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STRESEMANN AND LITHUANIA IN THE NINETEEN TWENTIES

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Gustav Stresemann, who served the Weimar Republic as foreign minister from November of 1923 until his death in 1929 was, for reasons to be pointed out later, much interested in developments which in one way or another were likely to affect the status of the Republic of Lithuania. After the invasion of the Vilna Territory by the troops of General Zeligowski and the severing of relations between Poland and Lithuania, it appeared probable that, with increasing tension, Poland might overrun her small neighbor. Such a development was undesirable from Stresemann's point of view, for his diplomacy was geared to the possibility of signing away the Memel - Klaipėda Territory to Poland provided the Poles were willing to give up in return Danzing and the Corridor. Equally undesirable to Germany would have been a reconciliation between Lithuania and Poland, which might prevent Stresemann from playing off one country against the other while remaining on top of both.

For its own reasons, Soviet Russia likewise endeavored to preserve the *status quo* in Lithuania. An abrupt occupation of Lithuania by Poland would constitute a threat to Soviet Russia, which fostered friendly relations with Lithuania in the twenties. By the same token, a Polish - Lithuanian reconciliation was a topic likely to render nightmares to the Russians, who envisioned the creation of a potent anti-Soviet bloc in East Central Europe presided over by the Poles.

The Lithuanians, cognizant of some of the above political trends, attempted to play off the Russians against Germans whenever it served their interests, expecting from the Russians continuous moral support in their quest to regain their ancient capital of Vilna as well as the recognition of Lithuanian sovereignty over the Klaipėda - Memel Territory.

On the other hand, the Lithuanians, to some extent, also attempted to benefit by the enmity between Poland and Germany, by soliciting German diplomatic support vis-à-vis Poland. But in the nineteen twenties the relations between Germany and Lithuania were not as smooth as those between Lithuania and Russia. After the occupation of Vilna by the Poles, Lithuania no longer even bordered on the Soviet state, while there was some friction between Lithuania and Germany over the Klaipėda - Memel Territory, which Germany had lost to the Allied and Associated Powers in accordance with Article 99 of the Peace Treaty of Versailles. Chagrined over the reluctance of the allies to transfer the Territory of Memel to Lithuania, the Lithuanians in January of 1923 staged an insurrection by which they endeavored to incorporate the Territory into Lithuania. A year later, on the basis of the Klaipėda - Memel Statute, the Allies sanctioned Lithuanian sovereignty in Memel. But the Statute provided vast autonomy for the Territory, whose institutions were controlled mainly by Germans, while many of the inhabitants were inclined to pro-German positions culturally and politically.

Stresemann, who appears to have had no emotional attachments to the Memel area, utilized the Memel Controversy for the purpose of manipulating Lithuania, which is the primary topic of this essay. As a statesman, Stresemann displayed unusual flexibility in his foreign policy. While he, at times, posed as a cosmopolitan European, he was unofficially conveying the impression to German patriots, more or less successfully, that he was a nationalist. Above all, Stresemann was a master in Realpolitik, and he proved this in connection with the Memel controversy.

Stresemann once remarked privately that the territorial provisions of the Peace Treaty of Versailles constituted a diabolical plot on the part of the victors of World War I aimed at producing discord between Germany and all her neighbors;¹ as a result of the border arrangements made at Versailles, France, Belgium, Denmark, Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Lithuania became potential enemies of Germany,² a situation which Stresemann was trying to correct by a dexterous and slow diplomatic process.

While pursuing his main objectives in Eastern Europe, namely the prevention of a system of alliances inimical to Germany and a peaceful revision of the territorial provisions of the Peace Treaty of Versailles, Stresemann displayed great skill in capitalizing on frictions between Poland and Lithuania over Vilna as well as on antagonisms between Poland and Russia. A particularly strong ingredient of Stresemann's foreign policy was his ability to grade issues on the basis of their overall importance to Germany. Thus, as a territorial revisionist, Stresemann did not pursue blindly a policy which was geared to the reacquisition of the lost lands from the corridor to the tiny area of Hultschin. He proceeded on the notion that Germany's primary territorial revisions in the East should center on the Corridor and Danzig.

In view of the above, it is not surprising that the Memel issue as such for the time being remained rather insignificant to Stresemann, who was operating on the principle of priorities. As a trained economist, Stresemann well realized that a deterioration of Lithuanian -German relations over Memel would be to the disadvantage of Germany.³ After all, the Lithuanian economy was closely geared to that of Germany, and until 1920 the Lithuanian currency was based on the German Mark. In the Memel Territory, Germany enjoyed almost a monopoly over commerce. This meant that ultimately the Memel Germans and their supporters would find themselves in a strong bargaining position vis-à-vis the Lithuanian authorities.

The close economic ties between Germany and Lithuania were reflected in commercial agreements between the two countries. The Lithuanian - German Commercial Treaty of June 1, 1923, belatedly ratified by Lithuania in May, 1926, stipulated an agreement on the part of Lithuania and Germany to accord each other most-favored-nation treatment.⁴ What is more significant, Germany needed Lithuania for the overland transit of goods to the other Baltic states as well as Russia, with whom Germany no longer shared a common border.⁵ Lithuania in turn was in dire need of the port facilities of Memel for the shipment of products which she herself exported to Western Europe and elsewhere. Economically speaking, the Memel Territory as such was insignificant to Germany. As long as relations between Germany and Poland were marred by the Corridor issue, and as long as Lithuania was needed by Germany for reasons of overland transit, there was no point for Stresemann to press for the reacquisition of Memel.

The Corridor controversy came to plague not only Germany but the Western European countries as well. By 1925, in a curious way the Memel issue became linked with the Corridor problem. Among British and other Western diplomatic circles there was being circulated the idea of a new territorial arrangement in Eastern Europe whereby Poland would return the Corridor to Germany and be rewarded with a new corridor, namely Memel. Lithuania in turn would be compensated with Vilna and its territory. While the British Foreign Office rejected the above scheme, Viscount D'Abernon, the British ambassador in Germany, appears to have shown considerable interest in the project.⁶ The continual tension between Poland and Germany over the Corridor and Danzig impaired the establishment of an anti-Bolshevik alliance to which the Viscount subscribed.

On March 18, 1925, D'Abernon approached Philip Kerr, a British diplomat who had participated in the peacemaking of 1919, for his opinion as to the idea of swapping Danzig and the Corridor for Memel. Kerr was unsympathetic and offered the argument that Lithuanian national consciousness in Memel had so evolved as to preclude such barter. Moreover, Kerr observed rather sarcastically that Poland had no more business to demand a port than Czechoslovakia, which enjoyed free port privileges in Hamburg and Stettin. Why should the present arrangement in Memel not be good enough for Poland?⁷ The idea of the "swap" nonetheless continued to circulate in diplomatic circles. It spread as far as to cause alarm among Russians, as will be shown later.

While Stresemann must have been fully aware of all rumors concerning the possibility of a Memel "swap", there is no evidence that he committed himself one way or another as early as 1925. During that time he was preparing himself for the more vigorous role which he would play as German foreign minister upon Germany's admission to the League of Nations. In his famous letter to the German Crown Prince, dated September 7, 1925, Stresemann outlined the three main objectives of German foreign policy: (a) satisfactory solution of reparations issue; (b) protection of Germans abroad, about 10 -12 million strong, living under "foreign suppression in foreign countries", and (c) a revision of borders, namely the reacquisition of Danzig and the Polish Corridor and a rectification of the Upper Silesian border.⁸ Memel was not mentioned at all, and the question may be raised, in view of Stresemann's later position concerning Memel, whether the omission was accidental or intentional.

In this letter to the Crown Prince, Stresemann outlined the role which he expected Germany to play concerning ethnic Germans abroad. He reasoned that in Geneva Germany should become the spokesman for the entire German cultural community (*Kulturgemeinschaft*).⁹ The use of the League of Nations for the promotion of pan-Germanism could have seriously thwarted the quest for collective security in Europe. To Stresemann's credit it may be pointed out that while at Geneva he at no time publicly displayed such tendencies.

Stresemann, in German circles, liked to project himself as an ardent patriot and nationalist. He indicated to the Crown Prince in the above letter that he, Stresemann, was in no position to advocate publicly the aims which he outlined privately.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Stresemann wrote an anonymous article in the *Hamburger Fremdenblatt* on September 14, 1925. In this article he argued that Germany's future task was to protect German national minorities abroad and to ensure that international agreements affecting members of the German national minority be carried out, the ultimate aim of German foreign policy being the revision of the Eastern borders of Germany which, in his own words, were "intolerable".¹¹

The championing of the rights of ethnic Germans abroad eventually led to Germany's involvement in the internal affairs of foreign countries, an outstanding characteristic of the Nazi regime. It appears in retrospect that it was Stresemann himself who set the tone concerning the relationship between Germany and German contingents abroad. In the summer of 1925, at a Conference of the *Bund der Auslandsdeutschen*, held in Berlin, Stresemann stated, apparently with enthusiasm, before several thousand Germans from abroad that Germany hopefully soon would become a member of the League of Nations and thus be in a position to alleviate the plight of the German minorities abroad.¹² Stresemann thereby rendered support to German organizations in Eastern Europe and to German minority activities in the Baltic area, Memel included. Such moral support, buttressed by clandestine financial assistance, especially in Memel, resulted in the alienation of ethnic Germans from the population of the countries in which they were residing. Stresemann, who in some instances liked to pose as a cosmopolitan European, thus emerges as the champion of the oppressed Germans abroad. His affiliation with the *Bund* reveals that he was not at all averse to identify with German chauvinistic organizations abroad. The *Bund der Auslandsdeutschen*, officially listed as a non-political organization promoting German cultural interests abroad, was for all practical purposes fostering pan-German objectives and attracted chauvinists long before 1933.¹³

Stresemann's concern for the alien Germans did not, however, greatly affect his foreign policy. To be sure, he was willing to exploit friction between ethnic Germans and the foreign governments diplomatically but, unlike Hitler later, Stresemann was not inclined to dramatize the real and alleged injustices perpetrated upon German minorities in Eastern Europe.

Basing his statecraft on the principles of Realpolitik, Stresemann was consistent in pursuing one of his main territorial objectives, the possibility of border revision vis-à-vis Poland. For this purpose he endeavored to utilize, if possible, the German - Soviet Friendship and Non - Aggression Pact of 1926. Officially Stresemann went on record advocating the need for improved German - Russian relations for their own sake. In a speech in Stuttgart in April, 1926, Stresemann repudiated the notion of an anti-Bolshevik crusade. In a radio speech on May 1, he suggested that the different social and political systems in Germany and Russia should have no bearing on the traditional German - Russian friendship.¹⁴ What Stresemann did not mention publicly was the fact that the above treaty might prove useful to Germany in applying some pressure on Poland concerning territorial adjustments. On June 30, 1926, Stresemann dispatched confidential directives to all German missions abroad, to explore the possibilities for a peaceful revision of the Eastern borders. As of this date Stresemann regarded a reconstruction of the old German border minus Posen within the realm of possibility.¹⁵

While in Eastern Europe Germany was trying to play Russia against Poland, Lithuania was anxious to utilize the friction among the greater powers to her own advantage. Lithuania's main concern was to preserve Lithuanian sovereignty over Memel and at the same time win support against Poland in Vilna. It appeared within the realm of probability that the Soviet Union would continue to back Lithuania vis-à-vis Poland over Vilna and there was no reason why Germany might not also go on record as sympathizing with the Lithuanian position in Vilna.

The Lithuanian calculation above was reflected in the Non - Aggression Treaty between Lithuania and the Soviet Union in 1926. To Russia, which endeavored to prevent the formation of an anti-Soviet Baltic Alliance, this treaty was of significance. The Lithuanians, fully realizing the importance of this agreement for the Soviet Union, insisted that the Soviet Union guarantee Lithuania's borders. While the Soviet Union appears to have been willing to assume a pro-Lithuanian stand over Vilna in the proposed Soviet - Lithuanian Treaty, it had misgivings about a similar stand in regard to Memel. The Soviet Ambassador in Germany, N. Krestinski, duly informed Stresemann that Russia was uneasy about Lithuanian demands that the Soviet Union commit herself in behalf of Lithuanian hegemony in Memel. Before taking any action, the Russians wanted to ascertain Stresemann's feelings about a possible Memel clause in the final draft of the Lithuanian - Soviet Friendship Pact.¹⁶ When Stresemann, needless to say, showed little enthusiasm, the Soviet ambassador quickly proposed an alternate solution: if Germany were willing to go along with some statement in the Lithuanian - Soviet Pact to the effect that the Memel issue was of primary concern to Germany and Lithuania, Russia could go on record that it was refraining from assuming any initiative in this matter. Stresemann, foreseeing difficulties with Lithuania over the last formulation, informed Krestinski that his proposal, while probably acceptable to Germany, needed further exploration.¹⁷

On May 11, 1926, Stresemann sent a wire to the German ambassador to Russia wherein he made a reference to Krestinski's above proposal and expressed his doubts whether Lithuania would be willing, in view of the fact that the Memel issue had been settled by the Memel Convention, to deliberate the future of Memel with Germany. Since the enactment of the Soviet - Lithuanian non-aggression treaty was in the interest of Germany, Stresemann advised his ambassador in Moscow to go along with a statement which, avoiding references to the Memel Convention, would make a point that the Memel issue was of some interest to Germany and Lithuania, while the Soviet Union was a disinterested party.¹⁸ Apparently Stresemann was driving at the formulation of an ambiguous statement which might please Lithuania without compromising the Soviet Union. To be sure, Stresemann himself was a master of diplomatic ambiguity whenever there was need for it.

On May 20, 1926, Krestinski informed Stresemann that the Lithuanians insisted on a statement whereby the Soviet Union would refrain from taking initiative to submit the Memel issue to international deliberations. Stresemann consented on the understanding that the proviso not be entered in the body of the Soviet -Lithuanian Non - Aggression Treaty but be handled in the form of a separate note.¹⁹

Evidently Stresemann calculated that the above mentioned pacts would weaken the position of Poland and facilitate Germany's endeavors concerning territorial adjustments vis-à-vis Poland. In a letter to Friedrich Sthamer, German

Ambassador in Britain, Stresemann indicated that a succession of minor territorial revisions in favor of Germany would merely prejudice Germany's ability to settle the Corridor problem. As of 1926, Stresemann stipulated that Poland might be maneuvered into territorial revisions because of her internal political difficulties and economic plight.[20](#)

While Stresemann was investigating the possibilities of highpressuring Poland into territorial adjustments, the Soviet - Lithuanian Pact was nearing completion. On August 5, 1926, State Secretary Carl Theodor von Schubert, who on record was a stronger nationalist than Stresemann, stressed during a conversation with Maxim Litvinov that "Memel, after all, was German." In an attempt to prevent that inclusion of the Memel clause in the Soviet - Lithuanian Treaty, Schubert stated that Germany presently was not in a position to regain the territory and for the time being had to settle for what was possible under the circumstances, i.e. the utilization of the Memel Statute for German interests. Schubert was thereupon reassured by Litvinov that the Russian - Lithuanian Treaty was patterned on the Russian - German Treaty and featured no territorial guarantees, its main objective being to prevent Lithuania from a rapprochement with Poland.[21](#)

On September 30, 1926, Krestinski was able to advise State Secretary von Schubert that the Memel clause had been omitted altogether from the final draft of the Soviet - Lithuanian Treaty, the Russians "having come closer to the Lithuanian point of view over the Vilna dispute."[22](#) This outcome must have been most pleasing to Stresemann who, while pursuing his Corridor problems, for the time being wanted no trouble with Lithuania and held it in Germany's interest not to magnify the Memel issue which was being debated in the League of Nations.

Lithuania, too, was little inclined to worsen her relations with Germany. On October 16, 1926, the Lithuanian envoy in Berlin, V. Sidzikauskas, inquired with Ministerialdirektor Wilhelm Wallroth about the possibility of a Lithuanian - German Non - Aggression Pact somewhat along the lines of the Lithuanian - Soviet Pact.[23](#) Wallroth, who personally did not think much of this project, informed Sidzikauskas that a Lithuanian -German Pact might constitute a dangerous deviation from the principles of Locarno and added at that time that Germany was viewing its Eastern border problems in a different light from those in the West, implying thereby that while Germany was reconciled to the territorial losses in the West, this was not the case as far as her Eastern frontiers were concerned.

On November 11, 1926, Stresemann informed the Lithuanian envoy that the development of cordial relations between Germany and Lithuania was being marred by Lithuania "de-Germanization" policies in Memel. Denying that his government was pursuing a policy of de-Germanization, the Lithuanian envoy pointed to the fact that in Memel there existed about 300 German language schools as opposed to about fifteen Lithuanian schools. According to Stresemann's account, the envoy is said to have maintained that the Lithuanian government had no intentions of suppressing German language and culture from which the Lithuanian nation could only benefit after years of suppression by the Russians. In a further attempt to disprove the German charges, the envoy is said to have pointed out that at the courts of law in Memel the German language was used almost exclusively due to the fact that the judges did not speak Lithuanian.[24](#) Stresemann records in his diary that he did not go into all the details of the matter and informed the envoy that he would respond to his comments more elaborately in due time.[25](#) Stresemann's diary suggests that Stresemann himself had no interest in magnifying the German - Lithuanian difficulties over Memel.

The Lithuanian envoy's remarks about German civilization are not necessarily a mere propaganda statement. While the older generation of Lithuanian intelligentsia had been largely educated in Russia, after World War I Lithuanians who studied abroad went to the West, often to Germany. Although this cannot be demonstrated empirically, it may still be argued that a large segment of the Lithuanian population admired Germany, be it only grudgingly. While admitting the superiority of the Germans, many Lithuanians tended to look down on the Poles and Russians.

The Russians, in the meantime, continued to worry about the rumors concerning the "Memel Swap" and probably suspected Stresemann of clandestine activities in this regard.[26](#) On December 2, 1926, at a meeting in Berlin attended by G. Stresemann, G. Chicherin, Krestinski, and C. Th. von Schubert, Secretary of State at the German foreign office, the question of the barter came up once again, Stresemann denying having ever discussed the possibility of such a deal with either England or any other power or deliberated about the matter in Geneva. Upon Chicherin's observation that Poland should be prevented from swallowing Lithuania and becoming a large power, Schubert observed, in allusion to Russian statements that Germany should render diplomatic support to Lithuania in Geneva vis-à-vis Poland, that Lithuania was making it very difficult for Germany to be her "guardian angel" at the League in view of the fact that in Lithuania proper and the Memel Territory in particular an anti-German policy was being carried out.[28](#)

In Lithuania, a new development occurred in December, 1926. The democratic government of K. Grinius and M. Sleževičius was overthrown by a military coup of the nationalist party (Tautininkai) in collusion with the Christian Democrats, who were still smarting from their parliamentary defeat of May, 1926. The conservative nationalist and clerical groups were apprehensive of the trends manifesting themselves in Lithuania since 1926. Much complaint was voiced about the proposed terminations of state financial support for the clergy as had been proposed by the socialist - populist government of Grinius - Sleževičius. Moreover, the nationalist faction was arguing that the democratic regime in Lithuania was too accommodating toward ethnic minority groups in the *Seimas* and regarded it as shocking that pro-German Memellanders in the Lithuanian parliament held the balance in support of the Sleževičius cabinet.

With the establishment of dictatorship in Lithuania under Antanas Smetona and A. Voldemaras, martial law, restricting democratic freedoms, was imposed on all of Lithuania including Memel Territory. While the implementation of martial law in

the Memel Territory no doubt contributed to friction between Lithuania and the pro-German Memellanders, neither Voldemaras nor Smetona could be accused of anti-German attitudes. Smetona had urged moderation in Memel as early as 1923, at the time when he was the special plenipotentiary of the Lithuanian Government. Voldemaras, now beginning to assume the role of a political prima donna, was particularly eager to cement better ties between Lithuania and Germany. As Voldemaras had the reputation as being vehemently anti-Polish and markedly pro-German, Stresemann was not alarmed about the new situation in Lithuania.²⁹ The Soviet Union, on the other hand, was uneasy about the consequences of the Lithuanian coup d'etat. The Russians anticipated Polish action against Lithuania, possibly an invasion of Lithuania, and voiced their concern to Stresemann who, however, calmed down Krestinski on December 22, 1926.³⁰ At that time Stresemann also informed Krestinski that (Austen) Chamberlain was categorically opposed to a Corridor - Memel swap at Geneva, where the issue had come up informally.³¹

Russian apprehensions about a possible Polish invasion of Lithuania were calmed down in Berlin as well as in Warsaw.³² Although it is true that the Polish government was involved in clandestine activities aimed at overthrowing the regime of Smetona and Voldemaras and replacing it with pro-Polish statesmen,³³ Poland was not interested in precipitating another crisis. When the Lithuanian authorities succeeded in crushing pro-Polish underground activities in Lithuania, Poland refrained from intensifying the Polish - Lithuanian conflict any further. It appears that Litvinov received ample assurances in Warsaw that Poland was not contemplating military action against Lithuania. A report to that effect was made to Berlin on December 25, 1926, by the German ambassador in Moscow, Count von Brockdorff - Rantzau. As of that date, Litvinov had no more quarrel with the fact that Voldemaras was becoming the strongman in Lithuania.³⁴

In his capacity as prime minister and foreign minister, Voldemaras was very successful in establishing a fine working relationship with Stresemann.³⁵ By the same token Voldemaras was not averse to the cultivation of the Russians. The acceleration of the Polish - Lithuanian dispute over Vilna in the fall of 1927 reinforced earlier Russian fears that Poland might overrun Lithuania, Memel included, and that consequently Danzig and the Corridor might lose importance to Poland, resulting in an eventual German - Polish rapprochement.³⁶ Although Soviet diplomats at foreign missions were instructed to take a firm stand on this matter and to warn Warsaw that Polish military action against Lithuania might result in Russian military intervention, the Soviet government was nevertheless unwilling to commit itself to this effect on paper. This caused considerable chagrin to Voldemaras who was aiming at a concrete Russian commitment such as a Soviet - Lithuanian military alliance.³⁷

Russian fears concerning the possibility of a German - Polish rapprochement were no doubt justified. The flexible Stresemann did indeed meet with J. Pilsudski, the Polish dictator, in 1927 and, according to a reliable source, the possibility of the Memel - Danzig swap came up.³⁸ Details concerning this conversation are unfortunately not available, and it remains unclear whether the discussion of this topic was initiated by the Poles or by Stresemann himself. As Stresemann was temporarily diverted by more important issues such as the problem of the evacuation of the Rhineland and the revision of the Dawes Plan, nothing definite was agreed upon between Germany and Poland concerning territorial arrangements.³⁹

There remains little doubt that Stresemann was very seriously interested in the possibility of the swap.⁴⁰ J. A. van Hamel, the High Commissioner of the League of Nations in Danzig, reports of a visit with Stresemann who in an "entirely noncommittal manner" had asked van Hamel's opinion about making Memel a Polish port.⁴¹ According to this report, van Hamel could not see how such a barter could be implemented and had asked Stresemann how he thought Lithuania would react to such an arrangement. Moreover, van Hamel expressed doubts that the port of Memel was a "fair equivalent" to Danzig.⁴² The gist of van Hamel's conversation with Stresemann over Memel, published in 1933, was picked up by Polish and Lithuanian newspapers, producing a great deal of apprehension in Lithuania.⁴³

Stresemann obviously could not publicly advertise such ideas which, to many German nationalists, would amount to treason. It is interesting to note, however, that other politicians of the Weimar Republic were interested in the possibility of a barter as well. Around 1927, Rudolf Breitscheid, the foreign relations expert of SPD, is reported to have favored the idea of rewarding Poland with "Lithuanian territory" in lieu of the Corridor.⁴⁴

In 1927, in view of the Lithuanian - Polish conflict over Vilna, the possibility of a Polish invasion of Lithuania was not at all improbable. As such invasion would terminate all possible "exchanges" and disrupt the status quo in Eastern Europe, it was in the interest of Stresemann to establish closer ties with Poland and, moreover, to tone down the dispute between Poland and Lithuania. When Voldemaras fought Pilsudski at the League of Nations over Vilna on December, 1927, Stresemann tried to prevent further clashes between Lithuania and Poland⁴⁵ and offered his services as an "honest broker" concerning the impending Lithuanian - Polish negotiations which were to be carried out in Königsberg. The Conference of Königsberg took place during the period March 30 to April 2, 1928, but failed to yield appreciable results; diplomatic relations between Poland and Lithuania were not resumed until after the Polish ultimatum to Lithuania in 1938.⁴⁶

At the same time, in December, 1927, Stresemann met in Königsberg with leading representatives of East Prussian officialdom and agrarian interests and assured them that Pilsudski had no intentions of overrunning East Prussia because he, Pilsudski, did not want Poland to acquire any more minorities.⁴⁷ In his typically vague fashion, Stresemann assured his East Prussian audience that the Corridor issue would be resolved by peaceful means, i.e., with the collaboration of

Berlin, London, Paris, and in accordance with the "spirit of Locarno". He himself, Stresemann said, was avoiding any commitments to Poland concerning Germany's Eastern frontiers.[48](#)

In the meantime, Voldemaras was in the process of cementing the relations between Germany and Lithuania. In January, 1928, he traveled to Berlin to meet with Stresemann and used the opportunity to express his gratitude to Stresemann for his assistance to Lithuania vis-à-vis Poland at Geneva.[49](#) As a result of this meeting on January 29, 1928, a Treaty of Arbitration was agreed upon between Germany and Lithuania, providing for smoother procedures in the handling of future disagreements between the two countries.[50](#) As was the case with comparable treaties of arbitration at the time, Germany and Lithuania agreed to submit all mutual disagreements which could not be resolved through regular diplomatic channels to the Permanent Court of International Justice at Hague.[51](#)

Much more significant, from Voldemaras' point of view, was a agreement between Germany and Lithuania governing mutual frontiers. Stresemann agreed therein that the Treaty of Versailles was to be regarded as a basis for drawing the borders between Lithuania and Germany and thus officially went on record as including the Memel area under Lithuanian jurisdiction.[52](#) Voldemaras later stated in connection with the above treaty that he had succeeded in accomplishing that which Lithuania had been unable to achieve in all of earlier history, i.e., the complete acquisition of the Memel Territory. By having secured Stresemann's approval to the new Lithuanian borders, he claimed to have brought to fruition the incomplete mission of Vytautas the Great of 1422.[53](#) The treaty, however, was phrased in such an ambiguous way that it was subject to various interpretations. Brushing aside the voices of his critics who were skeptical about Germany's intentions and apprehensive of the traditional "Drang nach Osten" policy, Voldemaras proclaimed that Lithuania had no more reason to fear future colonization from Germany.[54](#)

What was the real significance of the border agreement between Lithuania and Germany? Although the Memel Territory was included within Lithuania, there is nothing in the treaty to suggest that Germany was recognizing the incorporation of Memel Territory into Lithuania. It was phrased in such an ambiguous way that if the need arose, Stresemann could easily prove that he had no intentions of signing Memel away to Lithuania.

It is probable that Stresemann, in agreeing to this treaty, was primarily guided by economic considerations, a number of very annoying border problems having arisen between Memel and Germany. Smuggling of goods between Memel and East Prussia as well as fishing offenses produced headaches for both Lithuania and Germany.[55](#) In 1928, various commercial treaties were agreed upon between Lithuania and Germany to regulate commerce, particularly that between Memel and Germany. The treaty settling border problems provided for a more effective prosecution of offenders in either country. Its provisions were primarily applicable to fishermen from the Memel Territory entering Germany illegally or vice versa. If an offense was committed on the spot, German or Lithuanian police officers could pursue the offenders into Germany or Lithuania.[56](#)

The treaty settling the border problems between Germany and Lithuania was ratified in April, 1929, and printed in the German *Reichsgesetzblatt* on April 30, 1929. The full text stipulated that the "frontier between Lithuania and Poland had not been fixed, and that consequently the last point in the line marking the Lithuanian - German frontier cannot be indicated for the present" and provoked a Polish reaction. On May 22, 1929, Poland complained to Germany about the above clause and registered this complaint with the League of Nations.[57](#)

The implications of Stresemann's unwillingness to acknowledge Polish hegemony in Vilna can be subject to various speculations. On the surface, Stresemann merely indicated that Germany was not ready to promote an official rapprochement with Poland and thus antagonize the Soviet Union. At the same time it is not outside the realm of probability that Stresemann would have offered Poland all of Lithuania in exchange for the Corridor if an opportunity to do so had arisen. On the record, to be sure, the border agreement between Lithuania and Germany coincided with the Russian position toward Lithuania, i.e., non-recognition of the occupation of Vilna by Poland and preservation of Lithuania's position in Memel.

Whatever the motivations of Stresemann, he pursued the line that good relations between Germany and Lithuania were of paramount significance on account of the fact that Lithuania constituted the only overland bridge between Germany and the Soviet Union.[58](#)

Throughout his career as foreign minister, Stresemann pursued Realpolitik and tried to get the best deals for Germany under the most trying circumstances.[59](#) It is hardly surprising that a great statesman such as Stresemann was able to make a distinction between the reacquisition of the Corridor and that of Memel. If Stresemann could have succeeded in exchanging Memel for the Corridor, he would no doubt have done so, at the same time concocting new schemes for reacquiring Memel as well. As far as Lithuania was concerned, Germany was always in the position to magnify the "plight of the German minority" in Lithuania in order to precipitate action against Lithuania if the need arose. This is precisely who happened after 1933.

- 1 Henry Bernhard (ed.), *Gustav Stresemann: Vermächtnis* (3 vols.: Berlin: Ullstein, 1932), II, 172. Hereafter cited as *Vermächtnis*.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 Cf. Walter Schätzel, *Dos Reich und das Memelland* (Berlin: Junker and Dünnhaupt, 1943), p. 186.
- 4 Edith Kerstein, *Die Entwicklung der deutsch - litauischen Wirtschaftsbeziehungen im ersten Jahrzehnt seit Bestehen des litauischen Staates unter besonderer Berücksichtigung seiner wirtschaftlichen Struktur* (Frankfurt-Main: 1934), p. 47.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 52.
- 6 Comment by Maurice Gerthwol in Viscount D'Abernon, *The Diary of an Ambassador*, III, (Garden City: Doubleday and Do-ran, 1931), 149.
- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 150 - 51.
- 8 Bernhard, *Vermächtnis*, II, 553.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 554.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 555.
- 11 *Ibid.*, pp. 171 - 72.
- 12 Count Ernst Reventlow, *Minister Stresemann als Staatsmann und Anwalt des Weltgewissens* (München: J. F. Lehmanns Verlag, 1926), p. 77.
- 13 Kurt F. Bieligg, *Stresemann* (London, New York, and Melbourne: Hutchinson and Co., 1944), p. 70.
- 14 Cl. Diether Posser, *Deutsch - sowjetische Beziehungen 1917-1941* (Frankfurt-Main: Stimme Verlag, 1963), p. 35.
- 15 Wolfgang Ruge, *Stresemann* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1965), p. 186.
- 16 Germany, Auswärtiges Amt, Documents, Series B (1925-1933), II, 459. Hereafter cited as AA.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 460.
- 18 *Ibid.*, Stresemanns Telegramm an die Botschaft in Moskau, Berlin, May 11, 1926, p. 461.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Ruge, *Stresemann*, p. 187.
- 21 AA, Series B (1925-1933), II, Aufzeichnung des Staatssekretärs von Schubert, Berlin, August 5, 1926, 167 -168.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 288.
- 23 *Ibid.*, Aufzeichnung des Ministerialdirektors Wollroth, Berlin, October 16, 1926, p. 302.
- 24 Bernhard, *Stresemann*, III, 226.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 227.
- 26 AA, Series B (1925-1933), II, Aufzeichnung Stresemanns, Berlin, November 4, 1926, 1315.
- 27 *Ibid.*, Aufzeichnung des Staatssekretärs des Auswärtigen Amtes von Schubert, Berlin, December 2, 1926, p. 372.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 373 - 74. The Russians, it might be mentioned, were not yet members of the League of Nations.
- 29 *Ibid.*, Undatierte Aufzeichnung Stresemanns, p. 463.
- 30 *Ibid.*, p. 464.
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 *Ibid.*, Der Botschafter in Moskau Graf von Brockdorff - Rantzau an das Auswärtige Amt, Moscow, December 25, 1926, p.470.
- 33 Aleksandras Merkelis, *Antanas Smetona* (New York: Amerikos Lietuvių Tautinė Sąjunga, 1964), p. 359.
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- 57 OJ, September, 1929, Note from the Polish Government to the German Government, Berlin, May 22, 1929, p. 1322.
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- 59 See Hans - Wolf Dessau, *Stresemanns Weg. Untergang oder Befreiung?* (Berlin: Bredow, 1925), p. 15; cf. Hans W. Gatzke, *Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany* (New York: Norton Paperback, 1969), pp. 107-116.