

France after the First World War

Szerző dezs

Angol érettségi tétel

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France felt betrayed by her allies after the Treaty of Versailles. Clemenceau could not get through his will, the Rhine Frontier and in addition to this France's safety was not guaranteed in case of a German military revival. After President Wilson's failure, the French could rely neither on the Americans, nor on the British so they had to look after new allies. This led to the so-called Little Entente in the 1920s, which was an alliance with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia. This alliance was formed against Germany, Russia and Hungary. France had to walk her own way, so as the French saw signs of German reluctance to fulfill their duty prescribed by the Treaty of Versailles, they took direct action. It happened in Frankfurt in 1920, the Saar in 1922 and in the Ruhr in 1923. (1)

France was still a major world power - even if a significantly weakened one - in the 1920s. The economy seemed to be solid enough and the national currency also remained strong. (The latter was a conscious effort of the post-war governments, who wanted to prevent inflation by keeping the franc's value on the same level artificially, even if it made exporting difficult.) However, the public was disappointed with the Treaty, since the country's sacrifices were enormous (10 per cent of her men were killed and the Northern provinces were devastated) and still they were not sufficiently compensated for it. As a result of this Clemenceau and Briand, the politicians who were regarded to be responsible for the negative results, were forced to resign soon. The first government after the war became an anti-German right-wing coalition, the Bloc National and it found the ideal Prime Minister, who could force the Germans to pay reparations according to the Treaty, in the person of Poincaré, a clever, humourless lawyer in 1922.(2)

As Germany fell behind in paying for the damage caused by her, Poincaré

did not hesitate to act: in January 1923 French and Belgian troops occupied the Ruhr industrial area in order to force the Germans to pay. This decision later on turned out to be disastrous. The Germans chose the weapon of passive resistance and sabotage acts led to civilian deaths. The costs of the occupation also led to a financial crisis in France and as a result of this Poincaré resigned in 1924.

(3) The Bloc National was followed by a left-wing coalition, the Cartel des Gauches, but since this government was unable to deal with the crisis of the economy, Poincaré and a right-wing government was recalled in 1925. The following years until 1929 were a period of hope. Economic recovery started and the international relationship with Germany also improved: Foreign Minister Briand and his German colleague Stresemann could understand each other quite well. With the involvement of British Foreign Minister Austen Chamberlain, the three powers signed a Pact in Locarno in October 1925 which was followed by the

evacuation of the occupied zone of Cologne and the admission of Germany to the League of Nations with a permanent seat on the Council. Germany paid £400,000,000 for reparations between 1924 and 1930 which resulted in the development of the French economy. France strengthened both economically and politically and was about to regain her pre-war status, when the year of 1929 arrived.(4)

1929 was a watershed in post-World War I French history. The age of hope was over. Poincaré resigned because of his deteriorating condition, Briand lost office, Stresemann died and the Great Depression started off with the Wall Street crash. Hoover, the President of the USA imposed a moratorium on payment of reparations by Germany, while at the same time he insisted on the paying of France's war debts towards the States. Although, owing to governmental interference and nationalization, the French economy was able to resist the crisis until 1933, then both prices and unemployment started to raise sharply. This was the reason why France was the last country to be hit by the depression, but also the last to recover.

The depressed conditions created an ideal background for the flourishing of both left and

right extremist parties. While the parties of the moderate left, the Socialists and the Radicals were unable to co-operate - despite the fact that together they would have had enough support to get into governmental position -, the French Communist Party was getting stronger and stronger. In the elections of 1933 the Communists received 800, 000 votes compared to the Socialists's 2,000,000. They were also able to set up their own trade union CGTU, which meant a significant concurrence to the socialist CGT.(5) Fascist organization, like Croix de Feu also emerged and their blackshirts appeared on the streets soon. Meanwhile governments changed rapidly but none of them was able to stop the crisis. This fact provided a wonderful opportunity for Communists and Fascists to concentrate their fire from left and right on the incompetence and corruption of republican politics.(6)

In February 1934 the Fascist Leagues organized a huge anti-government demonstration because of the so-called Stavisky-affair. Stavisky was a shady night club owner, with influential acquaintances in the world of high society and politics, who was found shot on the head and though he probably committed suicide, there were rumours going on about his connections to politicians, who eventually got rid of him this way. At the demonstration there was clash between the police and the protesters, fifteen people died and more than a thousand were wounded. This was a deterring example of the leftist parties: the fascists were a serious threat and they had to do something against it. In 1936, the Radicals, the Socialist and the Communist put aside their problems with each other and formed a coalition, the Popular Front and they won an overwhelming victory at the general elections. Out of the three parties

the Communist made the largest gains with their 62 seats, while Blum, the Socialist leader became Premier.(7)

The Popular Front carried out some major social reforms including the raise of the industrial workers's salaries, the reducing of the working week to 40 hours and paid holidays. The arms industry was nationalized and the armament programme was accelerated because of the fascist challenge. Unfortunately, all these decisions meant a burden on the depressed economy and the crisis went on. Blum

had to resign in 1937, when he wanted to make exporting capital illegal. The Popular Front failed at the worst moment. In March 1936 Hitler already proclaimed the remilitarization of the Rhineland and sent his troops there. His gambling proved to be successful, since the remilitarization resulted in the crumbling of the whole French system of alliances. Her eastern allies realized that France could not defend them against Germany so they tried to come to terms with the latter.(8) Meanwhile the French fascists tried to ride the waves of public disappointment by canting slogans like ”Might not Hitler be better than Blum?”. French politicians were demoralized and the resistance towards a possible German attack was feeble.

Blum’s successor was the Radical Daladier, who could appear as the strong man of French politics concentrating on national defence in a mounting domestic and foreign crisis. The Anschluss happened in March 1938 and Daladier, Chamberlain and Mussolini accepted the partition of Czechoslovakia at Munich on 29 September. The Treaty of Versailles and the French system of alliances laid in ruins.(9)

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