Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to episode 57 of the VAP. In the last episode we dealt with the Italians, and noted how Orlando’s exit from Paris was far from what the Italian premier had wanted, but he had felt in the situation that he had little choice. With Italy now absent from Paris, or at least with nobody taking Orlando’s seat in the C4, matters could go one of two ways – they could slow down, as the need for Italian approval would delay everything, or they could speed up, as the Italians were removed from the Treaty and the other allies surged ahead. In the event, the big three chose to do the latter, while still hoping, in the end, that the Italians would return. The month of April had produced a great deal of conflict among the allies, be it among the French and Americans, with Japanese over their racial equality proposal or with the Italians more recently with their plans. Yet, it had also been a month of impressive progress – by the end of the month the Germans would be arriving, and the allies had felt confident enough in their progress to invite them.

Here we take stock of the situation by the last week of April 1919 by focusing our microscope on two apparently unrelated, but hugely important issues – specifically the future of the Rhine, and the status of the city of Danzig. These two issues of the Rhineland and Danzig were intrinsically linked with the outbreak of the SWW, and it is thus important in our narrative to establish where they came from. Without any further ado then, I will now take you to a very contentious issue indeed – the fate of the port of Danzig, which had once been upheld as a representation of Poland’s new start in the world, but which had since become useful for Wilson to make a point to the Italians…

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By the last week of April 1919, two Polands seemed to be emerging. The first Poland was the one represented by the Poles themselves in the Polish Committee in Warsaw, which was staffed with Polish and allied officials. The second Poland was that imagined by WW and DLG, who had come to view Poland as a potentially dangerous, unstable power which would have to receive support into the future if it was going to survive. We have addressed that oft parroted assumption which had it that Wilson was a firm advocate for Poland – his 13th point insisting on lands that were ‘undisputedly Polish’ being returned to Poland created, as we have seen, far more problems than might be apparent on the surface. Yet, it was with the city of Danzig that first LG and then WW became especially concerned.

The major reason for this obsession was first and foremost, because LG was inherently anti-Polish, and this affliction seriously clouded his judgement. It also meant that matters relating to Poland became bones of contention for LG, who dreaded the prospect of handing land to Poland which was full of Germans. This, LG claimed, was the situation in Danzig, where the city was torn between German and Polish populations. In such a situation, it would be disastrous to hand it to the Polish government, because before long, the minority German population would rise up and cause incredible headaches for the Poles and the peacemakers in Paris alike. LG advocated this perspective throughout March, but it was only when WW got behind him later in that month that Danzig’s future was confirmed.

As to why Wilson changed his position from one of supporting Polish claims to Danzig to supporting the idea of Danzig as a free city, we need look no further than the issue of Fiume. We will recall in the last episode that Fiume, a port city reaching into the Adriatic, had ties to Italian, Serbian, Croatian and even Hungarian ethnicities reaching back many years. Yet, the Italians had made it a red line issue, and Orlando had essentially left the conference on the evening of 23rd April because of that city. The 23rd April might have represented the culmination of that crisis, but long before, from late March when Italy’s claims loomed into view, the President had begun to anticipate that Fiume was going to be a problem. Thus, Wilson was eager to ensure that his bargaining position had no weak points, and he detected one such weakness in Danzig.

Danzig was a city comprised of Germans, Poles, Jews and others, and in Wilson’s mind, its circumstances mirrored those of Fiume in several respects. Several minority parties lived in Danzig, as in Fiume, and one power was resolute in its calls to claim the city. Anticipating Italian difficulties over Fiume, Wilson came to believe that if he were to grant Danzig completely to the Poles, then that act would be held up by the Italians who later argued for Fiume. What, the Italians could argue, was the difference between handing Danzig to Poland and handing Fiume to Italy; why was Wilson content to do one and not the other? Rather than find himself caught in this position, Wilson elected to give in to neither party, and he changed his policy towards Danzig from late March. This meant that he now saw eye to eye with LG over Danzig, but for very different reasons, and it therefor meant that the two leaders would be able to support the other, mostly against French efforts to see Danzig returned to Poland, but also against the Poles themselves. As Klaus Schwabe wrote in his book *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking*:

The British Prime Minister, backed by Wilson, refused to hear any objections or suggestions which would have given Poland more influence in Danzig. As Lloyd George made clear on April 5, the placement of Danzig under Polish sovereignty in any way at all was unacceptable to him. All that the experts could rescue for Poland – apart from some special economic rights – was that Danzig be represented diplomatically by the Polish government. In the final text of the treaty, no explicit mention was made of sovereignty for Danzig either. There was no debate on the basic assumption that the harbour of Danzig had to be available to the Poles.[[1]](#footnote-1)

So, if you were wondering why Danzig was a free city according to the TOV, and why in 1939 Hitler was dealing with the free city of Danzig rather than simply the Polish city of Danzig, then your answer resides here – in the perspectives of WW and LG. Interestingly, the case of Danzig reminds us how interconnected such issues were, and it demonstrates that consequences which last a generation can come from the mostly unlikely of sources. Thanks to the status of Fiume essentially, WW vowed to make Danzig a free city, and when it later came time to debate the issue of Fiume with the Italians, Wilson would actually use Danzig as an example of what should be done in a situation where cities possessed varied populations. Of course, Danzig’s residents were unimpressed at being used for such an example, and the Italians living in Fiume were similarly enraged that Wilson was dense enough to apply such stringent laws to vastly different cases. The two free cities also enjoyed very different fates; Fiume would only exist as a free city until 1924, when it was annexed by Mussolini’s Italy as part of an agreement with Belgrade. Danzig, more infamously, served as Hitler’s bridge too far in 1939.

During April there was much talk of the LON, and plans were made for applying the reservations and recommendations which had been made since Wilson’s return from his tour. We’ll deal with the issue of the League in its own dedicated episode, and we’ll also address the other important issue, that of reparations, in an episode in the near future. In this episode we have focused on Danzig and the Polish question, and we will now turn our attention to another contentious but also underrated bone of contention between the allies – that of the Rhineland, a region which included trouble spots such as the Saarland and Ruhr, and which the allied leaders all had very different opinions on.

It was the Rhineland, perhaps more than any other issue, which threatened to sour relations between the French and American leaders. Clemenceau could draw on strong reserves of political and military opinion to support him, and within that pool of opinion, there existed Marshall Foch who insisted that the occupation of the Rhineland must be permanent, or Andre Tardieu, his territorial advisor, who was willing to moderate the occupation terms by setting a time limit. Tardieu would later become the Minister for Liberated Regions, as the posting was called, which essentially meant that he was responsible for the re-integration of lands such as AL, but also the Rhine and Saarland. The curious nature of the Rhine basin and the troubled history between French and Germans meant that River did not form a natural barrier between the two states; in fact on the left bank of the Rhine, to the chagrin of the French, German culture and German people were in the majority. Living in these lands meant controlling the bridges over the raging river, and this meant that France would forever be at a strategic disadvantage.

To change this state of affairs, the French ministers focused in on the Rhine’s left bank, because not only was this region strategically important, it also contained vibrant industry, with coal and coking facilities to match. There was an awful lot on the line; if Clemenceau failed to wrest this Rhineland and its contingent parts, which included the Saar in the south and the Ruhr to the north, away from the Germans, then his premiership would be much maligned by figures loudly critical of his failure to protect France. The matter was complicated somewhat by the AL issue, which was unquestionably set to return to France. AL, which straddled a part of the upper Rhine, contained a measure of Germans, but was believed to be French in culture. Wilson was happy to hand over AL, and after previous discussions, the idea of a plebiscite in the region was done away with entirely. However, WW surely could not allow the French to seize this chunk of territory where predominantly Germans lived – this violated the self-determination principle which he supposedly stood for. This was the basis of the impasse between the two figures, so the question is how did they resolve their differences and leave both parties, if not completely happy, then at least contented enough to move on to another issue. The answer of course lays in compromise.

When WW returned to Paris in mid-March, the Rhineland was at the top of the French agenda. House recorded in his diary on 20th March that Clemenceau was loudly pleased with Wilson’s suggested compromise – it revolved around the idea of demilitarising the Rhineland, of promising Anglo-American aid to France in the event of her being attacked, but also in preserving German sovereignty over the Rhineland area. According to House, Clemenceau responded to his efforts by exclaiming ‘a monument ought to be erected to you’, but if the French premier had in fact said that, then such indulgent praise was premature.[[2]](#footnote-2) Perhaps because he was wary of relying too heavily on commitments made by Wilson to shore up France when an isolationist undercurrent was taking root then in Congress, or perhaps because the border was not where he wanted it on the Rhineland, *or* perhaps for these reasons and others besides, Clemenceau indicated that he wanted more. The Rhineland would demilitarised but it would also be occupied, until the Germans had paid off their reparations bill. This would guarantee compliance with allied terms and have the dual result of protecting France as well. In addition, the Saar, the southern chunk of the Rhineland, would be given to France in perpetuity. Wilson absolutely refused to approve of the detaching of the Saar from Germany, and Klaus Schwabe provides by far the best analysis of this unfolding debate that I have found. Writing on Wilson’s personal stance on the Saar issue, Schwabe noted:

As he saw things, the debate over the Saar district was more an issue of principle than most of the other issues disputed in Paris. In the talks which took place from March 28 to April 13, he made perfectly clear to his colleagues why he thought this was so. The historical and strategic arguments which the French offered to support their position at the beginning of the debate were totally unpersuasive for Wilson.5 Contrary to Clemenceau's claim, the Saar district was, in his eyes, "absolutely German." It constituted a single economic unit, and the fact that parts of it had at one time belonged to France was irrelevant. Indeed, he felt that arguing from historical grounds would soon lead the conference into unending debates. The only French arguments to which he allowed any validity were economic ones: The Germans had destroyed the coal mines of northern France, and France had a legitimate claim to adequate compensation.[[3]](#footnote-3)

What Wilson was willing to do to alleviate this economic pressure was to give the French the exclusive use of the Saar mines for a limited period. This exclusive usage idea did not, however, entitle the French to place the German population of the Saar district under French sovereignty. Wilson noted that he also would not satisfied with a deal that granted the people of the Saar a measured level of autonomy (on the model of Danzig) if they did not want such status. The Saar was German land, and for the sake of fairness, it had to be handed to Germany, however painful for France this might be. On this latter point, Wilson was in disagreement with Lloyd George, too. LG hovered in and out of the Rhine question throughout March and in April when the question began to really heat up. More often than not, Wilson found himself on the opposite side to LG, who was willing on several occasions to see things the French way and detach chunks of the Rhine for the French benefit. This meant that Wilson found himself fighting a war on two fronts, a quest which was far from easy given the additional pressures which April brought with it.

Wilson was rarely so driven by his principles as he was in the Rhineland issue though. In his view, if he yielded to France's in the Rhineland, then the result would be not only a renunciation of his principles for the peace but also a declaration of moral bankruptcy, where only the Bolsheviks would profit. What he feared was, as he put it to House, "the transformation of wartime enthusiasm into a despair as profoundly cynical as that of Bolshevism when it declares: 'There is no justice in the world; only by violence can injustices committed by violence be avenged.'" Wilson then went on to say, "I do not want to do anything that would allow anyone to say of us: 'You proclaim grand principles, but you admit exceptions to them whenever your emotions or national interest make it seem desirable to you to deviate from these rules.'" Instead, Wilson told Clemenceau, he wanted to break the vicious cycle of injustice followed by retribution in the region and make a future reconciliation between France and Germany possible. Wilson recognised, as did many others, that without this Franco-German reconciliation, without creating another AL in Franco-German relations, there would be no possibility of a lasting peace.

Yet, Wilson had another motive for standing firm on the Rhineland issue too, one which tied the issues of Danzig and Fiume together. As Klaus Schwabe noted:

Not only principles but also the internal consistency of the peace treaty were at stake for Wilson in this debate. By blocking France's plans for the Saar basin just as he had Poland's for Danzig, he hoped, indirectly, to deny Italy a legal basis for its expansionist desires on the Adriatic. The solutions found for Danzig and the Saar were to provide a model for a fair reconciliation of opposing interests, and this model would then be used for settling the Italian-Yugoslav border question. Here, too, of course, as in the negotiations on Danzig, the critical situation in east central Europe provided Wilson with persuasive arguments. However, unlike House, he did not yield to a mood of panic which prompted the latter, because of the Bolshevist threat, to reach a peace settlement at any price.[[4]](#footnote-4)

To guarantee a firm and just foundation for his later arguments, Wilson knew that he could not make one rule for France and one rule for the Italians or Poles. Wilson was also sensitive to accusations of sponsoring annexations, of supressing the ingrained nationality of the people of the Saar region, and of reducing the ability of the Germans to pay reparations if an industrial region like the Saar was seized. It was the Saar issue above all and French desires to straight up annex it that really provoked the rift between Wilson and Clemenceau on 28th March, when the French premier infamously accused the President of having pro-German sympathies, before storming out of the meeting. By this point, Wilson had already indicated that he would rather leave the conference altogether than hand the Saar over; was this the occasion for that great bust up between the American and French powers? Not quite. Calmer heads prevailed as we saw, when Clemenceau returned later that afternoon, and Wilson absolved himself of any German sympathies – he wanted, he told Clemenceau, to administer justice, not to take land from Germany which was indisputably hers, since this would only send the world’s sympathies to Germany in 1919 in the same way they had been sent to France in 1871.

Wilson’s opposition is especially interesting in this regard because it was odds with his advisors and with House. In the beginning of April Wilson was presented with a proposal from Tardieu which effectively repeated earlier suggestions for the Saar. It was to be administered in the same way as the Rhineland by France, in that it would be occupied and cast as a French mandate for 15 years, after which point it would be free to vote to join either France or Germany. The idea was that in that fifteen year period, the people of the Rhineland as a whole would effectively change their loyalties to France and ‘would offset a hundred years of Prussiafication’ by doing so. Tardieu’s big concession to Wilson this time was that the citizens of the Saar would retain their German citizenship, but Tardieu undermined this concession in the next breath by making it very clear that these citizens of the Saar would not be able to choose to return to Germany until the fifteen year period was up. Furthermore, the Saar’s coalmines would remain under French control regardless of what state the Saar chose to join after fifteen years. Not until 1935, in other words, would the Saar’s people be permitted to make a free choice, and in the meantime, France would hold the Saar as a LON mandate, and it could be expected in that time that France would work to change the dispositions of the Saar, perhaps even with the use of underhanded means when it came time to vote.

This arrangement was not at all satisfactory to Wilson. Even with the concession his advisors suggested, whereby the plebiscite in 1935 would be supervised by the League, Wilson found himself angrily rejecting the whole scheme. When it was presented before the C4 in the first few days of April, Wilson was at pains to emphasise that he was not in favour of a buffer state appearing in the Saar, and that the coalmines should not be placed indefinitely under French control, but that they could be handed to the French for the moment. Here Wilson was upholding the ethnic interests of the Germans as well as the economic interests of the French, but by doing so he pleased no one. On 3rd April, Clemenceau indicated that he did not want a situation to emerge where Prussia had political control of the Saar and Paris had only economic control. That evening, Wilson fell ill, and it was believed that with Wilson gone, more Francophile heads would prevail, and Clemenceau would get the Saar as he had hoped. Gone he may have been, but Wilson was not willing to stay silent. He continued to dictate from his sickbed and on 5th April, as we saw, he instructed his presidential ship the *George Washington* to be prepared to take him home. The French papers responded by declaring that France had no intention of annexing any lands, and while Wilson had won this round, Clemenceau was not willing to let it go just yet.

First of all, the French premier compromised. On 8th April Clemenceau indicated that he would accept LON supervision of the plebiscite which would be held in 1935, whereas before, he had been insistent that France would supervise it per its mandate status. Wilson responded in kind – on 9th April he instructed his experts to propose an administrative commission which would be responsible to the League of Nations and which would have political authority over the Saar district. With this proposal, both sides effectively met halfway, and neither Germany nor France would be the political leader in the region. Instead, German sovereignty would be suspended for fifteen years. Following this proposal, some real headway over the Saar was made, where first the experts, then the heads of state came to an agreement. The only condition which the French still refused to accept was the possible repurchase of the Saar coal mines by Germany; Clemenceau wanted to hold onto them indefinitely.

Wilson could not relinquish that point though – the crux of the Saar issue for him was to ensure that the French were economically compensated, but not that Germany lost its mines forever. The Americans negotiating the arrangement proposed a compromise on the question of sovereignty in the Saar in a bid to move things along. Sovereignty over the Saar wasn’t a particularly big deal in American minds, but because the region was of dubious French loyalty, it was of the utmost importance to France. The compromise reached ensured that the final text of the treaty which dealt with the Saar would make no mention whatsoever of German sovereignty. This signified that there was no question over who was in control of the region – governed though it was by a supposedly neutral League commission, it would not be in danger of coming under German domination. The French indicated they were willing to accept this compromise, but only after an additional clause was included that would require Germany to supply France with Saar coal at fair prices (to be set by neutral experts) in case the Saar basin or parts of it reverted to Germany after 1935.[[5]](#footnote-5)

By 13th April, the agreement over the Saar had effectively been reached and, so it seemed, a major hurdle in Franco-American relations had been overcome. Critics of Wilson then and since analysed what had taken place in the first two weeks of April and couldn’t help but notice that it appeared as though the President retreated on virtually all of his red lines in a bid to make the French happy. But was this perspective fair? Klaus Schwabe provides his analysis on this question, and in the process unpacks the main bone of contention for Wilson, when he writes:

But despite these concessions on Wilson's part, we cannot conclude (as many of his critics did then and still do today) that Wilson simply surrendered unconditionally to France's demands. His concessions were balanced by other terms in which his point of view was the controlling one. The most important of these was that the Saar district did not become a French mandate (as the British, too, hoped it would), but was put under an independent governmental commission responsible to the League of Nations. This deprived France of the possibility of using its administration to influence the outcome of the plebiscite, a possibility which was certainly inherent in the Tardieu plan of March 29. Now, after fifteen years, the Saar population would be able to decide, free of outside influences, what its political fate would be. This was what mattered most to Wilson, and this is why he had objected to all of Great Britain's plans for a French mandate.[[6]](#footnote-6)

So it was that the Saarland entered into a temporary period of quasi-independence. It shouldn’t be much of a spoiler to denote that by 1935, when it was time for the plebiscite and for the Saarlanders to announce their loyalties, Andre Tardieu’s original vision for flipping these loyalties over was ignored. The plebiscite, supervised by the League in 1935, guaranteed that the region would return to Hitler’s resurgent Germany; a paltry 0.4% voted for union with France, and 9% voted for the continuation of the status quo. The following year in March 1936, German forces called the French bluff by marching into the demilitarised Rhineland and returning it to its pre-1914 status. By that point the allied troops had left the scene, and only French blustering kept the region out of Berlin’s hands. Hitler’s successful gamble represented the ultimate defeat of Tardieu’s vision, but also of Wilson’s hope for the future – that by compromising, the Germans would led to peaceful relations with France, rather than hostility. Contrary to all he had hoped for in fact, Wilson had terminally failed to resolve that cancerous conflict of Frenchman versus German, which tore at the heart of Europe. Much like he had done in every other area then, Wilson’s moves came too early, and hoped for far too much.

Though the Saar was apparently solved, the Rhineland as a whole still had a question mark over its future. This question would not be answered until late May, when last minute solutions regarding the governance of the Rhineland were arrived at. Throughout April and May though, there was considerable tension between the Anglo-American and French visions of what a new regime in the Rhineland would look like. Marshal Foch had by far the more extreme vision, but because this vision of military occupation, complete with martial law in perpetuity was predicated on America lending two divisions, it quickly fell through. Foch was even isolated, as we saw, from Clemenceau, who attempted to compromise on the Rhineland question in a bid to get at least something from the final treaty. Occupation of the various bridgeheads over the Rhine, and a gradual returning of different portions of the region in five year intervals, was what was decided in the end.

Before they reached that point of compromise though, an incredible scene took place where rebellious French military personnel attempted to establish a breakaway Rhineland republic. This incident, taking place in the last two weeks of May, enabled Wilson to take a firm stand, and Clemenceau got the message. By the first week of June he had disowned any French generals who took part in that scheme, and he had committed to resolving the Rhineland issue by empowering its inter-allied commission, which France was to chair. The terms for the Rhinelanders were similar in scope to that of the Saar, except that the region would not fall a League-sponsored commission. Instead it would be occupied, with the occupation authorities very much subordinate to the civilian inter allied commission we just mentioned. In five year intervals, the allied soldiers would leave the three different regions – the Americans left alongside the British in 1930. Throughout that point though, the Rhineland was to be demilitarised, with no military installations, hardware or industry being crafted by the Germans. This was confirmed in the Treaty of Locarno in 1926, which declared that, for the sake of reducing tensions and mutual suspicions between Germany and France, once the last occupation forces left in 1935, the Rhineland would remain demilitarised permanently, serving as an unofficial buffer between the two states. For a variety of reasons, in 1936, a decade after the Treaty of Locarno had been signed, when very different international pressures were at work and the tenets of Versailles had lost their sheen, Hitler decided that the time was right to invade the Rhineland and forcibly remilitarise it.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Unimportant on the surface issues like Danzig and the Rhineland may appear in 1919 then, they held a critically important legacy. These were the two issues which, in fact, served as the beginning of Hitler’s march towards war, and then as his official beginning of the SWW. Throughout the length and breadth of the PPC, it would be impossible to examine every issue, analyse every meeting and scrutinise every bust up between allies, but in the cases of Danzig and of the Rhine, the big three demonstrated first their opposing views, and then their determination to compromise in the name of the bigger picture – that being, getting a preliminary peace treaty on the table which could be presented to Germany in good time.

Now that contentious border issues in Poland and the Rhine had been resolved and enshrined in the Treaty, it was only reasonable to expect that the end was in sight. On 13th April, the same day that a compromise over the Saar was reached, Germany was invited to send a delegation to Paris to receive the Treaty. Two weeks later though, and there was still a great deal of unfinished business to work out. Before the allies even came close to welcoming Germany to Paris, they would have to resolve arguably the most controversial and contentious issue of all time – reparations. Even the mention of that word today throws up negative connotations and images of blustering, ignorant statesmen in top-hats demanding too high a price for peace, at the expense of Germany’s long term stability and the viability of the TOV. In fact, for many of you listening right now, the economic questions revolving around reparations might seem like the most important aspect of the PPC, simply because of the destructive impact they had upon allied relations with Germany in the inter-war years, and because of how much capital the Nazis were able to make out of them. In the next episode then, we finally focus our full attentions on the reparations issue. We will investigate it all – the myths, the realities, the costs, the concessions, the outrages and the misunderstandings, so if you’re feeling brave enough, I hope you’ll join me for that in episode 58…

1. Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking*, p. 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See House, *Diaries*, vol. 7, p. 105. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The best analysis of these negotiations over the Rhineland region is provided by Klaus Schwabe, *Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking*, pp. 267-268. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Schwabe*, Woodrow Wilson, Revolutionary Germany, and Peacemaking*, pp. 270-274. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid*, p. 274. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: Hubris* (New York: Norton, 1998), pp. 582-586. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)