Hello and welcome history friends patrons all to the VAP episode 51. In the previous episode we traced the reparations question, and in the process reached some surprising conclusions about the big three and their perspectives on the question. We finished last time with a note on WW’s inconsistency, as he bowed down to LG’s insistence on including civilian damages within the final reparations bill. In this episode we continue our reparations coverage, by beginning with some shocking revelations about where the allies actually stood on the question of reparations, versus where the conventional narrative of the debate has led us to believe they all stood. As a spoiler alert, the British PM DLG does not come off particularly well in this episode, and we’re all about to find out why. Without any further ado I will now take you all to late March 1919…

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‘I wish’, said one American financial expert, ‘that Mr LG could tell us just what he finally wants, so that we could determine whether his ideas and the President’s as we understand them to be, are in reality far apart or close together.’ Of all the leaders at Paris, when it came to the question of reparations LG was the most difficult to work out and unquestionably the most inconsistent. On one occasion he opposed Australian premier Billy Hughes’ initial proposals for wresting millions of pounds from the Germans, but shortly afterwards he appointed Hughes head of a committee packed with other hardliners, whose task it was to arrive at a bill which would be presented to Germany. This committee, created in early March and filled with hardliner British and Empire delegates, was too much even for some of its attendees: ‘altogether it was the oddest committee I ever served upon’, remarked one Canadian member, adding that the committee’s purpose was ‘to make the Hun pay to the utmost, whether it leads to a generation of occupancy and direction, or not, and forgetful of the results otherwise.’[[1]](#footnote-1)

LG never ceased to vacillate in the reparations issue. This has traditionally been taken as evidence of his inner struggle over politics – the PM had, after all, promised the electorate that Germany would be squeezed until the pips squeaked. This was the same man who appointed known hardliners to committees, or took advice from them, only to complain about their extremism in later conversations with the Americans. It should be stated that the British and to a lesser extent the Empire delegations obeyed their PM to the letter. There was no delegate in Paris flying the British flag that refused to obey LG, and yet the Welshman frequently gave the impression that the hardliners were behaving recklessly, and that it was not within his power to rein them in. We must consider his political stance, but also his morale fibre. LG despised war on principle, and he believed that Germany was responsible for unleashing the worst war seen in human history, as he told the empire delegation: ‘By every principle of justice’, LG said, ‘by the principles of justice which were recognised as applicable between individuals, the Germans were liable for the whole of the damages and the cost of recovering them.’

The *whole of the damages* – this did not seem like a man unsure of how to proceed, and yet LG had to temper this approach which bare economic facts, which he would have been in tune with thanks to his previous gig as Chancellor of the Exchequer. If Germany was destroyed, then Britain would suffer economically because she would not be able to sell her goods to her. In House’s diary, we have the PM admitting openly that he knew Germany would never be able to pay what the allies demanded. In early March LG insisted to House over lunch that he was trying to find a reason he could present to his electorate to justify having fooled them. Was this simply a case of LG’s election campaign promises coming under scrutiny, and his desire to delay the inevitable reveal that he could not make those pips squeak after all? This would explain LG’s reluctance as well as his lack of clarity regarding what he wanted, but was he really so unsure deep down? Did a small part of him not want to punish Germany and make her feel the war? Certainly in secret cabinet minutes recorded in late 1918, LG comes across as a very different statesman from that which he presented to the world in spring 1919; they state:

The Prime Minister said that industrial France had been devastated and Germany had escaped. At the first moment when we were in a position to put the lash on Germany's back she said, 'I give up.' The question arose whether we ought not to continue lashing her as she had lashed France. Mr. Chamberlain said that vengeance was too expensive these days. The Prime Minister said it was not vengeance but justice.[[2]](#footnote-2)

We don’t need to list the mess of committees and sub-commissions, since a new one appeared to take shape almost every day, but in late February the big three did appoint a delegate each to sit on a committee which would arrive at some kind of final figure. It was here that, more than ever, the moderation of the French and the hardline stance of the British looms into view, and no, that isn’t an editing error on my part, the British really were the ones driving the harder bargain with regard to reparations. For the next few weeks, this three-way dance between British, American and French interests played out, as the figure suggested gradually shrank from its original high of $200 billion to the more reasonable sum of $50 billion, but the British delegate urged LG to be careful, as it seemed the French and Americans were privately cooperating ‘I cannot say what the bargain is’, the delegate remarked, ‘but the result is that we shall be practically left out in the cold.’

LG simply attempted to justify his high price, saying in early March that since the British ‘had been the chief financiers of the war, it was intelligible that the French and the Italians would not be so greatly concerned about the size of the indemnity as ourselves.’[[3]](#footnote-3) This was a good point which is often ignored – the assumption that the vengeful French asked for more money than anyone else, buoyed by Keynes’ critical picture of them, obscured the fact that it was in fact the British who had poured more money into the war than any other power. It has to be said that the conventional image of the grasping French not only holds little water, since documentary evidence shows the French perfectly willing to be moderate, but it also makes very little sense. Of course the British, as the power with the most money vested in the conflict, should want to receive the most money back after the war’s end.

If we consider the large sums of money which Britain had spent, the political promises which LG had made and the anger towards Germany which he felt himself, then it surely makes perfect sense that the British demanded the largest reparations during the PPC. While the French concerns were similar in many respects, and French soil had been violated, these considerations were evidently not sufficient to move the French to make aggressive claims on Germany’s money. The unfairness of the French mistreatment by the histories is only underlined by further evidence. When, on 15th March, LG was shown the figure of $30 billion in reparations which the three delegates had arrived at, he ‘cried out against the smallness of the figure’, according to the French observer. Three days later on 18th March, Edwin Montagu, the secretary of state for India and the man originally chosen to represent Britain on that three man committee, was replaced by a known hardliner: a judge called Lord Sumner. The reason given was due to the death of Montagu’s mother, but this does not explain the subsequent absence of that moderate British delegate for the remainder of the deliberations on reparations.

Historian Marc Trachtenberg was certain that Montagu’s replacing with Sumner ‘must be seen as a political move’, and there is further evidence for this theory. In early June, when LG began to have serious doubts about the sustainability of the high reparations bill, he attempted to rope Montagu and another expert back in to fix the problem. But Montagu had evidently taken the previous snub personally – and a man who was given leave to pay his final respects to a loved one would not feel that way. Noting to the other man who had been selected by LG to join him on this last minute exercise, Montagu is recorded as saying:

…that he regretted that he could not go in the matter with me, that he was sure that he would not be given the authority and backed up in case he came to an agreement; that he had tried that once already, and that he would not do so again.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The big problem with the revisionist idea that LG was in favour of a harsh reparations settlement until the final weeks of the PPC is challenged by the famous memorandum which he put about in late March. The Fontainebleau Memorandum has been presented since as an example of LG’s moderation, which to writers like Keynes and others, served as retrospective evidence that he must have ‘opted’ for a more moderate monetary settlement, despite all evidence to the contrary.[[5]](#footnote-5) In other words, if LG did in fact desire a large sum of money, and much more money than his counterparts, why would he issue this call for moderation? Well, what if I told you that the FM contained moderate elements, but that it was largely silent on the issue of reparations? Marc Trachtenberg wrote that:

Although [LG] set out the argument for a mild peace in the famous Fontainebleau memorandum, the noble rhetoric of this document cannot be taken at face value. There was no opting for a moderate figure, and in reality the Fontainebleau memorandum marked no change in actual British reparation policy, which in its essentials remained as unbending as ever.[[6]](#footnote-6)

The FM was circulated to Lloyd George's colleagues on the Council of Four on March 25. In it he declared that ‘we ought to endeavour to draw up a peace settlement as if we were impartial arbiters, forgetful of the passions of the war.’ These sentiments were noble, but it appears that LG was talking mainly about the territorial settlement, and not the reparation clauses. When the Council of Four discussed the memorandum in more detail on March 27, LG rhetorically asked: "What did France resent more, the loss of Alsace-Lorraine or the obligation to pay an indemnity of [five billion francs]? I know your answer in advance. What impressed me the first time I went to Paris most was the statue of Strasbourg in mourning." LG’s point was that territory, and not money, was the kicker for defeated nations, and it was the fuel that sparked off wars of revenge. Thus, the Germans must not be placed under Polish rule, but anything else, he declared, the Germans would accept, ‘including’ the minutes record the PM saying, ‘a very heavy indemnity.’[[7]](#footnote-7)

It is therefore high time that we took the issue of reparations away from the French ledger of sins, and placed it instead in the British list. Such an idea may well seem like dynamite, especially if you are used to the notion that the French were the more greedy and selfish. Yet, short of Keynes’ inflammatory statements and those historians that subsequently adopted his arguments, no genuine evidence exists to support the idea that France wanted more money than the British. In addition, evidence points to the fact that the British were much more difficult over the issue of reparations than the French ever were. The French at least knew that they wanted to set out the sum as quickly as possible, but LG went from a high number, to becoming suspiciously silent on the whole idea of putting a number forward at all. Marc Trachtenberg, whose revisionist article really set the ball rolling on the issue for me, concludes on the PM’s culpability in the reparations debacle:

Whether or not Lloyd George in his heart desired a moderate reparation settlement is beside the point. For whatever reason, the reparation policy of the British delegation was markedly more un- yielding than that of any other Allied delegation. It was British policy, especially British intransigence on figures, that was ultimately responsible for the failure of the treaty to include a fixed sum. The French and American delegates evidently wanted a figure. The latter repeatedly argued that the uncertain atmosphere that would prevail if the treaty failed to name a fixed sum would be disastrous to all concerned, to Germany as well as the West. In particular, a restoration of the international credit system was dependent on a fixed sum. No one would lend Germany anything, it was argued, if the amount due for reparation were not limited, for the money which would otherwise be used to repay such loans might have to go into paying reparation. But unable to borrow, Germany would be unable to procure "working capital," and the reparation annuities could not begin to be paid, let alone "mobilized" through the sale of reparation bonds abroad.[[8]](#footnote-8)

We simply have never been told about the fact that during a C4 meeting on 26th March, it was Clemenceau that simultaneously provided the voice of reason and the voice of urgency. Progress must be made on the reparations issue, Clemenceau declared, for the sake of French rebuilding and stability. He proposed a radical solution to the reparations problem by suggesting that the Treaty of peace would set down the minimum and maximum parameters, and that each year, the allies would determine how much the Germans would pay, until the final sum of money had been paid. Incredibly, Clemenceau further declared that the government could reserve the right to make further cuts in these figures and could "even suppress the minimum" if it became clear this was more than Germany could pay. In other words, if the minimum parameter proved too large an amount, then France was willing to accommodate Germany to see that she was able to pay off a portion of the sum.

The revelations did not stop there. What is really striking about this meeting on 26th March is that Clemenceau even declared his willingness to discuss the question with the Germans themselves, a point later reiterated by Louis Loucheur, the French representative on the reparations commission, who echoed Clemenceau’s point when he said ‘there remains the possibility of not definitively setting our figure before discussing it with the Germans at Versailles.’ It is remarkable that in the discussion that followed, and in spite of the conciliatory language of the Fontainebleau memorandum circulated the previous day, Lloyd George completely ignored this French suggestion; as for Wilson, he also paid no attention to the idea.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Keynes also paid it minimal attention, preferring to focus instead on the behaviour and appearance of Louis-Lucien Klotz, the French finance minister: ‘a short, plump, heavily moustached Jew’, Keynes noted, ‘well-groomed, well kept, but with an unsteady, roving eye, and his shoulders bent in an instinctive deprecation.’ Keynes blamed Klotz for starving Germany and withholding food imports, and for loudly proclaiming the high bills Germans would have to foot. Yet, Keynes seemed unable to distinguish between the real versus the declared policy of France. In public Klotz insisted on a high price, but in private, Klotz was under orders from Clemenceau that there was no chance France would ever get all that it desired. Clemenceau repeatedly sent the aforementioned Louis Loucheur on private meetings to House to talk about more moderate terms, wherein it was often expressed that there were few advantages to be had for France if Germany was forced into bankruptcy. As MM noted, ‘The picture painted so vividly by Keynes and others of a vindictive France, intent on grinding Germany down, begins to dissolve.’

It is hardly a surprise that Clemenceau maintained a harsh line in public – he was under considerable pressure from the right and the left all at once, just as his counterparts were in Britain and the US. ‘Who ought to be ruined?’ asked one headline in the conservative French newspaper *Le Matin*, ‘France, or Germany?’ The answer was not so simple of course, but it was impossible for Clemenceau to show clemency so long as the matter was felt to be so black and white. This did not mean that Clemenceau was privately advising moderation out of the goodness of his heart. The premier’s reasons for doing so are threefold. First and foremost, Clemenceau did not want to alienate the Americans by demanding too high a figure, and since he believed that America’s role in French defence was the more important issue, he was willing to roll back the rhetoric a tad when conversing with Wilson, if that meant the President would be willing to solidify an agreement which tied France, Britain and the US to a defensive alliance after the war.

That was Clemenceau’s major political goal – to preserve the alliance which had won the war against Germany, and which would be expected to win any resumption of the war in the future. Secondary to that question, when considering reparations, was the plain fact that Germany could not afford the large bills which were presented. It would do France no good to economically ruin her neighbour, because this would remove an important trading partner, but also kill any potential reparations which could be gained. The third consideration was more political. Clemenceau realised early on that to argue for reimbursement among the allies of all war costs would actually mean that Britain received more than France; France may have suffered more, but the British actually spent more and had the larger bills. Thus, to offset this fact, French negotiators were ordered to change their tactics and demand, not reimbursement for all war costs, but reimbursement for damages directly inflicted.

Within this category could be included the woes of the citizenry, if desired. The extent of the destruction wrought by the Germans in the French north east was no secret, and Clemenceau was content to make loud pronouncements about it at regular intervals. We have seen him do this in the record of the minutes for the CX and C4 meetings, but he also had his comments recorded carefully by the French press. ‘The barbarians of whom history spoke’, boomed Clemenceau in one report, ‘took all that they found in the territories invaded by them, but destroyed nothing; they settled down to share the common existence. Now however, the enemy had systematically destroyed everything that came in his way.’ Clemenceau would absolutely have taken a higher figure if the Americans had approved and the Germans had been able to pay, but he adapted his sense of justice and vengeance to suit the moment, whereas LG allowed these same senses to override political reason, and delay a final financial settlement.

After initially approaching Versailles with a very swollen figure indeed, French negotiators gradually reduced their asking price when it became clear that the allies were not willing to play ball. By late Feb, French policy had seen fit to reduce the figure by ¾, but it was then the British who refused to go any lower. By the final week of March, the inability of the allies to agree on a final figure made everything more complicated. If the presentation of a final figure to the Germans was impossible, then what was the alternative? Why not come up with the figure later, and make the Germans accept whatever was decided upon in advance? Unorthodox and clunky though this seemed to many, this approach was eventually confirmed, largely because of LG’s intransigence. The French even compromised on the share of the reparations which they would receive; in the final deal agreed by late 1920, it was accepted that the French would accepted 52% of the reparations, where the British would receive 28%, and the balance would go to everyone else. Originally, Clemenceau had wanted 70%, but just like in every other stage of the reparations negotiations, the French premier quietly compromised.[[10]](#footnote-10)

The notion of postponing the decision on a precise figure was accepted after initial opposition, but there was no doubt as to its unpopularity among that party which was meant to agree to its potentially limitless tenets – the Germans. When the German delegation did finally arrive at Versailles to be handed the terms in the first week of May, there was understandable bitterness that the lack of any stated figure would place Germany’s government in an impossible position. ‘No limit is fixed save the capacity of the German people for payment’, exclaimed one member of that delegation in horror, [The figure will be] ‘determined not by their standard of life but solely by their capacity to meet the demands of their enemies by their labour. The German people would thus be condemned to perpetual slave labour.’ Yet the Germans’ concerns were tossed aside in favour of kicking the can down the road for the umpteenth time, and focusing on matters other than the all-consuming reparations issue. The Reparations Commission would carry this burden into 1921, but by that point, as predicted, the burning anger towards Germany, in Britain and America particularly, had significantly cooled. Of course, this cooling in feeling did not mean that everything ran smoothly once time was called on the reparations commission’s deliberations – the 1920s remained years of contention and retrospective reflection as contemporaries wondered whether they had done the right thing.[[11]](#footnote-11)

From all these decisions and procrastination did those two infamous articles of the TOV, article 231 and 232, emerge. These two articles, which we will examine in more detail later, established first the legal basis for these reparations by confirming German responsibility for the war – the so-called war guilt clause. Second, it set out the limits of what Germany could pay, based on the plain fact that Germany’s resources were limited, so the liability should not be unlimited. That was essentially that – the sky would not be the limit on the final figure, but the Germans were not to be assured of much else. Those articles which were later to arouse such passionate fury among Germans under a very different leader, with fury directed towards France in particular, ironically only came about because the British would not agree to set a final figure in the TOV. In addition, the British PM refused to accept either estimates or parameters which granted Britain less money than he felt she needed. If it wasn’t clear yet, it is very much time to change what we think we know about the PPC. Far from the stubborn and selfish French, it was in fact the grasping and politically tied British PM who surprised us all.

Rather than Clemenceau’s oft-reported demand for a large indemnity from Germany, it would be more appropriate to focus on what really grinded the allied gears – his consistent urges to be granted some kind of jurisdiction over the Rhineland, and to preserve intact the wartime alliance. Both of these demands were politically sensitive for Clemenceau’s opposites; handing over the Rhineland would mean, after all, the repudiation of the self-determination idea. Those Rhineland Germans hardly desired to come under the rule of Paris, and whatever Clemenceau might say of old historical trends and the recent advent of the German Empire, the fact was it was now impossible to turn back the clock to before 1871. Not just 1871, but 1815, was where Clemenceau wanted to turn the clock; the Saarland had once been a picturesque backdrop of rolling hills and forest, but the discovery of coal and the subsequent industrial revolution transformed the Saar region into one of Germany’s most lucrative and productive coal mining regions. Clemenceau was eager that France should have it, but Wilson was not impressed: ‘You base your claim’, he said, ‘on what took place a hundred and four years ago. We cannot readjust Europe on the basis of conditions that existed in such a remote period.’

This last week of March did not go quietly, and we are given perhaps some hint of why figures like Wilson compromised on the question of reparations when we are reminded that, on 21st March, news reached the Big Four that Bolsheviks had seized power in Budapest. Reparations was only one item on a long and contentious list that the allies would have to work through. Clemenceau wanted the Rhine, assurances and guarantees about an alliance with Britain and France if he could not get it, and rights over industrial regions like the Saar as insurance. Clemenceau wanted a specific figure of reparations, but in exchange for those aforementioned carrots he was willing to be as moderate as possible when it came to the final butcher’s bill. He probably did not expect LG to have his way so completely, and delay the entire decision making process surrounding reparations. If there was to be no decision on figures, then he would focus on those matters which truly concerned him, and continue his quest to wrest binding guarantees from his allies.

LG maintained a calm exterior but was deeply vexed by the events of the last two weeks of March. He remained consistent in his opposition to Polish encroachment over ethnically German land, as well as the contentious coalfields in Silesia. He was wary indeed of allowing the French to annex the Saar or to formulate extensive rights over the Rhineland generally. Public opinion at home waxed and waned, depending on the source, between wanting a harsh peace with Germany and making a moderate peace quickly. Lord Northcliffe, who we know from House’s diaries acted with the President’s personal friend in mind when writing up his editorials, was a further source of pressure. All the while, financial experts continued to inform the PM that the British coffers could not take the strain incurred by maintaining so many soldiers in so many theatres at once. Industrial unrest at home had brought him back to London before – would he need to go again? And was Bolshevism truly creeping across the continent as the rumours implied? Events of 21st March seemed to confirm that they were, and provided additional grounds for anxiety. In the midst of all of these developments, it is hardly surprising that LG wished to hold off on making a solid decision on reparations, yet it is surprising that since the ball came very much from his court, it is conventionally assumed that the French were to blame for any and all difficulties emerging from the reparations settlement.

In the context of moderating arriving at moderate German terms which would not engender bitterness, and which would remove the Rhineland from the grasping French hands, LG worked to develop what we were introduced to before – the FM. That memo, we learned, was special because while it argued against extensive territorial penalties being imposed upon the Germans, it was mostly silent or vague on the question of reparations. Yet, in the histories, that FM is often trotted out as an example of the PM’s moderation in comparison to Clemenceau’s extremism. By now we now this picture to be unfair and inaccurate, but I simple cannot resist sharing some details on how that FM was actually produced. Traditionally, of course, committees or commissions sat together and banged out the details, but over the weekend of 22nd and 23rd March, the British delegation tried a different approach – they essentially played the DG for an afternoon…no seriously, they did!

The magic happened in a swanky Parisian suburb of Fontainebleau, in the Hotel de France et d’Angleterre. In the sumptuous grounds the delegation walked and took in the fresh air and peace, only to return that afternoon to LG’s private sitting room, where a scene which was made for television as played out. The purpose was the same as before – to take a fresh look at the whole treaty as it then stood, and to reach some kind of final decision with all of the big three could accept. In line with this aim, LG assigned each member of the delegation who was present a role, as an ally or as an enemy power, and urged them to state their case. I would absolutely have loved to have been a fly on the wall for such an exercise, but the star of the show was reportedly General Sir Henry Wilson, who had sat in mostly quietly on countless CX meetings by this point. In a bid to get into character for the roles he had been chosen, HW turned his military cap back to play a German officer, and recorded how he behaved in his memoirs:

I explained my presented situation, and my wish to come to an agreement with England and France, but saw no hope, for I read into the crushing terms they were imposing on me a determination on their part to kill me outright. As I could not stand alone I would turn to Russia, and in course of time would help that distracted country to recover law and order, and then make an alliance with her.

Not content to play merely the enemy, HW then switched to the victim when he took the role of a French woman, painting a moving picture of ‘the losses of so many of their husbands, sons and men folk, the unbearable anxiety and long separations, the financial losses, and the desperate struggle to overwork to keep their homes going.’ It must have been an absolute riot, but the tone never descended into anything approaching silliness. LG gave his two cents, but unfortunately not as any kind of character, simply as himself, and he reasoned that his major point was that the peace terms could not destroy Germany. It was up to LG’s private secretary Philip Kerr to make sense of what had taken place here, but his work on Monday 24th March formed the nucleus of the FM. The journey there had been bizarre, but here LG possessed a statement of aims and of approach which would be useful, and which gave him a chance to take the focus off reparations and highlight the political arguments when he said:

You may strip Germany of her colonies, reduce her armaments to a mere police force and her navy to that of a fifth rate power; all the same, in the end, if she feels that she has been unjustly treated in the peace of 1919 she will find means of exacting retribution from her conquerors.

This was prophetic indeed, and revealed in a pinch what LG believed should be taken, and what he did not believe factored into the equation. Note LG does not state ‘you may place at Germany’s feet a whopper indemnity’ – he changed the debate to political and territorial settlements, because he knew that the French were asking for a lot in that theatre, whereas Britain wanted merely Germany’s badly managed and abused colonies. In light of what had occurred in Hungary, LG also stressed the danger of Bolshevism, conveniently placing the spotlight onto that feared creed rather than on the less exciting reparations question. The exercise demonstrated LG’s political acumen, because he knew that WW was on side with the notion of minimal territorial exchanges, and that he would have preferred to have larger reparations if that meant that peoples were not ruled by foreign nations. ‘If you find the peace too harsh’, Clemenceau fought back, ‘let us give Germany back her colonies and her fleet, and let us not impose upon the continental nations alone the territorial concessions required to appease the beaten aggressor.’ The idea that Germany would not return for revenge if no land was taken was, Clemenceau spat, ‘a sheer illusion.’[[12]](#footnote-12)

LG was certainly up to something in the last few days of March 1919. It seems that he succeeded in changing the argument, and in refocusing the spotlight onto Franco-American tension over the Rhine, where in previous weeks the French and Americans had found common ground over reparations. Clemenceau was caught in a significant bind – he firmly believed that by harnessing the power of the Rhineland and Saar to her benefit, France would be safe. Just as the seas protected the other two allies, France needed her ‘sea’ along the Rhine. Wilson did not feel he could give that, but because Britain’s demands did not conflict with his stated principles, he could give LG virtually all of what he wanted. LG also suspected, correctly as it turned out, that by the time the reparations commission finalised its conclusions in 1921, Britain would be in a position to get what it wanted once more.

LG also did not want to destroy Germany on land, and he imagined that German markets would be much more susceptible if Britain didn’t attempt to restrict the lands of the 70 million Germans now. Previous statements of friendship and support for Clemenceau’s position and for French security vis-à-vis Germany had been abandoned, and while the French premier was outraged, he found that LG was merely the face of a British policy which was in general blithely indifferent to French security interests. Whether it was possible or not, many in LG’s government imagined that it would be advisable to withdraw somewhat from the continent into the Empire – like a splendid isolation part two. This segment of opinion upheld that it was important not to leave a lasting scar on Franco-German relations by creating another AL, and that philosophy was sound enough, but LG was perfectly content to inflict another scar on German pride when he insisted upon postponing the reparations question until he was in position to leverage a satisfactory answer out of it.

Why was it acceptable for Britain to have its way with reparations, but unacceptable for France to protect itself by imagining new structures along the Rhine? The simple answer is that LG did not believe reparations would be too much of an issue, or that it would foster the same resentment as the seizure of territory. After all, he could point to recent history to justify this perspective – the French burned at the loss of AL, not at the indemnity of 5 billion francs which they had paid off within a few years. Based on that logic, it seems as least partially fair to *suppose* that LG was acting on the basis of good faith and past evidence, but he had certainly done a suspiciously good job manoeuvring the French and Americans into conflict over the Rhine, where once the Anglo-American camp had suffered over reparations. As LG correctly anticipated, Clemenceau’s anxiety over the Rhine question would do most of his work for him.

On the morning of 28th March, the greatest blow up between the French and Americans yet took place, when Wilson insisted incorrectly that the French had never placed the Saarland among their war aims, and that it was contrary to the FPs. Rather than telling the President simply to stick his FPs and his blasted LON, which is certainly what Clemenceau wanted to do, the French premier upped the ante by accusing Wilson of being pro-German. With palpable tension in the room, Wilson effectively called Clemenceau a liar, and insisted that the French premier wanted him to leave the conference and return to the US. This was in fact quite correct – Clemenceau had always found House much easier to deal with. Clemenceau was too busy storming out of the room to comment though. He raged to a subordinate that he had never expected such immovable opposition to French demands. It must have seemed especially unfair considering the fact that Britain, up to this point, had gotten virtually all it wanted.

In that afternoon’s meeting, apologies were mumbled, and Wilson did try to reach some kind of compromise with LG’s actual help. The Saar could be autonomous, and the French could own its mines – how about that? It was said that the experts would look into it. Clemenceau was all politics, speaking here about the ties which bound Americans and Frenchmen together, but in private fuming about Wilson’s intransigence. Wilson followed the same tactic – proclaiming that afternoon the extent of France’s greatness, but complaining bitterly that evening to a friend that Clemenceau was akin to an old dog holding up the progress of the conference with his outdated demands. On 31st March Marshall Foch made a case once more for the creation of a separate buffer state. ‘The peace’, Foch said, ‘can only be guaranteed by the possession of the left bank of the Rhine until further notice, that is to say, as long as Germany has not had a change of heart.’ The British and American leaders looked on with polite and silent disinterest.

By the final week of March it had started to become apparent that in spite of the reparations blow up, a chasm was beginning to open up not between Britain and America, but between America and France. Combined with the increasingly intense schedule, where the C4 was meeting several times a day by the last few days of March, it was clear that fatigue was setting in, yet the strain seemed especially notable on the American President’s face. LG had been energised by his successes and distractions, and GC had been energised in his own right purely because he now had to fight harder than before for his rights. WW though was caught in the middle, having never had a clear vision beforehand about where he stood on all of the questions put forward by his allies. What Wilson desired was the solid creation of a LON, and as a lesser concern, the repayment of American loans. Neither of these goals, you will notice, provided America with any net gains, in the same way that territorial gains in Europe or colonies or even reparations did. For Wilson to feel like he had gained something from the peace negotiations, he would have to be confident that the allied leaders were content to see things his way, but it was impossible for him to persuade them on every point, especially when those points related to their perceived national interests.

Thus, it made sense that Wilson would cleave to the more agreeable allied leaders; he found such a man in LG, especially since reparations was effectively taken out of the equation, and colonies were quietly put on the backburner. Clemenceau was disagreeable because his demands were less palatable, but also because they were far more urgent, and it was less easy to compromise upon them. If LG failed to grab this colony or that mandate, so what – British security would not be unduly compromised. Yet, a failure to secure the Rhineland or to keep a handle on Germany’s industrial capacity would leave that front door open to an invasion of France through the same route as before. A few minutes ago we proposed the idea that LG didn’t imagine reparations would be such a big issue, because in 1871 it had been the seizure of AL rather than 5 billion francs that had truly mattered. It is also worth pointing out the inverse of this for GC’s case – since France had paid off that indemnity and emerged mostly unhampered within a few years, it stood to reason that Germany would follow suit.

If the bill was impossibly high, France would have no trade income or possibility of drawing reparations of any kind as Germany collapsed. However, this logically followed that only a medium sum would be possible, and no medium sum could keep Germany low forever – the only approach that could was to seize some of her border lands and establish some kind of buffer. Clemenceau would have reacted angrily to the suggestion that this policy mirrored Germany’s seizure of AL in 1871; France was not looking for conquest, she was looking to acquire security. In a such way does it become apparent that reparations, while a nice boon to French coffers, was very far indeed from the be all and end all mission of a vengeful French premier.

With that substantial note, we are going to put a pin in the reparations issue for the moment. Just as we also placed matters like the SEC, Ireland, the Polish border and other simultaneously occurring events in the background, now we relegate reparations to that position, but don’t worry – we will return to it in time to conclude on the truth behind that final figure of $34 billion in reparations which was eventually decided upon in spring 1921. In the next episode we resume our coverage of the big three’s relations and with reparations, for them, also kicked down the road for a while, it was quickly made very clear that there was no shortage of other matters in play that could evoke anger, bitterness and suspicion among the American, British and French in the first week of April 1919…

1. Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, p. 198. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Quoted in Trachtenberg, ‘Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference’, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid*, pp. 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *Ibid*, p. 36. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. A good example is Arno Mayer, who asserted that LG opted for moderation without any apparent evidence. See Amo Mayer, *Politics and Diplomacy of Peacemaking: Containment and Counterrevolution at Versailles, 1918-1919* (New York, 1967), p. 624. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Trachtenberg, ‘Reparation at the Paris Peace Conference’, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Ibid*, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid*, p. 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Ibid*, p. 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, pp. 202-204. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Some especially biting analyses of this kind can be found: ‘The Latest Phase of the Reparation Problem’, *Bulletin of International News*, Vol. 5, No. 14 (Jan. 19, 1929), pp. 3-11; Allyn A. Young, ‘The United States and Reparations’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Mar. 15, 1923), pp. 35-47. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Macmillan, *Peacemakers*, pp. 206-208. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)