stable state borders were those determined by ethnic and geographic factors as opposed to the 'inherently unstable' borders resulting from political agreements. German geopolitician Adolf Grabowsky contended that 'a border can rest on the conditions of space and on conditions of ethnicity. In both cases it is not artificial, not a mere treaty border, but a natural one.'^[17] Grabowsky revived the ideas that had already been proclaimed by German philosophers such as Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Johann Gottfried Herder, who argued that the borders must be in harmony with 'peoples' spirit' (*Volksgeist*). In other words, in determining legitimate state borders 'natural' forces, such as geography, race, ethnicity, should prevail over law and politics.^[18] Such argumentation evidently constituted a potential basis for justification of revisionist policies and territorial expansion.

Karl Haushofer, one of the leading geopoliticians of the Weimar era and arguably of all times, explicitly favoured German territorial expansionism. He, among a number of other geopoliticians, argued that Germany's growing population needed new space – *Lebensraum*.^[19] Haushofer defined *Lebensraum* as the right and duty of a nation to provide ample space and resources for its people. It was the duty of the stronger state with a growing population to expand at the cost of the weaker one.^[20] Interestingly, there was also another body of geopoliticians, led by Friedrich Burgdörfer, who argued to the contrary, i.e. that the German population was actually critically declining.^[21] However, they too advocated for more space.

Their argument was that the decrease in population was allegedly a result of people gathering in the cities, which prompted urbanization, the decline of moral standards, and changes in the social role of women.^[22] Germans, now being forced to crowd into the cities, were supposedly intentionally restricting family size, as they knew they would not be able to provide for their families under the miserable conditions of post-WWI Germany.^[23] It was for this reason that Germany needed new space with agricultural lands. Such were the lands located in the East, primarily in the Baltics, where people of German descent had been cultivating them for centuries. These and similar assertions

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were intended to give legitimacy to the eventual expansion of German territory.

Furthermore, geopoliticians invoked the threat of de-Germanization of the already shrinking body of the German population. Burgdörfer referred to the example of the oppressed German minority in the East Central European states and how their national identity was jeopardised as they were exposed to assimilation in a 'mixed people zone' (*Völkermischzone*).[24] He then concluded that '[o]nly an indigenous, procreative peasant population, tied to the soil, would be in the position to resist excess Slavic population pressure and successfully secure the German ethnic soil in the East.'[25]

Geopolitical theory is claimed to have become an intellectual underpinning for Nazi policies in the 1930s and during WWII. Historian Bruno Hipler called Karl Haushofer, Hitler's teacher, who during the 1920s through the mediation of his friend Rudolf Hess had largely formed Hitler's ideology.[26] In fact, Haushofer killed himself right after the Second World War, ending the suicide note with the words: 'I want to be forgotten and forgotten.'[27] He allegedly did this out of grief and remorse prompted by reflection on Nazi crimes.[28] Such conclusion seems to be supported by a sonnet written by Haushofer's son, Albrecht Haushofer, who was executed by Nazis shortly before the end of WWII: 'My father broke the seal open/He did not see a touch of evil/Yet let the demon escape into the world.'[29]

As these lines suggest, Hitler found ideological background for his heinous crimes in Karl Haushofer's ideas without the latter ever intending to become *eminence grise* of the Nazi atrocities. Murphy made a similar observation, stating that while geopolitics and originally geopolitical terms (notably: *Lebensraum*, *Raumforschung*, *Blut-und-Boden*, *Rasse-und-Mum* etc.) played an important role in domestic propaganda in the 1930s, Nazis saw in geopolitics 'convenient ex post facto rationalizations for a course of policy developed independently of strict geopolitical considerations.'[30] Thus, as demonstrated in Murphy's study, it is particularly the Weimar period when revisionist geopolitical ideas had the most ideological significance.

Imperialism interrupted: *ex oriente lux* and pragmatic turn

After Germany's defeat in WWI and its consequent decline, many Germans were disappointed with their homeland and resentful towards the West. To make sense of their time, in search for a way out of their problems and to a better future they turned to the East.[31] Hermann Hesse, one of Germany's foremost authors of the 20th century (whose father happened to be a Baltic-German from Estonia) reflected on this phenomenon in his novel 'Journey to the East' (*Die Morgenlandfahrt*):

[I]mmediately after the end of the World War – our country was full of saviours, prophets, and disciples, of presentiments about the end of the world, or hopes for the dawn of a Third Empire. Shattered by the war, in despair as a result of deprivation and hunger, greatly disillusioned by the seeming futility of all the sacrifices in blood and goods, our people at that time were lured by many phantoms (...).[32]

His narrator then embarked on the pilgrimage to the East in the quest for the ultimate truth. This Eastern mysticism (whether referring to the Far East, Russia or East Central Europe) was a common motive in Weimar Germany's literature. However, it was not only the romantic writers and disenchanting ordinary Germans who were mesmerized by the East. The Weimar Republic's *Ostpolitik* was one of the principal concerns of German foreign policy makers. They realised that if managed properly, relations to the newly independent states in the East might build a foundation for a brighter tomorrow. Thus, as another German writer summed it up, "*Ex oriente lux*" [Light from the East] was Germany's hope for the future.'[33]

Throughout history German territorial borders were constantly changing from the pre-unification period to the boundaries of 1871, the suddenly expanded post-Brest-Litovsk Empire of spring and summer of 1918, and the humiliatingly reduced territory of the Weimar Republic. Not one of these states represented ethnic, linguistic, and cultural homogeneity.[34] Thus, the question as to 'what was German' posed a constant dilemma for German authorities as well as for the German people within and outside the perpetually changing borders.

Having lost the war and much of its territory, Germany faced national identity confusion and the need to redefine what

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was German. This dilemma – or rather how it was seen by the soldiers continuing to fight in the Baltics when the war was already over – is described in the excerpt from Ernst von Salomon's novel based on his own experience fighting in the German paramilitary units *Freikorps*:

Where was Germany? Was it where the nation was? But the nation was screaming for food (...) Was it the State? But the State was busy searching for its constitutional form. (...) Germany was at its borders. The provisions of Versailles Peace Treaty told us where Germany was.

This excerpt illustrates the understanding of a *Freikorps* soldier as to what Germany was in 1919. The soldiers felt that the lands in the East where they were fighting were also German, but admitted with bitterness that it was ultimately the Peace Treaty that dictated where Germany was. Von Solomon wrote with irony that they were German soldiers who were nominally not German soldiers and protecting German lands that were nominally not German lands. [35]

That being said, before the outbreak of WWI, the prevailing ideology in Germany was that of a nation-state, where state, nation, and territory coincide. The pan-Germans (a movement founded in 1891) were concerned that millions of Germans continued to live outside of the borders of the unified German Empire. They were especially interested in Germans residing in East-Central Europe, who were allegedly subject to growing assimilationist pressures in the expansive and dangerous Slavic territory.[36] On the eve of WWI, the increasingly popular nationalist (*völkisch*) right in the *Reich* was challenging the legitimacy of the German Empire because of its failure to include all of those who belonged to the German nation.

During the course of the war, discussions about Baltic annexation intensified in the German media and among the stakeholders from business, industry and academia. The Baltic Trust Council (*Die Baltische Vertrauensrat*), an organisation established in 1915 by Baltic-German émigrés, attempted to convince the German government about the benefits of incorporation of the Baltic lands into the *Reich*, and addressed the *Reich's* Chancellor with a memorandum, which read: 'We have only two alternatives – to be annexed by Germany or to be massacred by Russia.'[37]

Their prayers seemed to have been answered in March 1918 with the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, by which Russia ceded the Baltics to Germany. Shortly after the Treaty had been signed, a speech in the *Reichstag* by Gustav Stresemann declared that only the union of the Baltic territories with the German Empire would secure Germany's Eastern border.[38] However, the Treaty was effectively terminated later that year as a result of Germany's capitulation to the Allied powers. The November Revolution and the collapse of the German *Kaiserreich* thwarted any further attempts to create German rule in the Baltics.

Foreign policy makers in post-war Germany had to adjust to new inconvenient circumstances. This inevitably meant abandoning any revisionist claims towards the new states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Economic demands in war-torn Germany required access to the Russian economic markets and the quickest way was through the Baltics.[39] This urged the German government 'finally to throw overboard the policy of the conservative German-Baltic barons and to conduct a purely German policy in Latvia and Estonia, built on an honourable basis.'[40]

The most sensitive issue with regards to Lithuania was the situation with Memel (Klaipeda) territory. This territory, previously a part of the Kingdom of Prussia, pursuant to the Treaty of Versailles was to remain under the control of the League of Nations until a later date when the people of this region would vote on whether to return the land to Germany or not. Germany never ceased to consider the people in Memel as part of the German nation. In 1922, Stresemann urged the Foreign Minister Hans von Rosenberg (1922–23) to not forget the Memel question and to persist claiming 'the right of self-determination for the Germans there who are at the mercy of international arrangements (...) for they were once politically united with us.'[41]

In 1923, disregarding the provisions of the Peace Treaty, Lithuania seized the Memel territory. Despite profound indignation over Lithuanian actions, the Weimar Republic was forced to maintain relatively soft policies concerning this issue. It had to eventually endorse Lithuanian actions, as it was motivated to have Lithuania on its side and thus

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prevent the isolation of East Prussia.[42] It should be mentioned, however, that in March 1939, Hitler rushed to recapture Klaipeda as the *Reich's* last territorial acquisition before the outbreak of WWII. This was even before signing the infamous secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, as if the suppressed revisionist bitterness had been impatiently waiting for the right time to erupt.

As discussed above, Germans nearly unanimously opposed the new borders imposed at Versailles and many thought of the German minority abroad (*Auslandsdeutsche*) as a symbol of the German historical claim to territory in East Central Europe. However, in the tense post-war environment, when Germany was under strict surveillance by the Allied powers, any indications of irredentist ambitions in German foreign policy would have been politically destructive. Needless to say, the demilitarised, impoverished and vanquished German state would have had little chance to actually enact such aspirations.

Instead, foreign policy makers started viewing the Baltic-German community as irreplaceable for the vital task of preserving and promoting German culture in the East, and strengthening the ties between the Baltics and the *Reich*. As historian John Hiden noted,

The Baltic Germans as a whole exemplified the model of a German minority which had enjoyed a long-standing and prominent economic role abroad and which might be expected to pick up the threads again after 1919.[43]

In other words, the German government was interested in pursuing its own pragmatic interests in the Baltic provinces while the interests of the Baltic-Germans as such were in second place.[44]

In addition, Baltic-German refugees in the Weimar Republic formed a bridge to the 'German element' in the Baltic countries. Therefore, the German government was eager to support and protect the Baltic-German community on both sides of the border, primarily by funding the relevant minority organisations.[45] While the preference was given to economic rather than to cultural survival, the cultural support for the Baltic-Germans in the Baltics (e.g. schooling, subsidies to the German theatre, the school visits, visiting professors and student exchanges) was necessary to cement together the disparate elements in the Baltic-German communities as a whole.[46]

Another factor that pressed Germany to pursue politics of understanding and cooperation with the Baltic States was the British interest in the region. Already in 1919, when the Bolsheviks retreated from the Baltics and the *Freikorps* turned against the Baltic people, British advisors arrived to train the Baltic forces to fight against the *Freikorps*, and the Entente increased its pressure on the German government to withdraw all support from the *Freikorps*. [47]

The German-Baltic National Committee (*Deutsch-Baltische Nationalausschuss*), an organisation founded in 1918 to represent the Baltic-German population in Latvia and to maintain ties with Germany, then declared that, even though there was a rumour in Germany that after the revolution the Baltic countries sought for British protection, no Baltic-German would ever think of such a thing.[48] The Committee insisted that this 'would be a betrayal of the future of the German nation to which the Balts would always belong physically and spiritually. It [was] the duty of every Balt to oppose such talks and such projects by all means with the greatest vigour and with ruthless candour.'[49]

However, despite such reassurances, Great Britain clearly had an interest in the newly independent Baltic States. In 1920, Dr. Rosenstock, a Baltic-German attorney residing in Latvia, was writing to the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs:

It is well known that at the moment England is making its efforts to alienate Baltic-Germans against the *Reich* in order to use them for the purposes of English politics. Efforts are being made to encourage the Baltic-Germans to return and they are being promised that pressure on the Baltic governments will be exerted, if the Baltic-Germans are willing to turn their backs to the *Reich* and to place themselves at the service of the English policy. (...) Thus, if Germany does not help the Baltic-Germans, it will inevitably drive them into the arms of England and the Baltic States.[50]

Dr. Rosenstock further reminded that the Baltic-Germans, who had been the pioneers of the German culture in the

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Baltics for 700 years, 'can only count on Germany to help them preserve the acquired rights (*Besitzstand*) in the Baltic provinces.' He then advised that helping them was in the interest of Germany, as the newly independent Baltic States would form an economic bridge to Russia. Germany thus 'must pursue a farsighted policy aimed at preserving the German element in the Baltic provinces, which is an absolute economic necessity.'^[51] Heinrich Von Bear, a Baltic-German from Estonia, provided similar observations: 'England sought, above all, to destroy any German influence in the Baltic provinces, without at the same time allowing advance of the Russians.'^[52]

The German government's pursuit of policies of understanding and cooperation was, however, at odds with the interests of increasingly active conservatives in the *Reich*. The historian Henry L. Bretton accurately described this clash of interests:

By force of necessity, German foreign policy had to be peaceful, bare of all reference to the use of arms. On the other hand, the peace settlement had created enough dissatisfaction among the German masses to render a rational and moderate foreign policy highly impractical from the point of view of domestic politics.^[53]

Domestic nationalists were not prepared to accept rapprochement with the Western powers. This resulted in growing alienation between Gustav Stresemann and his adherents on the one hand and the bourgeois nationalist circles on the other.^[54] Thus, the policy makers in Weimar Germany found themselves in a difficult position between a rock and a hard place. They had to measure up to the demands of the Allied Powers, while at the same time avoiding alienating nationalists in Germany. Stresemann's leadership was remarkable, not least because it was particularly he who managed to skilfully balance between the two extremes.

Continuity, change and national minorities in Stresemann's political discourse

Henry L. Bretton summarised Stresemann's political struggle and success as follows: 'His unusual political acumen was combined with a mental agility and flexibility that enabled him to represent one political extreme and the other without any detriment to his career. His international attitude developed from one of revengefulness and chauvinism to one of enthusiastic, intense internationalism.'^[55]

Bretton further commended Stresemann for proving over the course of his political career that 'a militarily weak and defeated nation could arise from under a severe peace settlement without resorting to armed force.' He noted, that '[i]f Stresemann appeared to be belligerent at times, it was primarily because it was necessary to appease the extremists at home.'^[56] Indeed, while constantly emphasising the lack of irredentist or revisionist motives behind his foreign policies in order to reassure suspicious Allied powers, Stresemann would also make sure that he did not appear feeble in the eyes of the nationalists at home.

Thus, the foreign policy leader constantly manoeuvred between satisfying both the Western powers and the German nationalists. Even though one might say that actions speak louder than words, it was to a large extent through language that Stresemann achieved his success. In 1923, when speaking in the *Reichstag* he himself addressed the criticism about allegedly too much talk and too little action:

A distinction is often drawn nowadays between speech and action by certain people (...) But what do they mean by action in the present state of international affairs? (...) Action as regards foreign nations can assume various forms. It can take the form of parliamentary and diplomatic 'feelers,' of speeches in parliament, of notes and proposals. The choice of methods must depend upon circumstances.^[57]

Under the circumstances of the time, when Germany was severely restricted in its capabilities and had to 'give proof of its goodwill' to the international community, language became Stresemann's main means of pursuing foreign policy goals.^[58] More specifically, it was a multi-layered political discourse that underlayed Stresemann's speeches and policy documents. Historian Ole Waeber suggested the idea that 'discourse forms a system which is made up of a layered constellation of key concepts.' When the change happens in political discourse (and accordingly in policies), it is likely that this change only occurs on the superficial level, whilst the deepest discursive level stays intact. Thus, Waeber's main point is that a change in discourse is not the same as the change of discourse: 'Change is not an

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either/or question, because we are not operating at one level only.'[59]

Following Waever's model, three layers can be indicated in political discourse that appears in Stresemann's speeches and texts. The first and deepest level is the imperialistic Great Power discourse. At this level, Germany is positioned vis-à-vis the world – as the 'handicapped' Great Power state, entitled to revise the 'unjust' consequences of WWI. The second level of discourse reveals the basic conceptual relation between the nation and the state. The crucial question here is who are defined as national minorities abroad and what is their relation to the kin-state. The third level addresses specifically the role of national minorities abroad in Germany's foreign policy. Such a role was largely dependent on what national interests were prioritised.

This study suggests that the 'pragmatic turn' in Weimar Germany's political discourse towards the Baltic States and the Baltic-Germans in the early 1920s took place particularly at the third level. Meanwhile, the imperialistic Great Power discourse with its revisionist claims persisted at the deepest level. The dynamics at the second level were arguably the most interesting ones. The relation between the nationals abroad and the German state had to be redefined in such a way that allowed for change at the surface level to occur and for the revisionist discourse at the deepest level to continue. At the middle level, the discourse was largely related to minorities, both abroad and within the German *Reich*.

Stresemann realised early on that Germany had to re-establish itself in the international arena as a peaceful Great Power and erase the image of a menacing belligerent state. He declared in the *Reichstag* in 1921: 'Let us make no mistake – we have got to change the hearts of those who were responsible for the Treaty of Versailles. Unless we succeed in doing so we shall never be able to recover our political and economic independence.'[60] A few years later he was still explaining that it was 'essential that [one] should act with the utmost caution in the present situation,' when a voice from the public reproached: 'too much caution.' The foreign minister then replied persistently: 'we shall not make any progress unless we show caution.'[61]

Similarly, Stresemann noted in the DVP convention: 'Our liberty in foreign politics has hitherto been severely circumscribed and is likely for some time to remain so. We are finding out how hard it is for a defenceless nation to carry on a foreign policy.'[62] He tried to show sympathy and understanding in order to appease the dissatisfaction of nationalist party members who were impatient to remedy Germany's position (that Germany, as they saw it, had been put in unfairly by the Allies), and perceived Stresemann's strategy as not assertive enough.

Moreover, Stresemann encouraged finding unity not only among members of his own party, but also among different parties, regardless of any political disagreements. In fact, he considered that only in unity can a defeated state re-establish itself as a Great Power: 'There is another weapon at the disposal of a Foreign Minister of a defenceless State. I am referring to that national unanimity which transcends party differences and enables him when the time comes to reject impossible terms.'[63] On a different occasion Stresemann declared: 'Party strife was never less undesirable than at a time like the present, when the enemy is at our gates. Never before has such a call come to us to rise superior to party strife and devote all our efforts to the preservation of our nation and our fatherland.'[64]

In the early years of Germany's first parliamentary democracy, which conservatives perceived as a humiliating concession on the ruins of the empire, friction and disagreements between different political parties were inevitable. However, the unity that Stresemann was talking about existed at the deeper level of Great Power discourse. Bastiaan Schot concluded in his study that all German political parties – from the communist left to the extreme nationalist right – were at least in agreement that the Treaty of Versailles had to be revised with all available means.[65] This illustrates exactly the thought of Ole Waever, who stated in his layered discourse theory that even if a certain position is perceived as in 'opposition' or 'marginalised' 'it means only that it is 'outside' and 'different' at the level of manifest politics, most likely it shares codes at the next (deeper) level of abstraction.'[66]

Thus, even Stresemann, who took a 'more circuitous but more peaceful approach through an understanding with the West,' had never relinquished revisionist claims concerning the territories in the East.[67] In his speeches he was emphasising different points depending on whether he was speaking in Berlin or in an international forum. Speaking to the German community, Stresemann would never discard the future prospect of the extension of German territory.

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For instance, in his speech in the *Reichstag* in spring of 1925 he stated:

Germany does not have the power to force through an alteration of her frontiers nor does she have the desire to do so. Since Article 19 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, however, states expressly that treaties which have become inapplicable can be altered, no one can expect Germany to renounce, for all time, her right to take peaceful advantage of this principle and to reopen the question at some future date.[68]

Stresemann used a slightly different rhetoric when campaigning in the League of Nations for the right of national minorities to national and cultural self-determination. There he would always point out that this principle was not meant to become a tool for territorial revisionism, but rather it was aimed primarily at the liberation of minority nations from the domination of their states. Furthermore, he would usually speak in an abstract, neutral and almost academic manner. He carefully omitted references to the situation of minorities in the individual states. Even if the implications were meant for particular states, such as the Baltics, Stresemann limited his statements to the general theoretical principles that, in his opinion, should be respected by the member-states of the League of Nations.[69]

The question of national minorities and the League Covenant were closely related to one another. Germany joined the League of Nations precisely to secure a position enabling it to pursue minority policy. In fact, this was the only way for a disarmed and weak Weimar Republic to lead effective minority policy and to potentially extend its influence beyond its borders. As Bretton puts it, '[i]f Germany's role was to be that of a guardian over the minorities (...), the League and its machinery could achieve what only strong armies could otherwise have accomplished.'[70] Stresemann even managed to convince the sceptical nationalists at home about the benefits of Germany's membership in the League, assuring them that the League would provide Germany with a platform to control German minorities abroad from Berlin.

Admittedly, there was also external pressure for Germany to join the League. Such international pressure increased particularly after signing the Dawes Agreement in August 1924. American creditors hinted in loan negotiations with the German banks that they saw Germany's early entry into the League of Nations as the best guarantee for Germany's stable development.[71] However, when entering the League, in order to appease domestic conservatives and to demonstrate that the *Reich* would not give up important national interests, Stresemann made the entry of Germany contingent on certain conditions, including the permanent seat on the League's Council and obtaining the same privileges within the League as other Great Power states.

Furthermore, the foreign minister made it seem in his speeches that membership in the League of Nations would not constrain Germany further. Quite the opposite: it would allow for influencing the nationals beyond its borders without raising a suspicion of the Allies. This is evident in Stresemann's speech on 9 February 1926, about a half-year before Germany officially entered the League:

The frontiers of Europe were altered by the peace treaties of 1919. Millions of German citizens have been brought under foreign supremacy, a proceeding that was utterly inconsistent with the idea of the right of self-determination of the nations, the principle, which was so proudly proclaimed during the war. We have recognised the situation created by these treaties and have surpassed every other nation on earth in fulfilling the conditions imposed upon us by an inhuman peace. But the right of the German people to feel for and sympathise with their own kith and kin who inhabit another State is an indisputable right of which no one can deprive us.[72]

One of the principal goals was to keep the German element in the Eastern territories intact by ensuring there was to be no absorption or assimilation of the minorities by the titular nations. While open irredentism was out of the question for Germany at the time, it seemed to have been merely delayed to a more convenient time in future, when Germany re-established itself as a Great Power. Stresemann claimed that eventual territorial revision was a perfectly legitimate consideration: '[f]rankly, I do not think that we have in the present century established a state of affairs which is eternal and that idea is very clearly expressed in the Covenant of the League of Nations.'[73]

It was precisely the plan to use the League of Nations to show Germany's interest in the destiny of the kin-minorities, without giving an impression that this could endanger territorial sovereignty of East Central European states. Still,

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some scholars alleged that Stresemann's minority policy was a concealed revisionism. A memorandum from January 1925 raised much debate on this issue. In this memorandum, Stresemann said that '[t]he creation of a state, whose political boundaries include all of the German people, who live within the borders of the areas of Central Europe settled by Germans and wish the union with the *Reich*, is the distant goal of German hopes.'

[74] Historian Fritz Fischer used this memorandum as the evidence for his thesis that the minority policy of Stresemann in reality provided a link between pan-German and Nazi expansionism. To an extent this is true – the Great Power imperialism as reflected at the deepest level of Stresemann's political discourse was indeed characteristic to all three German *Reichs*. However, Weimar imperialism was much more obscure and virtually non-existent at the most visible surface level of political discourse.

That being said, Stresemann's imperialism revealed itself at the second level of discourse, when he advocated for a unique relation between a nation and a state. This relationship would take form in what in German is called *Personenverbandsstaat*. It is a concept, revived from medieval and early-modern times, which can be roughly translated as an 'association of people.' It essentially defines a polity centred on individuals and the relations between them. In the original sense, it meant relationships between the rulers and the nobility. Stresemann redefined the concept as one that could be juxtaposed to the concept of modern territorial state. *Personenverbandsstaat* thus lacked the coincidence between sovereignty and territory that was the foundation of the modern state.[75]

One of the crucial aspects of *Personenverbandsstaat* was the recognition that every national minority had a right to cultural freedom, which could only be protected, if this minority constituted a self-governing body. As a result, the principal feature of German minority politics in the League was advocating for the principle that national minorities should have cultural autonomy in their host-states. This *inter alia* implied the right to establish intensive connections with the government of their kin-state, without being accused of disloyalty to the host-state. Stresemann argued that such relationships, transcending the borders of one state, 'cannot be regarded as an inadmissible political interference with the domestic affairs of a foreign power.'

[76]

It should be mentioned that promotion of *Personenverbandsstaat* had repercussions in Germany's domestic policies. Cultural autonomy had to be introduced for national minorities within the *Reich* as well. Stresemann's memorandum of 12 January 1925 is sometimes called the birth certificate of the minority policy of the Weimar Republic. In the memorandum, he stated that the German *Reich* had to show to the whole world that every nation had the inherent right to cultural self-preservation, and that such an argument would lose its credibility if the *Reich* itself denied such rights to national minorities within its own jurisdiction.[77] This was problematic given the autonomy of German local governments.

Nevertheless, *Personenverbandsstaat* was arguably the only way to ensure that German minorities in East Central European countries would receive almost complete equality with the Germans of the *Reich* and gain legitimate access to Germany's financial resources. Stresemann's commitment to minorities in the League of Nations was accompanied by financial support for the Germans abroad. This included loans, legal aid and subsidies for the organisations of Germans in East Central Europe.[78] As John Hiden noted, such financial aid to German minorities living abroad was considered an aid to, not a substitute for, self-help. That is, German minorities were expected to eventually support themselves through their participation in the economic lives of their host-countries, which would in turn help the German government build economic bridges with the new states.[79]

Hiden further explained that the German government accepted the drastic change in the position of the Baltic-Germans and developed a policy which was 'cautious, tactical and yet consciously directed towards long-term aims which were clarified largely in the general context of the problem of all *Auslandsdeutschen*.' [80] Since Stresemann avoided talking about minorities in specific countries to prevent suspicions of revisionist motives, there is barely any mention in his speeches of Baltic-Germans specifically. However, the Baltic case presents a unique example that evidences the dynamics of policies, which were justified and constructed through Stresemann's political discourse on national minorities.

The Baltic-Germans, exiled from what used to be their homelands since the Middle Ages, were outcasts in the post-war Germany. Von Solomon wrote in his novel: 'Germany was defeated, [they] could not return home either (...),

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[they] were homeland-less and ill.'[81] To remedy the feeling of 'homelandlessness' (*Heimatslosigkeit*), the Baltic-Germans gathered into various organisations in Germany and continued to be interested in the future of the Baltic States, their fellow Baltic-Germans who remained there and generally – in the fate of the Baltic-Germans. It is estimated that in the time period from 1919 to 1939 there were thousands of the Baltic Germans within Germany that belonged to multiple Baltic-German minority organisations.[82]

One example was the Baltic Trust Council (*Die Baltische Vertrauensrat*), which was established already in 1915 in Berlin. It was a successor organisation to the Association of the Balts (*Die Vereinigung der Balten*) that had existed since 1908. The Council was significantly funded by grants from the Ministry of the Interior. To ensure the smooth functioning of aid, the competent *Reich* authorities – especially the Foreign Office and the *Reich* Ministry of the Interior – transferred various tasks related to nationals abroad to the Council as well as to other similar organisations. Because of their private character, they were able to work in the 'border-states' without major obstacles.[83] Since these organisations were financed from the *Reich's* budget, it meant that their activities had been recognised by the *Reich* and had to remain in compliance with the *Reich's* policies.[84]

All in all, the concern with national minorities abroad was one of Stresemann's foreign policy priorities. The other two objectives, a reunion of Austria and Germany and the revision of Germany's eastern boundaries depended upon the successful campaign for control of the minorities.[85] In March 1929, shortly before he died, Stresemann wrote to his friend, emphasizing the importance of minority policies in his political career: 'I feel that I am obliged to remain in office until the last issue of the minority question has been addressed. I would consider myself a deserter, if I abandoned the issue, which I have started fighting for before the world.'[86]

The promotion of minority rights served both long-term and short-term Germany's interests. The minority discourse and policies were congruent with Germany's urgent need to resume economic relations in the East, and they facilitated diplomatic manoeuvring between German nationalists and the Allied powers. In the long-run, German minorities abroad had the potential to facilitate the path to eventual territorial revision. In other words, as this study suggests, minority discourse was the principal part of a discourse of the relation between the state and the nation. This discourse operated between two other discursive layers: the surface discourse of specific minority policies and the deep-level discourse on Germany's Great Power role in the world that implied revisionist ambitions. It allowed for the imperialistic discourse to continue while pragmatic change was taking place at the level of specific policies.

Conclusion

Post-WWI Germany had to accept the implications of its defeat and war-guilt and was 'handicapped' by the victors. As a consequence, it was impelled to swiftly reshuffle its national priorities: imperialistic ambitions had to give way to economic necessities. Having declared independence, the Baltic States not only slipped away from the German sphere of influence, but they also deprived the Baltic-Germans of their previous ruling status and effectively forced most of them to flee. However, the German government was not in the position to challenge that and compromise its relations with the Baltics. Instead, it had to seize the opportunity to build economic bridges over the Baltic States into Russian markets. To that end, it developed prudent political discourse and constructed policies of understanding and cooperation.

Nevertheless, regardless of this cardinal change and adjustment, some authors allege that imperialism never ceased to exist in the Weimar Republic. Indeed, revisionist ideas flourished among the German people, academics and politicians. There were also occasional revisionist references – sometimes obscure and sometimes manifest – in Gustav Stresemann's speeches and policy documents. This shows that perceiving German political discourse towards the Baltic States in the early 1920s as either reflecting a change or a concealed continuity of imperialism, is an oversimplified approach. This political discourse was multi-layered: at the most visible surface level it presented a pragmatic change, while at the deepest level imperialistic Great Power discourse continued from the Wilhelmine *Reich* into the *Third Reich*.

There was also a discursive middle layer operating between the two. At this level, foreign policy makers reconsidered the relationship between the state and the nation, giving the utmost importance to the question of belonging of the

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national minorities abroad. The League of Nations offered Stresemann a forum for minority discourse. The League also enabled the transformation a specific German interest into a matter of international concern. The German foreign policy leader was able to campaign for general minority rights within the capacity entrusted by the League, this way ensuring that no one was able to accuse him of a secret revisionist agenda. At the same time, Germany was empowered to spread its influence beyond its borders and overcome its 'handicap.' In such a way, German foreign policy makers managed to both develop pragmatic and internationally accepted policies towards the Baltics, and appease nationalists at home by giving them hope for the future.

Notes

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- [2] Manfred Langhans-Ratzeburg, *Die Großen Mächte Geojuristisch Betrachtet*. München und Berlin: R. Oldenbourg, 1931.
- [3] Gustav Stresemann, speech in the assembly of DVP. Stuttgart, 18. April 1926.
- [4] See, for example, Arthur Moeller Van den Bruck, *Das Dritte Reich*. Berlin: Ring Verlag, 1923.
- [5] Jonathan Wright, *Gustav Stresemann: Weimar's Greatest Statesman*. Oxford: OUP, 2002; Hans Morgenthau, 'Stresemann als Schöpfer der Deutschen Völkerrechtspolitik', *Die Justiz* 5/3 (1929), 169-76.
- [6] Fritz Fischer, *Bündnis der Eliten: Zur Kontinuität der Machtstrukturen in Deutschland 1871-1945*. Düsseldorf: Droste Verlag, 1979.
- [7] Ole Wæver, 'Identity, communities and foreign policy: Discourse analysis as foreign policy theory' in: *European Integration and National Identity: The challenge of the Nordic states*, edited by Lene Hansen and Ole Wæver, 20-50. London: Routledge, 2002, 32.
- [8] Wæver, 'Identity, communities and foreign policy', 31.
- [9] Original German: 'Ins Herz sollst du dir graben/Dies Wort als wie in Stein: Was wir verloren haben/Darf nicht verloren sein.' (translation by A.C.)
- [10] Robert John O'Neill and Robin Havers (eds.), *World War II: Europe 1939-1943*. New York: the Rosen Publishing Group, 2010, 17.
- [11] *Essays and Speeches on Various Subjects by Gustav Stresemann*, translated by Christopher R. Turner. Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1930, 114-5.
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- [13] Charles Kessler (ed.), *Berlin in Lights: The diaries of Count Harry Kessler (1918-1937)*. New York: Grove Press, 1999, 102.
- [14] David Thomas Murphy, *The Heroic Earth: Geopolitical Thought in Weimar Germany, 1918-1933*. Kent: Kent State University Press, 1997, 46.
- [15] Nicholas J. Spykman, 'Geography and Foreign Policy II', *American Political Science Review* 32/2 (1938), 236.
- [16] Murphy, *The Heroic Earth*, x.

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- [17] Adolf Grabowsky, *Staat und Raum: Grundlagen Räumlichen Denkens in der Weltpolitik*, Berlin: Zentralverlag, 1928.
- [18] Murphy, *The Heroic Earth*, 32.
- [19] The term was first introduced in Friedrich Ratzel, *Der Lebensraum. Eine biogeographische Studie*. München, 1901.
- [20] Holger H. Herwig, 'Geopolitik: Haushofer, Hitler and Lebensraum,' *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 22/2-3 (1999), 218-41, 226.
- [21] Friedrich Burgdörfer, *Volk ohne Jugend. Geburtenschwund und Überalterung des Deutschen Volkskörpers*, Berlin: Kurt Vowinkel, 1934.
- [22] Murphy, *The Heroic Earth*, 37.
- [23] Friedrich Burgdörfer, *Der Geburtenrückgang und Seine Bekämpfung. Die Lebensfrage des Deutschen Volkes*. Berlin: R. Schoetz, 1929, 46, 63, 102-3.
- [24] Burgdörfer, *Volk ohne Jugend*, 419, 423.
- [25] Burgdörfer, *Der Geburtenrückgang*, 160.
- [26] Bruno Hipler, *Hitlers Lehrmeister: Karl Haushofer als Vater der NS-Ideologie*. St. Ottilien: EOS Verlag, 1996, 7.
- [27] Colin S. Gray, Geoffrey Sloan (eds.), *Geopolitics, Geography and Strategy*. New York: Routledge, 2013, 237.
- [28] Murphy, *The Heroic Earth*, 241.
- [29] Cited in Hipler, *Hitlers Lehrmeister*, 18.
- [30] Murphy, *The Heroic Earth*, viii, xi.
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- [32] Hermann Hesse, *Die Morgenlandfahrt*. Berlin: Suhrkamp, 1933, 10.
- [33] Kurt Wolff, *Kurt Wolff: A Portrait in Essays and Letters*. Chicago, IL: the University of Chicago Press, 1991, 127.
- [34] Annemarie H. Sammartino, *The Impossible Border: Germany and the East (1914-1922)*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010, 5.
- [35] Ernst von Solomon, *Freikorps: die Geächteten*. Salenstein, Schweiz: Unitall Verlag, 2011, 55.
- [36] Rogers Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992, 116.
- [37] Brubaker, *Citizenship and Nationhood*, 116.
- [38] Hans Erich Volkmann, *Die Deutsche Baltikumpolitik Zwischen Brest-Litovsk und Compiègne*. Cologne, Vienna: Bohlau Verlag, 1970, 122-3.
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- [40] Letter from 'Ostexport', an organ for goods exchange between Germany and East-Central Europe (22 April 1920), quoted in Karl Heinz Grundmann, *Deutschumpolitik zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik: Eine Studie am Beispiel der deutsch-baltischen Minderheit in Estland und Lettland (Beiträge zur baltischen Geschichte)*. Hannover-Döhren: Verlag Harro v. Herschheydt, 1977, 245.
- [41] Stresemann, speech in the Reichstag, 25 November 1922, translated in Turner, *Essays and Speeches*, 148.
- [42] Miroslav Klusek, *Gustav Stresemanns Osteuropa Politik in den Jahren 1923–1929: unter besonder Berücksichtigung seines Verhältnisses zur USSR*. Berlin: Weidler, 2011, 103.
- [43] Hiden, *The Baltic States and Weimar Ostpolitik*, 44.
- [44] 'Im Namen und Auftrage des Baltischen Nationalausschusses, 21 Juli 1919' // Bundesarchiv Lichterfelde (hereafter, BArch). R 8054–27 fol. 1, p. 15.
- [45] Grundmann, *Deutschumpolitik*, 240, 297.
- [46] Hiden, *The Baltic States and Weimar Ostpolitik*, 47, 53.
- [47] Sammartino, *The Impossible Border*, 59.
- [48] At the time, he time the Baltic-Germans referred to themselves as 'Balts', as they considered themselves the true Baltic people.
- [49] 'An unsere baltischen Landsleute in der Heimat' // BArch. R 8054–27, fol. 1, p. 11.
- [50] Letter from Dr. Rosenstock, Kodlin to the Reich's foreign ministry // BArch. R901/80982, fol.1, 62, 64
- [51] Letter from Dr. Rosenstock, Kodlin to the Reich's foreign ministry // BArch. R901/80982, fol.1, 62
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- [56] Bretton, *Stresemann and the Revision of Versailles*, the inside cover, 54.
- [57] Stresemann, speech in the Reichstag, 17 April 1923, in: *Essays and Speeches*, 150.
- [58] Stresemann speech in the Reichstag, 6 October 1923, in: *Essays and Speeches*, 171.
- [59] Waever, 'Identity, communities and foreign policy', 29, 31.
- [60] *Essays and Speeches*, 127.
- [61] *Essays and Speeches*, 176.

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- [62] *Essays and Speeches*, 210.
- [63] *Essays and Speeches*, 191.
- [64] *Essays and Speeches*, 148.
- [65] Schot, *Stresemann, Der Deutsche Osten*, 27.
- [66] Waever, 'Identity, communities and foreign policy', 31.
- [67] Bretton, *Stresemann and the Revision of Versailles*, 125.
- [68] *Kölnische Zeitung*, 13 March 1925, no. 190.
- [69] Schot, *Stresemann, Der Deutsche Osten*, 48–9, 60.
- [70] Schot, *Stresemann, Der Deutsche Osten*, 127.
- [71] Schot, *Nation oder Staat?*, 140.
- [72] *Essays and Speeches*, 256.
- [73] League of Nations, *Official Journal*, Council, X (April 1929), 520–2.
- [74] Stresemann, Memorandum from 13 January 1925, cited in Schot, *Stresemann, Der Deutsche Osten*, 6.
- [75] Schot, *Stresemann, Der Deutsche Osten*, 9.
- [76] Bretton, *Stresemann and the Revision of Versailles*, 133.
- [77] *Essays and Speeches*, 146.
- [78] Georg Arnold, *Gustav Stresemann und die Problematik der Deutschen Ostgrenzen*. Frankfurt/M: Peter Lang, 2000, 118.
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- [83] Grundmann, *Deutschumpolitik*, 336.
- [84] Reich's office for emigration (Berlin 30 August 1928), BArch, R 8054/30 fol. 1, p.4.
- [85] Bretton, *Stresemann and the Revision of Versailles*, 126.
- [86] Letter from Stresemann to Kahl (13 March 1929), *Vermächtnis*, III, 438.

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