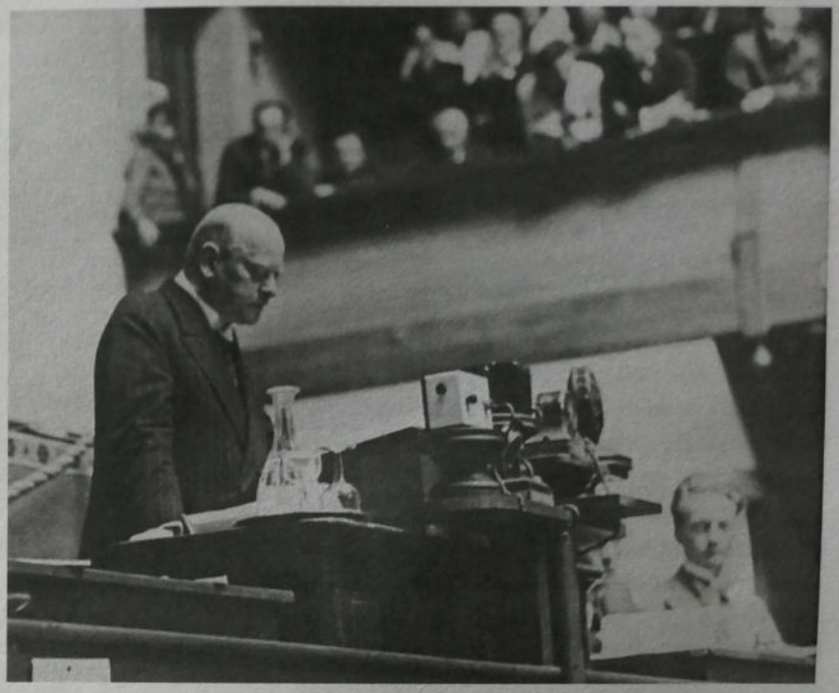
Peace as an Attitude: Gustav Stresemann and the Fragility of Reconciliation

When peace is spoken of today, Germany rarely comes to mind as an obvious example. The images of the twentieth century are too dominant: two world wars unleashed from German soil; the industrial mass murder of Europe's Jews under National Socialist rule; deprivation and devastation. In global memory, Germany appears more as a source of violence than as a force for reconciliation. All the more in need of explanation, then, is a glance back at the year 1926, when the German foreign minister Gustav Stresemann was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize—together with the French statesman Aristide Briand. That this award now marks its centenary highlights both the historical distance and the enduring relevance of the questions bound up with it.



Gustav Stresemann lors de son dernier discours devant la Société des Nations, Genève, Suisse, septembre 1929. Photographe : Erich Salomon. Musée J. Paul Getty, Los Angeles, 84.XM.123.5. | Gustav Stresemann During His Last Speech Before the League of Nations, Geneva, Switzerland, September 1929. Photographer: Erich Salomon. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, 84.XM.123.5.

Only a few years after the end of the First World War (1914–1918) a German was honored as a peacemaker. That Gustav Stresemann should assume this role was anything but self-evident. He had begun his political career as a national liberal monarchist, had supported the war, and initially did not interpret the war as a moral rupture. Only the experience of collapse in 1918, the revolution, and the unstable postwar years led to a profound political transformation. Stresemann evolved from a nationally minded power politician into a pragmatic republican, defending the Weimar democracy and republic above all out of historical necessity.

To grasp the significance of this moment, one must consider the situation of the time. The First World War had not merely redrawn borders; it had traumatized entire societies. From its inception, the young German Weimar Republic was a fragile political experiment, burdened by inflation, coup attempts from the right and the left, and widespread paramilitary violence. The new order was rejected by large segments of both the elites and the broader population. The Treaty of Versailles was perceived by many as unjust—a punishment rather than the foundation for a fair new beginning. In France, meanwhile, fear of renewed German aggression ran deep; too often the country had become a battlefield in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Peace, therefore, was not a shared end in itself but a fragile compromise shaped by conflicting memories and fears.

It was in this context that the Locarno Treaties of 1925 emerged. They formed part of a series of agreements aimed primarily at one thing: the mutual recognition of existing borders in Western Europe. They also codified the renunciation of military force as a means of pursuing political goals. Germany thus formally accepted the postwar order in the West for the first time. France, in return, agreed to reintegrate Germany as an equal partner into the European state system. Locarno was not a peace settlement in a grand, ceremonial sense. It was an attempt to build trust where war, deprivation, and mistrust had previously prevailed.

For Stresemann, this step entailed enormous domestic risks. Nationalists accused him of compliance and betrayal. Yet he persisted. He was personally willing to pay the highest price at a time when political assassinations were commonplace. He pressed his ideas forward relentlessly, convinced that Germany's international rehabilitation could only be achieved through cooperation and reliability—and not through revenge.

Yet the true core of this peace project lay deeper still. Stresemann and Briand understood that peace cannot be secured by treaties between governments alone. Anyone who sought peace had to bring societies along with them—the millions who had experienced, suffered, or lost everything in the war. For many, peace did not signify hope but renunciation. Peace required no longer viewing the former enemy as an existential threat, but as a le-

gitimate political actor. Emotionally, this weighed more heavily than any military conflict.

The Locarno Treaties were therefore more than a legal document. They were a political and symbolic signal: we accept one another as legitimate partners and we are prepared to take a risk. A risk of trust, at a time when fear, nationalism, and isolation were far easier to mobilize politically.

For Gustav Stresemann himself, this policy was also a personal ordeal. From the mid-1920s onward, he suffered from a severe and incurable illness, yet worked to the point of physical exhaustion. He knew his time was limited—and acted accordingly. His diplomatic travels, negotiations, and speeches were driven by the conviction that the failure of reconciliation would open the door to radical forces, and potentially to another war.

Tragically, this policy of understanding seemed distant from everyday life, carried by political elites but scarcely anchored emotionally within society. In Germany, large parts of the population continued to experience peace as an imposition—as the continuation of defeat. Nationalist movements offered simple answers and clear enemies. The National Socialists proved particularly: denouncing peace as betrayal—and Stresemann himself as a traitor.

Reconciliation, by contrast, demanded the endurance of ambivalence: the recognition that insight, guilt, responsibility, and suffering were not clearly or evenly distributed. This demand overwhelmed a society still living in a state of economic, political, and psychological emergency.

That this peace project failed—and ended in an even more devastating world war—does not diminish Stresemann's achievement or his insights. It makes them all the more urgent. The Weimar Republic collapsed not only because of economic crises or institutional weaknesses, but also because peace was not sustained by society itself. It remained elitist, unfinished, and therefore vulnerable. Stresemann died in 1929, just a few years before the republic's final collapse.

In his Nobel Prize address, Gustav Stresemann emphasized that peace does not grow out of self-evident trust. Peace, rather, is the conscious decision to overcome mistrust and to transcend the limits of national thinking. Peace, as his implicit message suggests, is not a condition but an attitude.

A hundred years later, it is not only Europe that once again faces the question of whether it merely administers peace—or truly sustains it.

Melanie Carina Schmoll, Ph.D., is a historian, expert in Holocaust education, adjunct professor at the Department of Political Science, an associate fellow at CMSS, University of Calgary. Her latest book, *Hatred of Jews–A Failure of Holocaust Education?*, deals with the alleged failure of Holocaust education and the worldwide rise in hatred of Jews since October 2023.

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