
Reviewed by Frances Brown

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When German Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann died on October 3, 1929, *The New York Times* reported the news on the first page with headlines describing him as a "strong advocate of Peace" and one who worked "to eradicate Bitterness of the War."[1] Despite such praise, over a period of time Stresemann underwent a historical scrutiny which presented him in a far less favorable light. He was seen as an unreconstructed nationalist whose peaceful overtures were insincere, a man who bided his time until Germany would be strong enough to challenge the Western powers. Jonathan Wright's book belongs to the first school of thought. Wright, a Tutorial Fellow at Christ Church and a University Lecturer in Politics at the University of Oxford, has produced a thorough, well researched study of the man he sees as "Weimar's Greatest Statesman."

Gustav Stresemann was born in 1878 to a lower middle class family. He was moderately successful at school, enrolling at the University of Berlin and developing liberal views. From 1901 to 1914 he pursued career interests in business and politics through membership in the National Liberal party. He saw no conflict between liberalism and nationalism. Elected to the Reichstag for the first time in 1907, Stresemann displayed the energy, organizational skills and speaking ability of a successful politician. During World War I he energetically advocated an expansionist foreign policy and domestic reform. In his view, Britain was the great enemy, determined to rob Germany of its proper role in the world. Stresemann believed that Belgium would have to be secured in the interests of advancing German sea power. He also eyed the Baltic provinces of Russia and staunchly supported unrestricted submarine warfare. In the concluding days of the war, Stresemann painfully and reluctantly began to realize a German victory was unlikely. His own National Liberal party was falling apart. Along with many other Germans, he rejected the dictated Treaty of Versailles as not morally binding.

The years from 1919 to 1923 were traumatic for Germany and, in Wright's view, pivotal in the development of Stresemann's outlook from "wartime annexationist to the European statesman of 1925-29" (p. 111). The shock of defeat was
coupled with the fear of Bolshevism and revolution. The allies demanded reparations, setting the sum in January 1921 at 226 billion gold marks to be paid over a period of 42 years. To enforce reparations payments, in January 1923, France occupied the Ruhr thus denying economically vital coal fields to the rest of Germany. Germans responded by simply refusing to work for the French authority. Rampant inflation followed this policy of passive resistance and the mark became worthless. By the time of the Ruhr crisis, Stresemann had formed his own German People's party, the DVP, a collection of members of the old National Liberal party and propertied business interests.

During these four years Stresemann came to embrace the republic. Possessing a strong monarchist tendency, he nonetheless came to see the republic, with its promise of parliamentary democracy, as the only alternative to civil war, revolution, dictatorship and chaos. Wright insists this defense of the republic was authentic, while Stresemann's detractors see it as an accommodation to the latest political trend. By 1923 Stresemann also developed his skills at maneuvering among the welter of political parties that marked the Weimar Republic: the Centre Party, German Democratic Party (DDP), German National People's Party (DNVP), German Social Democratic Party (SPD), and German Communist Party (KPD). His own DVP contained liberal and conservative elements, making party unity a formidable challenge.

As a result of political negotiations, Stresemann, at the age of 45, became Chancellor in August 1923 as well as foreign minister. Although his term as chancellor lasted only three months, he continued as foreign minister until his death. Becoming chancellor in the midst of the Ruhr crisis, he feared the collapse of the German economy and concluded that passive resistance should end. This was a decision that, in Wright's judgment, was a courageous act of statesmanship. Under British and American pressure, France ended the occupation of the Ruhr and Germany agreed to accept international obligations. The Dawes Committee restructured Germany's reparations schedule.

Stresemann's immediate concern in 1923-24 was to prevent the break up of Germany, fearing French determination to remain indefinitely in the Ruhr and in the Rhineland. Beyond that, he wanted a revision of the peace treaty, especially in the East, a goal toward which he worked until his death. Acutely aware of German weakness in armaments, he insisted that peaceful revision was the only option for Germany. At the Locarno Conference in October 1925 he met with his counterparts, French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand and British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain, to create the hopeful, peaceful spirit of Locarno. Wright sees this pact as setting the stage for European detente for the rest of the decade. As a result of Locarno, the post-war settlement in the West was accepted and guaranteed. Stresemann also guided Germany into membership in the League of Nations, although significantly, Germany refused to guarantee frontiers in the East.

In addition to negotiating with foreign leaders, Stresemann had to persuade German political leaders to accept his policies. Wright quite properly and effectively draws attention to Stresemann's part in domestic politics accepting the judgment that he became the "master of the parliamentary game," a person "who maintained the precarious balance of the political system" (p. 6). Wright provides extensive details of the bewildering twists and turns of coalition politics. Stresemann served for five years as Foreign Minister under a succession of governments as coalitions dissolved and parties realigned themselves. After Locarno, for example, the DNVP withdrew its support for the government leading to the cabinet's resignation in December 1925. A month later a new government was in place drawing support from the DVP, the
Centre, the DDP and the Bavarian People's Party (BVP).

In support of the argument that Stresemann developed from a wartime nationalist to a European statesman, Wright lists his achievements: he brought Germany back from the depths of the Ruhr crisis. Germany accepted the Dawes Plan, Locarno, and membership in the League of Nations. Negotiations were undertaken for new trade treaties and for early foreign evacuation of the Rhineland. In 1926 Stresemann and Briand received the Nobel Peace Prize. And, in the last two to three years of his life, he moved, in Wright's view, toward a broader and genuine conviction that war would be a disaster for Europe. All of this was achieved against a contentious, fragmented domestic political background.

Despite Wright’s strong defense, however, troubling questions remain. Though Stresemann worked well with West European leaders at Locarno, he had little regard for the eastern Europeans. He viewed the Polish state as unstable and refused to accept the settlement on the eastern front. Germany hoped to regain Danzig, the northern half of the corridor which cut off East Prussia and Upper Silesia. Stresemann vigorously opposed a permanent seat for Poland in the League of Nations Council. In violation of the Treaty of Versailles, he permitted cooperation between the German and Soviet armies in the training of pilots, tanks and gas warfare. Even to his contemporaries, Stresemann seemed contradictory. Konrad Adenauer of the Centre Party saw his policies as having a “vacillating and see-saw character” (p. 366). The Foreign Minister was eager to protect the rights of Germans in other countries. There was a secret program of subsidies for Germans in Danzig and in the corridor. Propaganda harped on the problems of Germans in Poland. In 1926, just months after Locarno, he supported a loan for assisting German settlers to return to Tanganyika lest Britain try to unite it with its own East African possessions.

These factors argue against elevating Stresemann to the first ranks of European statesmen. They also suggest more continuity between foreign policy trends in the 1920s and 30s than his supporters might wish to acknowledge. And they raise the question of how committed he was to a peaceful revision of Versailles. Time and again he referred to the lack of German armaments as requiring a peaceful approach. What would his policies have been like between 1923-26 if Germany not had this weakness?

This is a thoroughly researched book. Wright has used archives in Berlin (Auswartiges Amt), London and Paris. He has consulted numerous German sources, including the works of Stresemann, has spoken with Stresemann's son and has accessed the family papers. Nonetheless, very little of Stresemann's private life intrudes. Approximately 80 percent of the book covers the last eleven years of his life. Wright's interest is in Stresemann as the political leader and the foreign minister, and the book is tightly and clearly focused on this interest. Maps, photographs and a glossary enhance the work. Still, novices with little knowledge of German history and politics, will find the book difficult to follow. Scholars will find it the most thorough, up-to-date political study of Stresemann available in English.

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