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The Promise of Participation: European Reconstruction Work in Early Weimar Germany's Political Culture*

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In the autumn of 1921, German participation in reconstruction became the subject of two local opinion polls in northern France. The small population of Chaulnes in the Somme region was invited to vote on the rebuilding of eleven villages by German craftsmen. Shortly before, a group of German building trade unionists had visited the region on the invitation of the French Confédération Générale du Travail and other trade unions. The unofficial first survey showed a clear majority for German reconstruction aid, but the French government insisted on repeating the poll. Under such pressure, many fewer voters participated in the official second referendum and rejected the former enemy's offer.[1] In light of the tension in Franco-German relations after the Great War, the final dismissal of the German proposal for Chaulnes seems less surprising than its previous acceptance. Still, it is worth noting that sending German labourers and building materials to northern France only three years after the armistice was within the realms of possibility. In the polls the rural population of northern France also recorded that transnational trade-unionist activity was certainly contemplatable at the time.

The Somme episode reveals that reconstruction was a live issue not only in those European countries that had suffered direct material damage during the First World War but also in the Weimar Republic. At first glance, the topic was not a crucial one in postwar Germany, as the Reich's European territory remained almost intact. Only eastern Prussia had witnessed sizeable damage, during the battles with tsarist troops in 1914/15, but reconstruction there was almost complete even before the war ended.[2] And while vestiges of bombardment in southern and western parts of the Reich featured in anti-Allied propaganda, with postcards and other media displaying destroyed residential buildings in Cologne, damage was actually limited (as indeed was aerial warfare above Germany during the war).[3] At the same time, the need for reconstruction in other parts of the European continent was acute. Belgium had been severely damaged, its famous library in Leuven but one prominent example.[4] In France, large swathes of

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[1] See H. Clout, *After the Ruins: Restoring the Countryside of Northern France after the Great War* (Exeter, 1996), pp. 201–6.

[2] J. Salm, *Ostpreußische Städte im Ersten Weltkrieg: Wiederaufbau und Neuerfindung* (Munich, 2012).

[3] C. Geinitz, 'The First Air War against Noncombatants: Strategic Bombing of German Cities in World War I', in R. Chickering and S. Förster (eds), *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front, 1914–1918* (Cambridge, 2000), pp. 207–26.

[4] W. Schivelbusch, *Die Bibliothek von Löwen: eine Episode aus der Zeit der Weltkriege* (Munich, 1988).

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the country were impacted by the war: industrial centres and cities such as Lille, Nancy and Reims were extensively destroyed. In northern Italy and in the territories of the disintegrated Habsburg Empire, in emerging Yugoslavia as well as newly formed Poland, old town centres and entire villages as well as infrastructure were in need of repair.[5]

As Hugh Clouth noted in his study of northern French reconstruction, the 'German option' became a highly controversial topic in the years immediately following the signing of the peace treaty.[6] And as Marc Trachtenberg stated in his seminal study on the politics of reparation, the potential participation of Germany in this form of work in Europe was largely considered 'key' to solving the reparation question in general.[7] However, Germany's putative role in European reconstruction has rarely been analysed in the context of the difficult implementation of the Treaty of Versailles.[8] As most of the German plans, especially for northern France, remained provisional, they do not feature in studies of international relations, which privilege the 'hard facts' of foreign affairs. At the same time, scholarship on political culture and communication in the Weimar Republic has traditionally favoured the national, regional or local over the transnational.[9] Only recently has the focus of culturally inspired approaches shifted to transcend national borders, giving a better understanding of Weimar politics and society in a global context. Still, the connection between reconstruction on the European continent and reparations from Germany as a legacy of the First World War has not yet played a substantial role in these studies.[10]

Bearing in mind Germany's specific position in postwar Europe and aligning with the recent trend of embedding 'Weimar in the world', this article considers the role European reconstruction played in the newly founded republic. To do so, it analyses the intensive planning process in Germany as a discursive knot that merged administrative structures, political decision-making, entrepreneurial interests and, last but not least, coverage in the media. In fact, planning reconstruction abroad allowed different actors in Germany to engage actively with the Treaty of Versailles—instead of waiting passively for instructions from the Allies. Far from being an independent attempt on the part of German trade unionists, their effort, in vain, to participate in reconstructing villages in the northern French Somme stood for a general policy supported by German governmental authorities, relevant companies and large parts of the population. Converting reparation claims into reconstruction aid became one of the explicit aims of the Armistice Commission (Waffenstillstandskommission) and of the Ministry

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[5] B. Thoß, 'Kriegsschäden', in G. Hirschfeld, G. Krumeich and I. Renz (eds), *Enzyklopädie Erster Weltkrieg* (2nd edn, Paderborn, 2014), pp. 658–61; A. Deperchin, 'Des destruction aux reconstruction', in S. Audoin-Rouzeau and J.-J. Becker (eds), *Encyclopédie de la Grande Guerre* (Paris, 2004), pp. 1125–37. For a comparative European perspective see Salm, *Ostpreußische Städte*, pp. 221–36.

[6] Clout, *After the Ruins*, p. 201.

[7] M. Trachtenberg, *Reparation in World Politics: France and European Economic Diplomacy 1916–1923* (New York and Guildford, 1980), p. 117.

[8] For the treaty's implementation, but without reference to reconstruction, see C. Fischer and A. Sharp (eds), *After the Versailles Treaty: Enforcement, Compliance, Contested Identities* (London and New York, 2007).

[9] See K. Canning, K. Brandt and K. McGuire (eds), *Weimar Publics, Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the Political Culture of Germany in the 1920s* (New York, 2010); W. Hardtwig (ed.), *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1939* (Göttingen, 2005).

[10] C. Cornelißen and D. van Laak (eds), *Weimar und die Welt: globale Verflechtungen der ersten deutschen Republik* (Göttingen, 2020).

for Reconstruction (Reichsministerium für Wiederaufbau), which was founded on 7 November 1919, almost a year after the armistice. In order to implement the Treaty of Versailles advantageously, these political and administrative actors were in close contact with trade unions as well as entrepreneurs in the building sector. As a consequence, European reconstruction work became a popular topic of mass media communication in the Weimar Republic. In the case of the two French referenda in particular, several trade-union newspapers expressed optimism and exasperation about the possibility of German involvement.[11]

Instead of focusing on the modest results on the ground, it is thus worth looking at the aspirations and frustrations that accompanied the planning process, integrating them into our understanding of the ambivalent political culture of the newly founded republic. Understanding the Weimar Republic in its European and postwar context thus requires us to focus on the growing gap between high expectations and deep disappointment that characterized Germany's first democratic regime.

I. Informal Cooperation in an Era of Reconstruction

Following the First World War, reconstruction work on the European continent was closely linked to the slogan 'Germany should pay', which had emerged in France as early as 1915.[12] Thus, once Germany had declared defeat, calls for reparations became unavoidable. Numerous claims for restitution had already been written into the armistice contract that was promulgated several times during the first half of 1919. While representatives of the Allied countries discussed how to handle vanquished Germany, German politicians also began to consider what room there might be for negotiating the final shape of reparation payments. Among them was Matthias Erzberger, member of the Catholic Zentrum party and later minister of finance. As one of the best-known politicians of the armistice period and a key figure in republican governments from 1919 to 1921, he repeatedly insisted that Germany should play its part in reconstruction. If his assassination on 26 August 1921 is rightly viewed as an indication of the deep tensions in early Weimar Germany's political culture, his commitment to reconstruction underlines how precarious was the attempt to bring foreign affairs and domestic politics together.

As head of the German delegation to the treaty negotiations, Erzberger witnessed the extensive destruction in Belgium and northern France. In his memoirs, *Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg* (Experiences in the World War), published in 1920, he reminded his readers of the 'ghostlike' contours of the infrastructure and dwellings destroyed in the western European war zones.[13] When he returned to Berlin after signing the armistice, Erzberger was probably the most influential political actor at the intersection of foreign and home affairs. In the months following 11 November 1918, the Armistice Commission grew into a kind of shadow cabinet that initially existed alongside the Council of People's Deputies (Rat der Volksbeauftragten), which was headed by Friedrich Ebert and later existed in parallel to the republican governments under Philipp Scheidemann and Gustav Müller. From February 1919, Erzberger also held the post of minister without portfolio, which allowed him to contribute to the strategic discussions of the cabinet. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was kept busy by internal reforms, the Armistice Commission under Erzberger began to consider with increased intensity participation in reconstruction work abroad, focusing especially on the former Western Front in Belgium and northern France.

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[11] M. Wagner, 'Der Wiederaufbau Nordfrankreichs', *Der Grundstein*, 49 (3 Dec. 1921), pp. 333–4; H. Kaufmann, 'Französisch-deutsche Verständigung über den Wiederaufbau', *Mitteilungsblatt des Allgemeinen freien Angestelltenbundes*, 12 (1921), pp. 205–7; 'Gewerkschaftskonferenz für den Wiederaufbau: Übereinstimmung deutscher und französischer Gewerkschaften', *Vorwärts*, 306A (24 Dec. 1921), p. 4; 'Das Referendum über die zerstörten Gebiete und die weiteren Verhandlungen der französischen und deutschen Gewerkschaften', *Der Grundstein*, 18 (6 May 1922), pp. 138–9.

[12] See B. Kent, *The Spoils of War: The Politics, Economics, and Diplomacy of Reparations 1918–1932* (Oxford, 1989), p. 20.

[13] M. Erzberger, *Erlebnisse im Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart and Berlin, 1920), p. 327.

As early as March 1919, the Armistice Commission launched the Commission of Reconstruction (Wiederaufbaukommission), whose task it was to explore reconstruction as a means of reparation. In the constitutional phase of the republic, Erzberger preferred to discuss the matter informally with relevant experts in the building sector. In late November and early December 1918, he met with Julius Berger, owner of the eponymous civil engineering company Julius Berger Tiefbau A.G. and a key actor in the German Empire's building trade, and Georg Haberland, owner of the Berlin Real Estate Company (Berlinische Bodengesellschaft), who was one of the most influential real estate agents in the German capital. At the turn of the year, Erzberger also talked with Walther Rathenau, who during the war had moved from the role of executive at A.E.G. to a management post in the War Raw Material Department (Kriegsrohstoffabteilung) and after it spent a short period as a political writer before entering government, first as minister of reconstruction and then as foreign minister. (In June 1922 Rathenau was also a victim of political assassination.) Besides approaching Rathenau, as a political all-rounder, and various building magnates, Erzberger contacted labour unions (which became increasingly influential following the Kaiser's resignation) such as the social democratic trade unionist and former bricklayer Hermann Silberschmidt and Josef Becker, a member of both the Zentrum and the Union of Christian Construction Workers.[14]

These were informal conversations that only came to light subsequently. In fact, the sources for Erzberger's meetings were produced in the context of his court case against Karl Helfferich of the right-wing Deutschnationale Volkspartei, who stood accused of libel after attacking Erzberger as minister of finance in a widely circulated pamphlet. As minutes of an oral interrogation, these sources give insight not only into the factual events at the turn of 1918/19 but also into the explosive nature of the issue of reconstruction in early Weimar Germany. The proceedings were held in Moabit, Berlin, in early 1920 and became one of the first politicized trials of the early Weimar Republic. Having initiated the process against Helfferich, Erzberger quickly found himself on the defensive. The presiding judge pressed him on the subject of European reconstruction, the influence of construction companies on the Armistice Commission and, in the same vein, his own supposed liaison with the private sector.[15]

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[14] *Der Erzberger-Prozess: stenographischer Bericht über die Verhandlungen im Beleidigungsprozess des Reichsfinanzministers Erzberger gegen den Staatsminister a.D. Dr. Karl Helfferich* (Berlin, 1920), pp. 322–3.

[15] On the trial see K. Epstein, *Matthias Erzberger und das Dilemma der deutschen Demokratie*, trans. I. Kutscher (Frankfurt/Main, 1976), pp. 403–9; N. Domeier, 'Der Sensationsprozess Erzberger-Helfferich: die Verquickung politischer und wirtschaftlicher Interessen in der Weimarer Republik', in Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg (ed.), *Matthias Erzberger: ein Demokrat in Zeiten des Hasses* (Karlsruhe, 2013), pp. 158–83.

II. Institutionalizing the Planning Process in the Face of Defeat

Following on from informal cooperation, the idea of German participation in reconstruction abroad was also subsequently institutionalized within the Armistice Commission. In March 1919, the Department for the Reconstruction of the Destroyed Areas of Belgium and Northern France (Referat für den Wiederaufbau der zerstörten Gebiete Belgiens und Nordfrankreichs) was created as a separate unit. Among government representatives and interested entrepreneurs it was briefly known as the Reconstruction Department (Wiederaufbaureferat). The head of this department, Carl Pfuelf, regularly consulted a handful of business representatives, four of whom—Josef Becker, Julius Berger, Georg Haberland and Hermann Silberschmidt—had been Erzberger's earlier interlocutors. According to former member of the Armistice Commission Edmund Marhefka, the integration of business representatives into the first government's planning staff went smoothly and satisfactorily.[16]

The aim of the Reconstruction Department was not only to centralize the planning process but also to socialize the topic of reconstruction with the broader public. In April 1919, Pfuelf began publishing a departmental newsletter, *Mitteilungen des Referats 'Wiederaufbau der zerstörten Gebiete Belgiens und Nordfrankreichs'* (Notifications of the Department for Reconstruction of the Destroyed Areas of Belgium and Northern France). This bulletin was an offshoot of the comprehensive *Mitteilungen der Waffenstillstandskommission* (Notifications of the Armistice Commission), which was issued three times a week and had a circulation of 3,000. Summarizing the state of the international negotiations, the *Mitteilungen der Waffenstillstandskommission* was distributed to domestic and foreign newspapers, trade associations, administration units, members of the national assembly and individual subscribers. Subdivided into an official and a non-official section, the publication provided insight into the daily work of the Armistice Commission and discussed the wider economic and political issues of transition from war to peace. Pfuelf's special newsletter on reconstruction also appeared regularly until July 1919. It included articles on questions concerning the building trade, the working conditions of labourers on building sites outside Germany, the use of standardized materials and the various possibilities for 'mechanizing the reconstruction'.[17] This one official publication therefore set out several ways to participate in reconstruction, including the idea of exporting recent planning principles and new construction materials from Germany to other European countries.

In parallel to the publicity of the Armistice Commission, reconstruction regularly played a role in the Weimar Republic's ministerial bureaucracy. The republic having been founded in February 1919, the portfolios of the respective ministries were still developing. To swap ideas on reconstruction was thus first and foremost a welcome opportunity to demonstrate the new republic's consensus and to explore attitudes towards 'Versailles' within the respective ministries. Following the ground-breaking Stinnes-Legien Agreement between industrialists and trade unionists, concluded on 15 November 1918, and after the first democratic parliament was installed, in February 1919, the common topic of reconstruction also allowed for the integration of employers and employees into the official planning process.

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[16] E. Marhefka, *Der Waffenstillstand 1918–1919: das Dokumentenmaterial der Waffenstillstandsverhandlungen von Compiègne, Spa, Trier und Brüssel. Notenwechsel/Verhandlungsprotokolle/Verträge. Gesamttätigkeitsbericht*, 3 vols, vol. 3: *Die Deutsche Waffenstillstands-Kommission: Bericht über ihre Tätigkeit vom Abschluss des Waffenstillstandes bis zum Inkrafttreten des Friedens: dem Deutschen Reichstage vorgelegt im Januar 1920* (Berlin, 1928), p. 390.

[17] See, for example, H. Fränkel, 'Französische Maßnahmen zur Verbesserung der ländlichen Bauweise', *Mitteilungen des Referates 'Wiederaufbau der zerstörten Gebiete Belgiens und Nordfrankreichs'*, 28 (5 May 1919), pp. 4–6, here p. 5.

Over the course of several meetings organized by the Ministry of Labour (Reichsarbeitsministerium) in cooperation with the Ministry of Economy (Reichswirtschaftsministerium), representatives of the Weimar administration talked to members of the building trade and trade unions about details of potential reconstruction assignments. Differences regarding the modalities of organizing building sites abroad persisted between the construction employers and the employees, particularly on questions of labour conditions and pay, but it is more revealing by far that these meetings were essentially based on a widespread consensus. As the undersecretary of state in the Ministry of Labour and commissioner for housing Adolf Scheidt explained at the beginning of one such session, in early May 1919, communication about reconstruction referred to two key, closely intertwined concepts of postwar politics and economics: first, by offering material help to its former enemies, Germany would contribute to the process of 'reconciliation', and, secondly, the expected number of future building contracts could aid 'recovery' in the domestic market.[18] In meetings hosted by the relevant ministries, talking about reconstruction avoided the more uncomfortable issue of reparations.

III. References to Reconstruction in the Peace Treaty

In spring 1919, the popular idea of a politico-economic surplus of reconstruction work also formed part of the official guidelines for the German negotiators at the Paris Peace Conference. Travelling to Versailles at the end of April, they hoped in vain to communicate directly with the representatives of the Allied countries. Drawn up by the circle of ministers in Berlin and including Erzberger's vote for reparations in kind, the guidelines made a clear point: they named 'reconstruction in kind by German enterprises' as the preferred means of resolving the reparation question.[19]

The signing of the peace treaty did not put an end to the German reconstruction plans but rather provided a basis for further aspirations. In fact, the topic even made it onto the agenda of international negotiations as a result of the intervention of the German delegation at Versailles. Given the hierarchic setting of the conference, the German delegates did not participate in oral negotiations. On the basis of the guidelines, however, they worked out detailed propositions to replace a part of the reparations through reconstruction. As Peter Krüger has pointed out, the Allies rejected almost all German propositions presented in the counter-proposal in May 1919. However, they

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[18] Bundesarchiv, Berlin-Lichterfelde (henceforth BArch) N 1143/60, fol. 079.

[19] BArch R 43 I/1348, fol. 553, *Richtlinien für die deutschen Friedensunterhändler*, 21 Apr. 1919.

discussed seriously the ideas on reconstruction that were included.[20] Consequently, the Allied answer to the German approach could be read as a partial accommodation, as it stated that after signing the peace treaty, Germany 'can propose' works of reconstruction or the sending of craftsmen, building material and technical support.[21] In a compendium from 1923, the German Foreign Office even interpreted the written communication between the Allies and Germany as 'consent'.[22] Published during the Ruhr crisis, this record of proposals previously made by the German government concerning reparations and reconstructions was, however, more of a protest than a display of neutral data. In spring 1919, however, there had been a minimum of consent concerning Germany's possible role in reconstruction. While the Allies summarily rejected the counter-proposal, reconstruction aid by the former enemy apparently remained an option worth considering for European countries affected by war damages.

The final text of the Treaty of Versailles thus opened a backdoor to German reconstruction abroad. Part VIII of the treaty, entitled 'Reparations', begins with the famous Article 231 recording Germany's war guilt and its obligation to pay reparations. In Annex IV to Part VIII this obligation was explained, stating that Germany had to 'devote its economic resources directly to the physical restoration of the invaded areas of the Allied and Associated Powers'.[23] The following sub-clause restricted this participation 'to the extent that these Powers may determine'. Nonetheless, the sub-clause itself could be read as an invitation to enter into dialogue with the former enemies. The following paragraphs proposed numerous details for potential German deliveries for the 'restoration of the invaded areas', such as 'reconstruction materials (stones, bricks, refractory bricks, tiles, wood, window glass, steel, lime, cement etc.)', 'heating apparatus' and 'furniture'.[24] Affirming that these objects should be 'produced and manufactured in Germany', this part of the treaty expressed the victors' interest in the economy and productivity of the defeated. Reparation policy after the First World War was thus always related to the acceptance of Germany's industrial strength, which endured despite its capitulation, although as Trachtenberg recognized, 'The important thing, however, was to moderate German ambitions and bring its industrial activity into harmony with the remainder of the world economy.'[25] The Treaty of Versailles having come into effect in January 1920, European reconstruction remained an issue in German politics and society. As the Somme episode described at the beginning of this article documents, negotiations continued. Still, reconstruction remained on the agenda not only for the countries damaged by war but also for political and administrative actors in the Weimar Republic. Faced with expectations and speculation, they found themselves in the difficult—and politically delicate—position of regularly disappointing them.

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[20] P. Krüger, 'Die Reparationen und das Scheitern einer deutschen Verständigungspolitik auf der Pariser Friedenskonferenz im Jahre 1919', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 221, 2 (1975), pp. 326–72, here pp. 347–8.

[21] Auswärtiges Amt (ed.), *Die den Alliierten seit Waffenstillstand übermittelten deutschen Angebote und Vorschläge zur Lösung der Reparations- und Wiederaufbaufrage* (Berlin, 1923), p. 121.

[22] *Ibid*.

[23] Auswärtiges Amt (ed.), *Der Vertrag von Versailles: der Friedensvertrag zwischen Deutschland und den Alliierten und Assoziierten Mächten nebst dem Schlußprotokoll und der Vereinbarung betr. die militärische Besetzung der Rheinlande. Amtlicher Text der Entente und deutsche Übertragung. Auf Grund der endgültigen, neu durchgesehenen amtlichen Revision* (Berlin, 1924), p. 240.

[24] *Ibid*.

[25] Trachtenberg, *Reparation in World Politics*, p. 3.

IV. Managing Expectations and Rumours

The internal debates within the German ministries were accompanied by far-reaching hopes for a quasi-democratic mass participation in the construction sites along the former Western Front. For a wide spectrum of economic actors across the country, involvement in reconstruction work abroad became desirable. In the historical context of a democratically legalized government and a public space structured by mass media, those aspirations presented a serious challenge to the newly established ministerial bureaucracy of the Weimar Republic. Large building companies such as Julius Berger Tiefbau A.G. reached out to governmental institutions, and they were not alone in doing so. Small enterprises, architects, unemployed labourers and a considerable number of individuals were also curious about new opportunities after the war. In this context, the newsletter of the Reconstruction Department of the Armistice Commission contributed to a new optimism that was—ironically—based on the very negative topic of reparations.

During the first years of the Weimar Republic, German ministries received a flood of proposals, requests and expressions of interest concerning reconstruction abroad. Besides the Ministry of Economy, it was the Ministry for Reconstruction that had to deal with the huge number of queries.[26] These sources show, strikingly, the thin line between war and peace, destruction and reconstruction: numerous former soldiers offered their services, emphasizing that they already had experience 'on the ground' in the European regions destroyed by war.

As a means of coping with these expectations, the ministries stopped dealing with them for the time being, in effect replicating the Allies' handling of the German proposals. References to future agreements at an international level became the common answer adduced by the respective governmental departments. In order to manage its bulging inbox more effectively, the Ministry of Economy even developed a preprinted form that was returned to interested companies and individuals. The standard feedback was that 'negotiations with the Entente' were 'still pending'.[27] Thus, the government administration evaded its responsibility by telling the population that international relations were tentative and unpredictable.

In the meantime, rumours were circulating concerning the distribution of orders. In the case of furniture deliveries to France, a Bavarian Catholic merchants' association from Augsburg complained to the Hansa-Bank in Munich in the summer of 1920 that 'the orders came from the Reparations Commission' and concluded 'that the Jewish hand [*Judenhand*] is at play and skimming off the cream at the expense of the German people'.[28] On being informed of such assumptions, the political representative and member of the Catholic Bayerische Volkspartei Sebastian Schlittenbauer contacted the Bavarian minister of commerce and industry and founding member of the Deutsche Demokratische Partei Eduard Hamm, albeit without reiterating the anti-Semitic allegation. Hamm hurriedly refuted the complaints, pressing his staff to investigate the awarding of contracts for the delivery of furniture to France as speedily as possible, 'confidentially' and 'without attracting attention'.[29]

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[26] For the history of the institution see D. Hainbuch, *Das Reichsministerium für Wiederaufbau: die Abwicklung des Ersten Weltkrieges. Reparationen, Kriegsschäden-Beseitigung, Opferentschädigung und der Wiederaufbau der deutschen Handelsflotte* (Frankfurt/Main, 2016).

[27] BArch R 3301/141, printed form from the Reichswirtschaftsministerium, 25 Aug. 1919, no pagination.

[28] Bayerisches Haupt- und Staatsarchiv, Munich, Ministerium für Handel, Industrie und Gewerbe, 5375.

Even though anti-Semitic stereotypes remain an exception in the sources on German plans for reconstruction, the prospect of public contracts for this type of work abroad generally created an atmosphere of rivalry among the potentially interested professional groups. As early as 1919, numerous architects started to communicate their plans for the reconstruction of northern France publicly, even attempting to contact French local administrations. For the members of the government involved in negotiations with official French representatives, such unofficial approaches caused severe problems. In an internal meeting in August 1919, members of the delegation negotiating reconstruction work with France considered organizing a 'huge press conference' to inform the German public about the difficult conversation in which they were engaged with the Allied countries. Architects were even explicitly and 'urgently' warned that they should 'keep a low profile' instead of disturbing the very delicate negotiations with the former enemy.[30]

Balancing publicity and discretion in the media thus played a crucial role for the republic's political representatives. Professional journals as well as the daily press such as the *Vossische Zeitung* or *Berliner Tageblatt* wrote regular pieces about the entanglement of war damages, reparation negotiations and German plans to provide reconstruction aid.[31] The Armistice Commission was aware of the complexities of transparency. On the one hand, the availability of numerous reports raised public expectations and led to individual queries, while, on the other hand, governmental institutions in the founding period of the Weimar Republic also made decisions in secret. Not least, Erzberger, as founder, in October 1914, of the Zentralstelle für Auslandsdienst—the key institution of German propaganda during the war—had professional experience himself of operating at the intersection of government affairs and media politics.[32] In the Armistice Commission, he continued to support but also control the media work of the institution through the Press Department and its newsletter. Pfuelf, his subordinate and head of the Reconstruction Department, was in two minds when it came to the department's media coverage. While stating that the 'reconstruction question' was 'probably the most important for German economic life for the next decades', he considered a 'discussion of the reconstruction question in the press [...] not possible at present for political reasons'.[33] Eventually, Erzberger decided that it was not advantageous for Pfuelf to publish regularly and to give so many details on the issue of

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[29] *Ibid.* On Hamm see W. Hardtwig, *Der Weimarer Demokrat Eduard Hamm zwischen Kaiserreich und Widerstand* (Stuttgart, 2018).

[30] BArch R 3301/23, fol. 174, Protocol of the Cabinet, 12 Aug. 1919.

[31] See, for example, 'Die französischen Arbeiter für die Beteiligung Deutschlands am Wiederaufbau', *Berlin Tageblatt*, 134 (22 Mar. 1921), p. 4; 'Die Beteiligung am Wiederaufbau', *Vossische Zeitung*, 107 A 54 (5 Mar. 1921), p. 4.

[32] Epstein, *Matthias Erzberger*, pp. 118–22, 124–6.

[33] C. Pfuelf, 'Aufzeichnungen in der Frage des Wiederaufbaues der zerstörten Gebiete Belgiens und Nordfrankreichs', *Mitteilungen des Referates 'Wiederaufbau der zerstörten Gebiete Belgiens und Nordfrankreichs'*, 10 (17 Apr. 1919), pp. 1–5, here p. 3.

reconstruction. In July 1919, shortly after the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, he therefore ordered the publication of the Reconstruction Department's own newsletter to stop.[34]

V. Conclusion

German plans for reconstructing European war zones were never fully realized. Still, German participation in reconstruction after the First World War was far from being a 'non-story' in at least three respects. First, German debates on reconstruction had an impact on postwar international relations in Europe, as they formed part of the controversial implementation of the Treaty of Versailles. As such, they stand for the material dimension of reparation, which has only lately become the subject of research on the aftermath of the First World War. The Allied countries added material claims to financial payments, supplying themselves with coal, coke, dyestuffs, rolling stock, livestock and other goods. In addition to the one-to-one restitution of machines, equipment and works of art that had been carried off, which came into force with the armistice, this counterpart to financial reparations led to highly controversial, but as yet barely studied, discussions, planning processes and everyday cross-border practices. Since the opening of government archives in the United States, Great Britain, France and Belgium in the 1960s, research on reparations has focused predominantly on financial aspects of German payments.[35] Despite the number of publications occasioned by the centenary of the First World War, historical scholarship has still hardly discussed systematically the material variety of reparations—the so-called 'reparations in kind' that for contemporaries were an alternative to 'reparations in cash'. Only recently has the supply of building materials and debates about labourers from Germany in the devastated regions of its neighbouring countries been introduced into the history of making and implementing peace in Europe after 1918.[36]

Secondly, since the close connection between destruction in Europe and reparation payment by Germany affected 'Weimar culture', the topic deserves the attention of Weimar historians.[37] In Germany, the issue of reconstruction raised expectations, but it also led to deception and disappointment. The response of political, administrative and economic actors to the uncertain international situation sheds light on public optimism after the war and the frustration that followed. In addition, the issue taxed the government's attempt to communicate via official publications, as any information about reconstruction was widely disseminated by mass media and also grist for the rumour mill. In particular, the close relationship between the political and economic spheres that is characteristic of large-scale construction planning became part of public investigation. In this sense, trade-unionist Silberschmidt warned the government in a meeting at the Ministry for Reconstruction against retreating into 'backstairs politics' (*Hintertreppen-Politik*) when dealing with reconstruction.[38]

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[34] BArch N 1097/50, fol. 14, Erzberger to Stockhammern, 4. Apr. 1919.

[35] G. D. Feldman, 'The Reparations Debate', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 16 (2005), pp. 487–98.

[36] J. Dülffer, '100 Jahre Erster Weltkrieg: eine Bilanz des Jahres 2014', *Osteuropa*, 64 (2014), pp. 45–58. For a survey on reparations in kind under the terms of the armistice and in the Treaty of Versailles see Kent, *Spoils of War*, pp. 61–3. On reconstruction as an issue of the peace treaty and the postwar order see A. Karla, 'Auf Reparationen bauen? "Versailles" in der Praxis', in A. Schors and F. Klose (eds), *Wie schreibt man internationale Geschichte? Empirische Vermessungen zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Frankfurt/Main and New York, 2023), pp. 221–42.

[37] P. Fritzsche, 'The Economy of Experience in Weimar Germany', in Canning, Brandt and McGuire, *Weimar Publics*, pp. 360–82, here p. 378.

Finally, Germany's potential involvement in reconstruction can be regarded as an example of the entanglement of national and international political cultures after the First World War—and almost certainly beyond. While the politics, economy and society of Weimar Germany have been predominantly studied in a national framework, the discussions about reconstruction open out national political culture and engage questions of international relations. As for the Allied countries, their reactions to German proposals were partly dismissive, partly expectant. In Germany, the official communications of the government and administration were characterized by a remarkable self-confidence in 'German' building skills, as were the offers by entrepreneurs, architects and individuals. The entire debate, however, depended completely on the distribution of power at the international level, where Weimar Germany had to accept the legacy of the German monarchy. In the years prior to the country's re-entry into the international community via the Locarno Treaty in 1925, vague promises of participation in reconstruction went hand in hand with mechanisms of exclusion and ultimate disappointment. Analysing contemporary communication on reconstruction thus highlights how deeply Weimar's political culture was embedded in the international history of the interwar years.

Once the First World War had come to an end, the promise of participation in reconstruction that resonated in the Treaty of Versailles opened a new Pandora's box in postwar Germany and Europe.[39] By emphasizing the planning process and its communicative challenges—instead of its modest results—this article has flagged a fundamental dilemma of the Weimar Republic's political administration in the years following the armistice. Talking about reconstruction work abroad became, on the one hand, a welcome occasion for raising hopes within German society. In the face of defeat, participating in reconstruction could be made to sound like a tempting promise that would help turn the page on military capitulation. In this way, a fulfilment of the reparation clauses of the Treaty of Versailles was not only part of the government's policy but also corresponded to the requests of broad segments of the population. On the other hand, the sending of German building material and labour to European countries proved a highly sensitive subject. Hence the Allies' reticent attitude towards the German plans created frustration and rendered the acceptance of the peace treaty even more difficult. Historians in search of material evidence are likely to be disappointed, as tangible effects of the German planning offensive were limited. Indeed, most reconstruction projects abroad came to naught, and other different projects arose only after the resettlement of reparations in 1924.[40] The effects of the planning process itself on the politics, economy and society of the early Weimar years merit, however, an account that takes in the broader European context and does not exoticize but rather integrates the German case into the history of reconstruction after the First World War.

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[38] BArch R 3301/24, fol. 20, Meeting at the Ministry of Reconstruction, 7 Nov. 1919.

[39] For an almost idiomatic use of the term see J. Leonhard, *Die Büchse der Pandora: Geschichte des Ersten Weltkriegs* (Munich, 2014).

[40] See A. Karla, 'La coopération par les réparations: Entreprises de construction allemandes en France après la Première Guerre mondiale', in H. Joly and P. Müller (eds), *Les espaces d'interaction des élites françaises et allemandes 1920–1950* (Rennes, 2021), pp. 21–31.

Abstract

Material reconstruction after the First World War was closely linked to German reparations, yet it is curiously underrepresented in the historiography of the Treaty of Versailles as well as in studies on interwar Germany. In the Weimar Republic, political leaders, economic actors and large parts of the population supported the idea of sending building material and even labourers to neighbouring countries. This far-reaching planning process began before and continued after the signing of the peace treaty, as the Allies remained hesitant but not fully hostile to the German proposals. Material reparation potentially mobilized a wide range of goods and labour, and it was thus particularly prone to expectation, but also to disappointment in a broad segment of the population. Against the backdrop of war destruction and the international peace negotiations in 1919, this article investigates the way in which European reconstruction was discussed formally and informally in Weimar Germany. By focusing on the communicative channels and media that promoted German participation in building work abroad, it discusses how expectations were raised, managed and disappointed at the intersection of foreign and domestic policies. While there had only been minor destruction in German territory between 1914 and 1918, the republic's political culture proved to be deeply affected by the material reconstruction on the European continent, even though most of the far-reaching plans did not result in building sites on the ground.

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