It is an honor and pleasure to evoke the memory of Hermann-Josef Rupieper. He was an energetic, enthusiastic colleague, an accomplished historian, and a good friend. I got to know him during his time in Washington, DC, first when he was the acting director of the German Historical Institute in 1987 then, during his tenure at the Woodrow Wilson Center in 1990. Like all academics that labor over twentieth century international history, we “stayed in touch” as he moved from Berlin to Marburg to Halle. Most recently, Hermann was a valued collaborator in helping to organize an international conference “The Year 1956 in Europe.” He was to discuss “The German Question.” We shall greatly miss him at the proceedings three months from now in Slovakia!

Hermann-Josef Rupieper brought a sensible and balanced perspective to the study of European International History and, especially, to U.S.-European relations. Himself a post-war baby-boomer, born in the Ruhr, Hermann did his undergraduate study at the Free University of Berlin during the ‘roaring’ 1960s before heading west for the beauty and tranquility of Stanford, California to do his Ph.D. study with Gordon Craig. Fellow Stanford students fondly remember his serious mien, impeccable English, and wry sense of humor.


Hermann Rupieper’s work fit prominently into a dazzling decade of studies of the 1920s, made possible by the flood of archival openings in Great Britain, France, the U.S., Belgium, and Italy – added to the huge store of German documentary sources that became available after World War II – a decade marked by the pioneering work of Denise Artaud, Jacques Bariéty, and Georges Soutou in France, Gerald Feldman, David Felix, Jon Jacobson, Edward Keeton, Melvin Leffler, Sally Marks, Walter McDougall, Charles Maier, and Stephen Schuker in the U.S., and Karl-Ludwig Holtfrerich, Peter Krüger, Ernst Laubach, Werner Link and Klaus Schwabe in Germany.

In The Cuno Government, Hermann had not only the opportunity to consult a myriad of sources but also to evaluate the conclusions of his fellow-archive dwellers. His was an almost exhaustive investigation not only of German political, economic, and diplomatic records and private papers but also of industrial and labor union records. And, in addition, to the French and British sources, Hermann combed the U.S. records of the period, the contemporary press, the major published documentation, and a trove of diaries and memoirs to relate the terrible year history of Germany and Europe.

More than a generation away from the 1970s, it will undoubtedly be difficult for many of you to imagine the ferocity of the debate over the Ruhr occupation of 1923, considered the last battle of World War I, and that entire annus terribilis for the Weimar Republic of hyper-inflation, communist uprisings, and the Hitler putsch. Oblivious to this little Historikerstreit, U.S. text books and television documentaries quoted (as, as far as I know, still quote) Nicholson and Keynes over the political and economic idiocies of Versailles and feature cartoons of a hideous Marianne stomping on a hapless, helpless Ger-
many in 1923, and the general public in this country still believes that the Allies venge-
fulness and cupidity created Weimar’s demise and Hitler’s triumph.

In that charged scholarly realm that Rupieper entered in the 1970s, there was a
great chasm between the two interpretations of Weimar. On one side of the divide were
Hans Gatzke and Fritz Fischer, reinforced by the work of Marks and Schuker, who identi-
ified Germany’s first republic as a link between the Second and Third Reichs, as an old-
guard dominated regime whose sham fulfillment policies masked treaty revisionism and
the desire to dominate Europe. The other side was composed of historians who defended
Weimar (among them Felix, Feldman, and Krüger) for operating as uprightly as possible
under impossible circumstances. In the middle were those such as Artaud, Holtfrerich,
Maier, and Schwabe, who did comparative European and transatlantic history and broad-
ened our knowledge of the 1920s by inserting the economic, cultural, social, and ideo-
logical dimensions of its diplomacy.

Was Germany’s first republic an unrepentant Second Reich in a new guise, will-
ing to risk occupation and even to ruin its own currency in order to avoid the financial
consequences of Ludendorff’s failure to win in the West? Was France able and deter-
mined to destroy German unity and its economic power? What were Great Britain’s mo-
tives in emitting sighs of disapproval over Paris’s policy, failing to halt the Ruhr occupa-
tion, but ultimately demanding a “solution”? And what were America’s motives in avoid-
ing as much responsibility as possible for the reparations tangle but repeatedly cajoling
the Europeans to clean up their own house? These were some of the questions over which
Temper flared at conferences and ink spilled in articles and reviews during those almost
halcyon days of Cold War détente and Ostpolitik.

What about the other side? Little was said about the Soviet role in the early 1920s,
because little was known at the time, or even now. Piotr Wandycz investigated the roles
of the Poles and Czechs; Sally Marks brought in the Belgians; and Charles Maier the Ital-
ians. In communist Eastern Europe, Alena Gajanová studied Czechoslovak foreign policy
and Magda Adam dissected the Little Entente. Nonetheless, the main discourse of the
1970s was over the policies of the very powers – the U.S., France, Germany, and Great
Britain – that had formed the core of the post-World War II Atlantic alliance and how
they tried, and failed in the early 1920s to solve the Franco-German quarrel, to reintegrate
a defeated Reich, and to forge a lasting peace in Europe.

Moreover, despite the then popularity of the Annales school, there were no
Braudelians among us international historians looking at the longue durée; instead, archi-
vial scholars such as Hermann-Josef Rupieper produced meticulous analyses of individu-
als, decision-making, and actions under a very intense microscope Ruhr specialists in the
1970s heatedly disputed the precise moment when Raymond Poincaré lost patience with
Berlin (and London) and took the fateful step of using force to collect reparations.

This microhistory was both the strength and weakness of the diplomatic history of
the 1920s. To be sure, the stakes in these inquiries were extremely high, and not only in
scholarly and professional terms, because they also reflected personal judgments on the
responsibility of specific people and governments for the never-resolved struggle be-
tween Berlin and its former enemies as well as for the damaging dissonance within the
Allied camp that Weimar and Nazi Germany so deftly exploited.
On the other hand, the more we combed the archives of one, two, three, four, even five of the actors, the more difficult it became to step back and produce a longer as well as larger analysis.

In The Cuno Government and Reparations, Hermann Rupieper entered at the last stages of this debate. There is no doubt of his sympathy for the German side. He treated the Rathenau-Wirth policy of “fulfillment,” with its underlying goal of revising the London schedule of payments sympathetically, without questioning its tactics or motives. He depicted Poincaré as tough and unyielding, the British as moderate and realistic, the Americans as well intentioned if also divided and distracted.

Under Rupieper’s pen, into the dangerous arena of French threats and German defiance in the fall of 1922 enters Wilhelm Cuno. Born in Thuringia and trained in law, the forty-six-year-old Cuno had served the imperial government for ten years before his appointment as head of Ballin’s Hamburg-Amerika shipping line. Contesting Cuno’s negative reception in the contemporary Allied and German press, Rupieper characterizes the new German chancellor as intelligent, charming, and well-connected as well as a decidedly unpolitical figure to whom President Friedrich Ebert turned in November 1922 when Wirth was forced to resign.

Cuno’s “cabinet above parties -- his Geschäftsministerium – was advertised as a continuation of his predecessor’s diplomacy, but with this crucial difference. According to Rupieper, “the new chancellor had always been convinced that either economic lunatics or Machtpolitiker, set upon destruction of Germany’s economic potential had invented the Versailles treaty’s reparations clauses.” If the Allies had wanted a solution, Cuno was prepared to negotiate and submit his own proposals; but under no circumstances was he prepared to continue reparation payments without a reduction of the London Schedule of Payments.

The portents were not favorable. Cuno’s abandonment of even the pretense of fulfillment set the stage for a confrontation with Poincaré; his expectation that Britain and the United States would halt France was chimerical; and, perhaps most dangerously, his stubborn insistence on creating a non-political cabinet weakened the already frail fabric of Weimar democracy on the eve of its first major international crisis. Moreover the decisive role of German industrial leaders worked against Cuno; divided and, yes, stubborn, the fractious and divided members of the RDI refused to accommodate even the mildest British and American suggestions and also set impossible conditions for negotiating a new reparations agreement -- including the immediate evacuation of the Rhineland.

Rupieper did not hold Cuno responsible for the impending catastrophe. Instead, he applauded Cuno’s last-minute proposals that foreshadowed the Locarno pacts three years later, to sign a 30-year nonaggression pact with his Rhenish neighbors, while also admitting that the time and the stars were scarcely right for this maneuver.

At issue in the early winter of 1922 was the very meaning of reparations: if to Cuno, the British, and the Americans the reparations dispute was a “purely business question” that needed to be solved calmly and lucidly by the experts, to the French it was a life-and-death matter of who had actually won the Great War. On December 9, Poincaré admitted to his allies, “There was no chance of raising the money to balance France’s budget if nothing was done as regards Germany.” If Germany’s obligation was reduced, as Berlin and London were urging, the Chamber, having authorized billions for reconstruction, would toss Poincaré out. Responding to a last-minute British suggestion to
couple reparations and inter-allied debts, Poincaré issued the fateful warning that he
would never relegate France’s fate to a “Committee of Bankers.”

On January 11, after months of ignoring the shortfall in coal deliveries, the Reparation Commission declared Germany in default. French and Belgian troops, with reluctant Italian support and over British objections, entered the Ruhr. The event was scarcely unexpected, since France had threatened this action for three years. What was unanticipated was the uproar in Washington and London, which the French initially ignored.

Rupieper underlines Poincaré’s two grave miscalculations: that his coup de main would help solve interallied debts and reparations, and that international bankers would provide any loans with French and Belgian troops occupying the Ruhr.

Even more historically significant was France’s third mistake. The Ruhr occupation was an audacious political gamble by a deeply timid politician, which left France highly vulnerable to the German response. When Germany’s industry, population, and government refused to cooperate, the invader was caught in a web of its enormous financial and economic weakness. Rupieper, who listed but never defined France’s ultimate aims – simply to get more money and coal, to force negotiations with its allies, or actually to break up and dominate the Reich -- makes it clear from the start that all were impossible to achieve for the economically weak, politically divided Third Republic without German compliance and British cooperation.

According to Rupieper, Cuno made quite reasonable choices in the face of the invasion. Rupieper deems the policy of passive resistance as nothing less than “a fight for German existence and … a struggle for the preservation of German unity.” Indeed, this was not only a desperate form of reaction but also a nationalistic unifying force, generously financed by the Cuno government, and with funds that went mainly to heavy industry. Moreover, passive resistance also greatly contributed to the hyperinflation of 1923. On the other hand, Rupieper notes the Reich’s success in exploiting the economic differences among the allies and replacing Ruhr coal with imports from Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Great Britain.

Politically, however, Germany stood alone, except for the questionable support from Soviet Union. In contrast to their ambassadors in Berlin who immediately urged London and Washington to intervene, Britain, hesitating to antagonize France, whose collaboration it needed at the Lausanne Conference, maintained “benevolent neutrality,” and the U.S. government had little desire to intervene in a grave European political squabble. In the meantime French territorial ambitions expanded, now including the establishment of an autonomous Rhenish Republic, which the British resolutely opposed. Poincaré deluded himself that he was gathering bargaining chips, when, in fact, France itself was also becoming isolated.

The crisis escalated in the spring and early summer of 1923. Germany made futile efforts to divide the Allies and lure them into negotiations. France stood firm in its insistence on ending passive resistance. Several Americans tried to mediate. And Britain was helpless to control Poincaré.

Suddenly the clouds began to lift. On the domestic front, Cuno, in July 1923, faced with the catastrophic plunge in the mark, a huge budget deficit, and the looming danger of food riots and revolution, emerged from his strange passivity to craft tough tax-reform legislation; and in August, Curzon publicly ended Britain’s silence by publicly challenging the French occupation of the Ruhr.
But these two positive events came too late to save Cuno and his “non-party”
government. The great beneficiaries were Germany’s warring party leaders, who had sat
on the sidelines during the crisis and finally agreed to take responsibility and form a
Great Coalition.

In Rupieper’s final estimate, the Cuno government represented a highly danger-
ous interlude in German and European history. During these harrowing eight months
there was a suspension from fiscal, political, and national responsibility while Germany
more or less awaited rescue from industrial leaders within and the Anglo-Saxon powers
outside.

And help finally came. Suddenly the British Foreign Office and Treasury moved
into action and pressured France to accept an international commission of inquiry. Still,
the new government headed by Gustav Stresemann waited passively in Berlin, and the
new Coolidge administration emitted only cautious signs of support. According to
Rupieper, Poincaré ultimately bowed to London’s demands for a comprehensive inquiry
on reparations not because of British or American political pressure but because of the
looming threat to the franc. True, France continued to pursue its separatist schemes in the
Rhineland even after the Dawes committee was convened, but the game was up. Paris
could not, on its own, re-write the Versailles treaty and strip any further land from Ger-
many.

During the Dawes negotiations, according to Rupieper, Germany remained largely
passive, simply trying “to hold out as long as possible and yield as little to France as ex-
isting circumstances allowed.” To be sure, Stresemann was operating under the same illu-
sion as Cuno. The Dawes provisions, although scaling down reparations and opening the
way for stabilization and foreign loans were economically arduous and politically contro-
versial for Germany; but Stresemann contented himself with the support of London and
Washington, later claiming that the hugeness of Germany’s debt gave him an immeasur-
able control over the stabilization of Europe.

With the acceptance of the Dawes Plan in 1924, Rupieper pronounces the end of
the struggle over reparations. But was it? The problem of interallied debts was still not
solved, nor was the question of French [or Polish] security, nor the problem of German
irredentism. Indeed, even the reparations question itself was not settled. It was American
loans that funded German payments. And early on, Stresemann made clear his aims of
revising the Dawes figures and demanding the early evacuation of the Rhineland. What
would be the next steps of this liberated Germany? Rupieper gave no answer.

What we have is a microstudy of political behavior in hard times: of one of the
brief Weimar cabinets that had no parliamentary basis struggling against fractious domes-
tic interests and an overwhelming adversary. Rupieper’s Cuno launched passive resis-
tance but also made the disastrous decision to prolong it regardless of the financial, po-
litical, and social consequences of the ensuing hyperinflation. Rupieper’s Cuno failed to
convince the French to remove reparations from the realm of politics; it was the British –
far more than the Americans – who made this happen. Indeed, Rupieper’s Weimar never
submitted to France but it also never really shaped policy in London or Washington; and,
yes, it remained “a revisionist power par excellence.”

The principal question raised by Hermann-Josef Rupieper’s fine, compact anal-
ysis of the calamity of 1923 is as follows: Was Wilhelm Cuno’s brief moment on
the world stage – with his well-intentioned but hapless combination of passivity and defiance
– as well as the inconsistent and divided responses of Germany’s ex-enemies less the gateway to the deceptively tranquil ‘twenties than a perilous detour on the long, tortuous road to the pacification of Europe?

In his next work, Hermann-Josef Rupieper turned to the political, diplomatic and economic arrangements of the post-World War II period, which produced a real American commitment to European security and prosperity, reconciliation between France and West Germany, and, despite the reservations of Great Britain, a major step towards European unity. In the shadow of the Cold War in Europe, it seems that, notwithstanding some new forms of friction, ignorance, and confusion – as well as the enduring popular mythology about Versailles and Weimar -- the aged leaders of all four powers may have absorbed some of the “lessons” of the 1920s.