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# A Vision of Europe

*Franco-German Relations during the  
Great Depression, 1929–1932*

CONAN FISCHER

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Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

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First Edition published in 2017

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press  
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016946337

ISBN 978-0-19-967629-3

Printed in Great Britain by  
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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## Preface

The interwar Great Depression demanded its price of international relations. The French Foreign Minister, Aristide Briand, presented a scheme for European unity at the League of Nations in May 1930 but, according to received wisdom, it was given short shrift by the key European powers, Germany included.<sup>1</sup> Briand's initiative might appear to have been the last gasp in the process of interwar European detente and Franco-German reconciliation that he had championed from 1925 in tandem with his German counterpart, Gustav Stresemann.<sup>2</sup> The latter's death in October 1929, an electoral breakthrough by the revanchist Nazi Party in the September 1930 German elections, and the impact of the Great Depression seemingly combined to put an end to their ambitions. The wider international climate was, it is claimed, similarly unpropitious as each major power promoted national economic self-interest above any collaborative solution to the crisis.

Some recent academic work is somewhat less pessimistic in its conclusions, however, demonstrating that the major powers persevered with efforts collectively to resolve the economic challenges of the Depression era, but that they did fall short.<sup>3</sup> It has even been argued that Franco-German rapprochement rested on more solid foundations than commonly believed and that enduring synergies, extending back over a century, have underpinned the current Paris–Berlin partnership.<sup>4</sup> However, at first sight the course of events suggests otherwise, for successive generations of French and Germans experienced the two World Wars of the earlier twentieth century as enemies. The Allied Commander-in-Chief, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, proved prescient when warning in 1919 that war between his French homeland and Germany would recur within a generation and it is not surprising that interwar Franco-German relations are generally seen as antagonistic and the four years of the Stresemann–Briand partnership as farsighted but exceptional. Furthermore, Karl Heinrich Pohl has most recently accentuated the ambivalence even of Stresemann's foreign policy.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Ch. 3, Germany, France, and the Briand Plan, under heading 'The (Problematic) Launch of the Briand Plan'.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the book I use both the adjectives 'Franco-German' and 'German-French'. It is revealing that the French spoke of 'Franco-German' matters, and the Germans of 'German-French'. My use of the terms reflects French and German usage respectively as the context demands. My own text favours the prevailing English-language usage of 'Franco-German'.

<sup>3</sup> Patricia Clavin, *Securing the World Economy: The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946* (Oxford, 2013), chs. 2 and 3; Sylvain Schirmann, *Crise, coopération économique et financière entre états européens 1929–1933* (Paris, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Robert Frank, 'Le Paradoxe Franco-Allemand du siècle', in Robert Frank, Laurent Gervereau, and Hans Joachim Neyer (eds.), *Course au modern. France et Allemagne dans l'Europe des années vingt. 1919–1933* (Nanterre, 1992), 180.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Heinrich Pohl, *Gustav Stresemann. Biographie eines Grenzgängers* (Göttingen, 2015).

However, *A Vision of Europe* offers a less pessimistic evaluation of Franco-German relations after Stresemann, arguing that the mutual search for rapprochement was sustained for several years after his death until, during 1932, the challenges of the Great Depression and domestic political tensions in both countries finally disrupted the process. Neither side abandoned reconciliation without a fight; indeed the process of rapprochement culminated as late as September 1931 in a formal commitment to Franco-German economic union. This agreement was designed to pave the way towards a political partnership that would be located within a wider process of European integration, so offering the Briand Plan a fresh lease of life. It also drew inspiration from the early advocates of a progressive, transnational Catholicism, which sought to bridge the Franco-German divide by referring to a common spiritual heritage whose values would unite Europe's Christian and democratic societies against the challenges of Fascism and Bolshevism. If this particular pillar of Franco-German detente had been less in evidence while the Protestant, liberal Stresemann was in office, it proved vital during the final years of rapprochement.

Much of the resulting story will be unfamiliar or surprising to many readers, for the pattern and character of Franco-German relations during the Depression years have remained relatively neglected by historians to date and also misunderstood. The peace treaty and its aftermath have been extensively analysed and debated, while the Stresemann–Briand era has also attracted ample coverage that includes excellent biographies of the two foreign ministers. However, with one or two notable exceptions,<sup>6</sup> historians have had less to say and certainly less positive to say regarding the Depression years. The records of the French Foreign Office relating to the early 1930s were severely depleted by the loss and destruction of material during the Second World War, which has complicated and no doubt discouraged writing and research, while historians of Germany have confronted the more immediate matter of the implosion of Weimar and the Nazis' drive to power precisely during the Great Depression.

Franco-German rapprochement and thoughts of European integration during the early 1930s therefore appear at first sight to be unpromising research subjects, but when combined with the surviving French records, the extensive documentation held in the German Foreign Office archives tells a remarkable, if bitter-sweet story. This is not the place to pre-empt the narrative, but in brief French foreign policy was more imaginative and German foreign policy more constructive and collaborative than conventional wisdom has allowed. This book was completed in June 2016 just a day before the British referendum on whether to remain in the European Union. Readers will find some loose but striking parallels between the debates of the interwar era, which did draw in Britain, and those being fought out today, but this timing is entirely coincidental. The initial work on this project in

<sup>6</sup> For example, Franziska Brüning, *Frankreich und Heinrich Brüning. Ein deutscher Kanzler in der französischen Wahrnehmung* (Stuttgart, 2012); Schirmann, *Crise*.

2008 pre-dated the onset of the current British–EU crisis by several years; a crisis which few, if any, seriously anticipated at that time.

This book draws heavily on government and diplomatic documents and correspondence. The citations reflect the title of the documents as archived, which inevitably gives rise to some inconsistencies of form. It does however accurately reflect the vagaries of official cataloguing.





## *Acknowledgements*

I am very grateful to the British Academy and the Elizabeth Barker Endowment for their invaluable financial support for my research programme in the German Foreign Office archives in Berlin, and to the School of History at the University of St Andrews for generously funding parallel research in the French Foreign Office archives at La Courneuve in Paris. I also owe a particular debt of gratitude to Volker Berghahn of Columbia University, New York, who was strongly supportive of this project from an early stage and who very generously provided me with accommodation in Berlin during a preliminary appraisal of German foreign policy records. It was thanks to this visit, in 2008, that I became convinced that the archives harboured an untold story that deserved to be told.

I am also deeply grateful to other colleagues and friends for a wide variety of support and assistance; in particular to Frank Müller, Stephen Tyre, and Andrew Williams at St Andrews; to Stanislas Jeannesson at the University of Nantes; to Tom Weber of the University of Aberdeen; and to Frank McDonough at Liverpool John Moores University. The archival staff in Paris and Berlin provided outstanding research support, among them François Falconet and Martin Kröger, while at Oxford University Press Christopher Wheeler was generously supportive while overseeing the commissioning of *A Vision of Europe*. Since then his successor Cathryn Steele has provided the judicious mix of encouragement and firmness needed to steer the book to conclusion, for which I am very grateful indeed.

If my daughters have flown the nest and so escaped the downside of life with two academic parents, my wife, Mary, has, again, been remarkably supportive and tolerant of the low-key but remorseless distraction and disruption of authorship. I am deeply grateful to her, as always.

Conan Fischer

*Edinburgh*  
*June 2016*



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## *List of Abbreviations*

AEG	Allgemeine Elektrizitäts-Gesellschaft (General Electric Company)
BVP	Bayerische Volkspartei (Bavarian People's Party)
DDP	Deutsche Demokratische Partei (German Democratic Party)
DNVP	Deutschnationale Volkspartei (German National People's Party)
DVP	Deutsche Volkspartei (German People's Party)
ILO	International Labour Organization
NSDAP	Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei (National Socialist German Workers' Party)
RDI	Reichsverband der Deutschen Industrie (National Confederation of German Industry)
SA	Sturmabteilung (Storm Section/Storm Troopers)
SPD	Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands (Social Democratic Party of Germany)
UDE	Union douanière européenne (European Customs Union)
US	United States
USA	United States of America



# 1

## Tentative Beginnings

### France, Germany, and Intimations of Rapprochement

#### CONTRASTING PERSPECTIVES

Devastating warfare, economic crises, and a series of brutal dictatorial regimes may have characterized the history of Europe during the first half of the twentieth century, but there were times when it could seem otherwise. Memories persisted of a 'golden' decade that preceded the First World War, subsequently idealized as a time of stable expectations when even the summer weather could be counted upon if planning a riverside picnic. And once the bloodletting of the First World War had passed, the Western world came to enjoy a brief period of remission dubbed the 'roaring twenties' or 'jazz age', when a modicum of prosperity and efforts at social reform combined with radical changes in both popular and high culture.

The earlier period, up until 1914, marked the close of a 'long' nineteenth century of calculable progress that was swept away with the coming of war in 1914. There were to be backward-looking efforts to restore this idealized world, eulogized by the American President Warren G. Harding as a 'return to normalcy',<sup>1</sup> which included the restoration of gold-standard currencies as the supposed foundation stones of a solid and dependable social and international economic order. The jazz age was a very different matter. Alongside the polarizing impact of breakneck cultural and societal innovation which repelled the more conservatively minded, it was marked by a wave of conspicuous consumption funded by alarming levels of personal, corporate, and public debt. As has been said of the interwar American boom: 'In their appetite for immediate gratification, the consumers of the 1920s were devouring their future.'<sup>2</sup> A reckoning, in the form of the Great Depression, was not long in coming and the accompanying political upheaval as often as not came to include a conscious struggle between the traditional and the modern, whether, for example, in Nazism's selective rejection of the new, or in the struggle during the Spanish Civil War between an emancipating secular republicanism and a traditional social and moral order.

<sup>1</sup> Alan Sharp, *Consequences of the Peace: The Versailles Settlement: Aftermath and Legacy 1919–2010*, 2nd edn (London, 2015), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Chancellor, *Devil Take the Hindmost: A History of Financial Speculation* (London, 1999), 197–8.



These complex patterns of upheaval left their mark on the conduct of international relations, which saw the victors of the First World War and their defeated foes respectively struggle to recover the advantages of a squandered past and harness diplomacy to deliver on the lavish, utopian promises made to their citizens during wartime. Post-war international relations could however equally be forward looking, seeking a fresh start for Europe and the wider world. Given that the conflagration of the Second World War followed hard on the heels of the First, these efforts might be dismissed as a sorry failure, but interwar diplomacy did notch up a series of positive achievements that anticipated key dimensions of the contemporary world, among them templates that subsequently served the cause of post-1945 European integration.

The 1919 peace settlement included provision for the creation of the League of Nations to act as the supranational executor of international affairs. This organization was the child of US President Woodrow Wilson's imagination, but he failed to secure ratification of the peace settlement in the American Senate and the resulting absence of the modern world's emergent superpower from the League set limits on its effectiveness. Initially dominated by Europe's imperial victor powers, it has often been written off as a failure.<sup>3</sup> Recently, however, it has been adjudged more sympathetically and credited for its innovative response to a number of challenges that transcended the competency of individual nation states. Among these achievements were the creation of a global Health Organization, which served as the direct predecessor of the United Nations' World Health Organization, and the International Labour Organization (ILO) whose work was also carried over into the United Nations after the Second World War. More generally, the League provided moral and institutional templates for the United Nations itself, as its successes and failures provided 'lessons of history' for the statesmen of a new era.<sup>4</sup>

Particular international crises, such as the 1929 Great Depression, also provided a combination of negative 'lessons' for the future, such as the widespread and ruinous imposition of protectionist trading policies, which contrasted with the more positive legacy of collaborative efforts to combat the slump that may have ultimately failed but, nonetheless, anticipated the economic multilateralism of the post-1945 era. These latter initiatives, it is claimed, also served as intimations of the present-day European Union, whether one looks to its successes or its particular traumas.<sup>5</sup>

Franco-German relations were at the heart of all this. French diplomacy sought above all else to secure the country against another German invasion, whilst German foreign policy prioritized elimination of the more onerous provisions of the 1919 peace settlement. Both countries, therefore, were confronted with the same fundamental choice, of either a reckoning with the other or achieving a

<sup>3</sup> For example, Patrick O. Cohrs, *The Unfinished Peace after World War I: America, Britain and the Stabilisation of Europe, 1919–1932* (Cambridge and New York, 2006), 46–67.

<sup>4</sup> Clavin, *Securing*; see also Patricia Clavin, 'Europe and the League of Nations', in Robert Gerwarth (ed.), *Twisted Paths: Europe 1914–1945* (Oxford, 2007), 325–54.

<sup>5</sup> Schirmann, *Crise*, back cover.

mutual reconciliation. During the immediate post-war years, confrontation—tellingly described as a latent state of war<sup>6</sup>—prevailed as each manoeuvred to revise the peace treaty in its own favour. As we shall see, there were simultaneous, but faltering, efforts on both sides to arrive at a more amicable settlement before, from 1925, the pursuit of rapprochement eventually gained the upper hand under the stewardship of the French and German Foreign Ministers of the day, Aristide Briand and Gustav Stresemann.<sup>7</sup> More recent work has tended to view these efforts sympathetically.<sup>8</sup> Briand's pioneering contribution to the cause of European peace and in particular his (ill-defined) plan for 'European federal union', which he submitted to the League of Nations in 1930, were celebrated by a major international conference held in Geneva in 1991.<sup>9</sup> Stresemann was traditionally regarded as a profoundly ambivalent figure, negotiating a tenuous divide between multilateral peacemaking and the pursuit of German national interests, but his recent biographers have treated him more positively, as a German patriot who regarded national interest and international harmony as interdependent.<sup>10</sup>

This reconciliation, of course, was temporary and *pace* Briand's scheme for European union, Stresemann's death in October 1929 is still generally taken to betoken the end of detente. Peter Krüger's magisterial history of Weimar Germany's foreign policy accordingly lends the post-Stresemann era short shrift as he devotes 506 pages to the first decade of the Republic, but summarizes and effectively dismisses the complex events of its final three years in an epilogue of 48 pages.<sup>11</sup> Changes in senior personnel at the Wilhelmstraße (German Foreign Office) that occurred after Stresemann's death allegedly bore witness to this degradation of foreign policy. 'Committed opponents of the Locarno spirit and the Stresemann era', Krüger argues, took charge<sup>12</sup> and isolated the remaining supporters of detente.<sup>13</sup> Hans Mommsen reminds us that this process occurred within the context of a German republic that was on its last legs.<sup>14</sup> The final republican coalition government collapsed in March 1930 after an acrimonious and

<sup>6</sup> Gerd Krumeich and Joachim Schröder (eds.), *Der Schatten des Weltkriegs. Die Ruhrbesetzung 1923* (Essen, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> See Ch. 2.

<sup>8</sup> For an overview, Cohrs, *Unfinished Peace*, 259–86.

<sup>9</sup> Antoine Fleury (ed.), *Le Plan Briand d'Union fédérale européenne. Perspectives nationales et transnationales, avec documents. Actes du colloque international tenu à Genève du 19 au 21 septembre 1991* (Bern, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> Christian Baechler, *Gustave Stresemann (1878–1929). De l'impérialisme à la sécurité collective* (Strasbourg, 1996); Jonathan Wright, *Gustav Stresemann: Weimar's Greatest Statesman* (Oxford, 2002). Pohl, *Stresemann* is more equivocal, however.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Krüger, *Die Außenpolitik der Republik von Weimar* (Darmstadt, 1985).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 513, 514. See also Eckart Conze, *Das Auswärtige Amt. Vom Kaiserreich bis zum Gegenwart* (Munich, 2013), 66.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Krüger, 'Der abgebrochene Dialog. Die deutschen Reaktionen auf die Europavorstellungen Briands in 1929', in Antoine Fleury (ed.), *Le Plan Briand d'Union fédérale européenne. Perspectives nationales et transnationales, avec documents. Actes du colloque international tenu à Genève du 19 au 21 septembre 1991* (Bern, 1998), 300–1; see also Martin Vogt, 'Die deutsche Haltung zum Briand-Plan im Sommer 1930. Hintergründe und politisches Umfeld der Europapolitik des Kabinetts Brüning', in Fleury (ed.), *Plan Briand*, 324–5.

<sup>14</sup> For wider detail, Hans Mommsen, *Die verspielte Freiheit. Der Weg der Republik von Weimar in den Untergang 1918 bis 1933* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1990), 226ff.

intractable dispute over how best to balance the budget and the resulting elections in September saw an upsurge in support for the National Socialists that left them as the second-strongest party in a fragmented parliament. A republican majority remained mathematically possible, but the Social Democrats (SPD) could still not reach agreement with their erstwhile liberal coalition partners over how to address the burgeoning budget deficit, added to which the President and his entourage had no wish to see the SPD back in government in any case.

Germany's conservatives argued that the Weimar system was incapable of addressing the deepening economic crisis that had followed the 1929 Wall Street Crash and aspired to reform the constitution so as to strengthen the executive at the expense of parliament.<sup>15</sup> In late 1930 President Hindenburg appointed a centre-right minority government, led by the Catholic Centre Party politician Heinrich Brüning, and granted him emergency decree powers under Article 48 of the constitution. This Article was originally intended to protect the young and vulnerable republic against counter-revolutionary forces, but now the same law was being exploited by the very people it had been designed to repel. Not surprisingly, this development is widely seen as the first step down a slippery slope which saw parliamentary democracy first displaced by an increasingly authoritarian form of rule and thereafter by Nazism.<sup>16</sup> In October 1931 Brüning also took on the foreign policy portfolio and here too his performance has often been judged negatively. Krüger is withering as he concludes that Brüning took risks in the hope that 'it would turn out alright on the day [*daß es gut ginge*]'.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, he continues, this brinkmanship left Berlin unresponsive to French overtures as Germany went all out to secure an end to reparations and soon enough resolved to adopt an unyielding line at the 1932 International Disarmament Conference in pursuit of its long-standing ambition to secure 'equal rights' with the other major powers. To this extent, Hitler's foreign policy may have come to harbour much more radical longer-term objectives, but on taking power he was able from the outset to reinforce and entrench initiatives that had been launched by his immediate predecessors.

Not surprisingly, this has served to inform a pessimistic interpretation of German diplomatic practice during the Depression years that reinforces the image of the Stresemann era as an interlude in Weimar's history of failure. The legacy of Locarno, it is argued, evaporated and the award of the Nobel Peace Prize to Briand, Stresemann, and their British counterpart Austen Chamberlain for their contribution to the detente of the mid-1920s came to appear hollow and founded on illusory hopes. The effects of this twilight era extended of course well beyond France and Germany as the all-too-fleeting optimism of the later 1920s was extinguished and premonitions of catastrophe grew ever more insistent.<sup>18</sup> When

<sup>15</sup> Among the more influential contemporary theorists, Carl Schmitt, *The Crisis of Parliamentary Democracy*, trans. Ellen Kennedy (Cambridge, MA, 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Mommsen, *Verspielte Freiheit*, 226ff; see also Heinrich August Winkler, *Weimar 1918–1933. Die Geschichte der ersten deutschen Demokratie*, 2nd edn (Munich, 1994), chs. 13–15.

<sup>17</sup> Krüger, *Außenpolitik*, 515.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, in the British case, Richard Overly, *The Morbid Age: Britain between the Wars* (London, 2009).

Western European statesmen picked up the pieces after the Second World War and Konrad Adenauer and Charles de Gaulle signed the Franco-German Friendship Treaty in 1963, there was little or no acknowledgement of the precedent set by Briand and Stresemann,<sup>19</sup> nothing of the struggle for detente conducted during the early 1930s by Heinrich Brüning and his colleagues in the German Foreign Office which will form an important part of our story. Perhaps it was too easy to dismiss Stresemann as an ambivalent figure whose career marked a temporary relaxation in the tenor of German revisionism at best, while Brüning was unable to avoid the charge of complicity in the collapse of the Weimar Republic.

Turning to France, if the Third Republic was in significantly better shape than Weimar, Briand's personal legacy appeared similarly ambivalent, for his collaboration with German counterparts later became conflated with the subsequent appeasement of Hitler during the 1930s by London and Paris, or even, with the benefit of a good dose of hindsight, with the dark years of Vichy. Briand, after all, had concluded his career in 1931/32 as a member of Pierre Laval's Cabinet and his choice of Georges Suarez to pen his biography proved equally unfortunate. Like Laval, Suarez later threw in his lot with Vichy and both were executed after the liberation.<sup>20</sup>

However, it is possible to view the Franco-German rapprochement of the interwar era, or even aspects of pre-1914 relations, in a different light. Franco-German economic relations, it transpires, were founded as much on fundamental synergies as on confrontation, an enduring factor that after 1945 informed the process of Franco-German reconciliation within the wider framework of (West) European integration.<sup>21</sup> The French historian Robert Frank has been particularly bold, maintaining that throughout the twentieth century a deep-seated and positive relationship existed between France and Germany. 'In fact,' he argues, 'despite the drama of the two world wars, things have developed as if the natural trajectory of the past century has led to rapprochement, to entente and a special relationship between France and Germany.'<sup>22</sup> So strong was this relationship, Frank maintains, that not even the twelve years of Hitlerism could destroy it. This argument might appear heroic at best, possibly based more on wisdom after the event than on the force of documentary evidence, for due to losses during the Second World War important elements of France's Foreign Office records are missing, leaving it a struggle to reconstruct the whole story.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Bariéty, 'Aristide Briand. Les raisons d'un oubli', in Antoine Fleury (ed.), *Le Plan Briand d'Union fédérale européenne. Perspectives nationales et transnationales, avec documents. Actes du colloque international tenu à Genève du 19 au 21 septembre 1991* (Bern, 1998), 1–2.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 2–4.

<sup>21</sup> Jacques Bariéty, *Les Relations franco-allemandes après la Première Guerre Mondiale. 10 novembre 1918–10 janvier 1925. De l'exécution à la négociation* (Paris, 1977). For pre-1914 intimations of this same process: Raymond Poidevin, *Les Relations économiques et financiers entre la France et l'Allemagne de 1898 à 1914* (Paris, 1969); Klaus Wilsberg, 'Terrible ami—aimable ennemi': *Kooperation und Konflikt in den deutsch-französischen Beziehungen 1911–1914* (Bonn, 1998).

<sup>22</sup> Frank, 'Paradoxe', 180.

<sup>23</sup> Ministère des relations extérieures, *Les Archives du Ministère des relations extérieures depuis des Origines. Histoire et guide suivis d'une étude des sources de l'histoire des affaires étrangères dans les dépôts parisiens et départementaux* (Paris, 1984), 187–98.

Nonetheless, it is a proposition which finds some support in this current work, with its focus on the Depression years, 1929–32. The surviving French Foreign Office records need not be exploited in isolation, but can be viewed in tandem with the extensive and thematically organized German Foreign Office documentation relating to interwar Franco-German relations. The very organization of these German records says much on the structure of a complex relationship, but can trip the unwary or the impatient. The obvious first port of call is found in ten bulky folders covering '[French] political relations with Germany' during the years 1929–32.<sup>24</sup> They offer extensive coverage of contentious issues such as frontier revision, reparations, and disarmament where Franco-German relations generally remained obdurately difficult. This negative impression has informed mainstream historical interpretations of the period and also strongly influenced the general tenor of the edited volumes of documents on German foreign policy,<sup>25</sup> themselves an important source for historical scholarship. However, the Wilhelmstraße extracted a mass of documentation from its original records, which it then filed separately, including a strikingly extensive collection covering the years 1929–32 labelled 'Efforts to bring about German-French détente'.<sup>26</sup> This consists of eleven thick folders complemented by an additional folder labelled 'Franco-German rapprochement',<sup>27</sup> but this is by no means the end of the story. Nine further folders cover ministerial visits during 1931 by Brüning to Paris and by Laval and Briand to Berlin,<sup>28</sup> which are of particular significance here. Five more detail cultural collaboration between the two neighbours,<sup>29</sup> four document the activities of a private industrial pressure group (the Mayrisch Committee) that was dedicated to the promotion of closer Franco-German collaboration,<sup>30</sup> while four deal with the German reception of Briand's 1930 European Union plan.<sup>31</sup> There are further collections, in particular the documents that relate to the work of individual diplomats (*Handakten*), which include among other things<sup>32</sup> valuable detail on economic relations,<sup>33</sup> and also records of the Foreign Minister's speeches, meetings, and related activities.<sup>34</sup> Most of this diverse collection of material, again, relates to the pursuit of detente, or to the ultimate reasons for its failure. All in all, therefore,

<sup>24</sup> Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes (AA), Politische Beziehungen zu Deutschland, Signatur R (R) 70501–10.

<sup>25</sup> *Akten zur deutschen auswärtigen Politik 1918–1945. Serie A: 1918–1925*, ed. Hans-Georg Fleck et al. (Göttingen, 1982–93); *Serie B: 1925–1933*, ed. Hans Rothfels et al. (Göttingen, 1966–83).

<sup>26</sup> AA, Bestrebungen zur Herbeiführung einer deutsch-französischen Verständigung, R70534–44.

<sup>27</sup> AA, Deutsch-Französische Verständigung, R28263.

<sup>28</sup> AA, Gegenseitige Besuche führender Staatsmänner, R70567–70; *Handakten* hierzu (Friedberg), R70571–4; Pressestimmen zum französischen Gegenbesuch in Berlin, R70575.

<sup>29</sup> AA, Die deutsch-französische Gesellschaft (Grautoff) und deren Veröffentlichungen, R70550–4.

<sup>30</sup> AA, Die deutsch-französische Studienkommission sowie Gründung eines französischen wirtschaftlichen und politischen 'Comité d'Entente international' (Comité Fougère) und eines deutschen Gegenkomitees, R70576–9.

<sup>31</sup> AA, Bund der Vereinigten Staaten von Europa (Briand-Memorandum), R28629–31; Ges. Seeliger: Briand Memorandum, R105491.

<sup>32</sup> See bibliography and individual references for greater detail.

<sup>33</sup> AA, Ges. Eisenlohr, R105386–8.

<sup>34</sup> AA, Reden, Interviews und Aufsätze des Reichsministers, R27994–8.

the bulk of German documentation relating to France during the years 1929–32 concerns rapprochement rather than confrontation. This simple measurement of *Aktenmeter* (shelving metres of archival files) is not in itself conclusive, but with this copious evidence to hand there is clearly a story here worthy of serious investigation.

And as the surviving records in Paris confirm, France remained equally wedded to the pursuit of detente with Germany, regarding Brüning and his Foreign Minister, Julius Curtius, as men with whom they could do business. Curtius had previously played a significant role in the 1929 Young Plan renegotiation of Germany's reparations liabilities, and was regarded by Paris as Stresemann's understudy, who, far from seeking confrontation with France, remained dedicated to the policies of his late mentor.<sup>35</sup> For his part, Brüning understood rapprochement with France from a Catholic perspective, which saw him wedded to the idea of a Europe resting on Christian ideological foundations that, in essence, anticipated elements of post-1945 Christian Democracy. In this regard Brüning, as a Catholic politician, could offer France something Protestant liberal politicians with their historic attachment to the German national state could not or would not.<sup>36</sup>

Therefore, despite some important changes in senior German diplomatic personnel, and despite significant upsets, the Quai d'Orsay (French Foreign Office) continued ultimately to trust Berlin and maintained an intimate and positive relationship with Germany into the spring of 1932. Paris always fretted over the threat posed by the German right and especially over its trenchant repudiation of Franco-German detente, but Brüning was considered a bulwark against this rising tide of nationalist opinion, which, like all tides, would ebb in due course. Berlin was reassured that Brüning's use of emergency powers in the conduct of government was perfectly acceptable to Paris, for the alternatives hardly bore thinking about. Implausible though it remained, the fall of Brüning might conceivably see the Austrian revanchist demagogue Adolf Hitler being offered a role in Germany's government.

This line of argument cuts across received wisdom, for it dates the demise of Franco-German rapprochement three years or more after the death of Stresemann. And as will be seen, this pursuit of rapprochement rested squarely on economic collaboration, yet in the shadow of the 1929 Wall Street Crash, which is seen with justification as the trigger for an upsurge in economic nationalism across the globe.<sup>37</sup> A succession of upsets did, indeed, serve to complicate the pursuit of Franco-German rapprochement, but both sides responded by intensifying their efforts to circumvent such obstacles rather than by abandoning rapprochement. Some recent work has dedicated greater attention to efforts at collaborative economic diplomacy during these troubled years,<sup>38</sup> efforts which saw France and Germany propose to meet the challenges of the Great Depression on a bilateral and

<sup>35</sup> See Ch. 2 under 'Julius Curtius and the Second Hague Conference', 50–3.

<sup>36</sup> See Ch. 4 under 'Brüning in Paris' and 'The Catholic Connection'.

<sup>37</sup> See, for example, Patricia Clavin, *The Great Depression in Europe, 1929–1939* (Basingstoke, 2000), 166.

<sup>38</sup> Clavin, *Securing*; Schirmann, *Crise*.

ultimately on a continental basis. This agenda was never going to be prejudiced on a whim, given its centrality to the wider pursuit of detente. It was only during the spring of 1932 that the recourse to economic nationalism finally intruded on this Franco-German project, just as the damage was compounded by a publishing scandal which inflicted massive if gratuitous damage on German-French relations. But before turning to the events of the Depression years, it is important to outline, in brief, the origins of the thinking and forces that underpinned and sustained rapprochement.

## THE OPENING GAMBITS

German heavy industry came to consume far more iron ore during the early twentieth century than its domestic mines could hope to supply, leaving the country's blast furnaces overly reliant on imported Swedish ore. The vast iron ore fields of neighbouring France offered an attractive and geographically convenient alternative, prompting the Thyssen heavy industrial conglomerate, among others, to build stakes in the mines of French Lorraine and Normandy. In the latter case it only secured a deal in 1912 after hard-fought negotiations which centred on whether ultimate control of this strategic asset would rest in French or German hands. On the face of it, the bargain struck left Thyssen a minority partner in the Société des Hauts Fourneaux de Caen (The Caen Blast Furnaces Corporation) with French board members in the majority, while its operations were financed in large measure by French merchant bankers. However, August Thyssen, founder and owner of the eponymous German firm, was no stranger to transnational business ties for he had interests across Europe and also overseas, for example in South America and India. Practicalities alone saw him espouse the vision of a 'European trading economy, free from national political rivalries', while the French Director of the Hauts Fourneaux, Louis Le Chatelier, held comparable views and looked beyond business relations to a future where Franco-German economic cooperation would serve to mend wider relations between the two hereditary enemies. He praised Thyssen's personal role in this process, observing that a deal had been struck in Normandy 'thanks to the lofty ideals of M. August Thyssen who, in his own words, hoped that the agreements concluded between ourselves "form the foundation stone of a lasting accord and contribute to the improvement of relations between our two countries"'.<sup>39</sup> August Thyssen's son, Fritz, echoed his father's sentiments during a visit to Normandy in 1912, anticipating (quixotically) that Franco-German economic integration would henceforward render war between the two former enemies obsolete.

Thyssen and Le Chatelier were, of course, hard-headed businessmen, who soon enough clashed as the latter attempted to extend French influence within their joint venture, but the commercial alliance held and there was little discernible political

<sup>39</sup> Quoted in Wilsberg, *Terrible ami*, 234–5.