

Multinational Conventions and Agreements

LOCARNO TREATIES

TREATIES AT A GLANCE

Completed (Ratified)

October 16, 1925, at Locarno, Switzerland

Signatories

Germany, Belgium, Great Britain, France, Italy, Poland,
and Czechoslovakia

Overview

A group of five treaties, these agreements attempted to resolve security problems left unsettled by the TREATY OF VERSAILLES (1919) and related documents. The main treaty confirmed Germany's western borders with France and Belgium. Germany also signed nonaggression treaties with its eastern neighbors, Poland and Czechoslovakia. The Locarno Treaties made it possible for Germany to join the League of Nations, ushering in a fleeting interwar period of international harmony.

Historical Background

In the wake of the Paris Peace Conference and the Treaty of Versailles (1919) that ended World War I, Europe found itself turned in knots over unresolved issues, especially concerning war debts, reparations payments, and collective security. Although France was among the victors in World War I, it emerged from the war economically ravaged, with much of its young manhood dead. In contrast, Germany, the nominal loser, was positioned to become the predominant power in Europe. In negotiating the Treaty of Versailles with its allies, France had wanted to detach large portions of German territory in order to ensure its security. Great Britain and the United States persuaded France's Georges Clemenceau to relent on this demand in exchange for a guarantee of alliance. Subsequently, however, the U.S. Senate failed to ratify the Treaty of Versailles, effectively nullifying President Wilson's promises to France, and the League of Nations developed international security policies and procedures without teeth. An attempt to bolster the League's security options was made with the Geneva Protocol of 1924, but these measures were quickly abandoned.

Meanwhile, American bankers and British diplomats continued to push hard for repayment of the

debts, which caused France to grow even more punitive in its treatment of the defeated Germany. When hyperinflation threatened to make Germany's reparations payments useless, the French occupied the industrial Ruhr Valley and began negotiating directly with giant German firms like Krupps and Thyssen. They refused to evacuate the Rhineland, which had been demilitarized and under their control since the war, until the League of Nations set up by the peace conference guaranteed them some security from a resurgent Germany beyond the limitations placed on the size of the German army at the peace conference. Despite its cries of poverty when the United States or Britain brought up war debts, France, however, continued to maintain the largest army in Europe and to refuse the Weimar Republic a seat at the table in the League of Nations.

To allay French worries about security and get them out of the Ruhr and the Rhineland, as well as to pave the way for German entry into the League, the Allied nations met in Locarno, Switzerland. In this climate, a wary France entered into the Locarno Treaties, which at least provided for British support on a conditional basis and promised to stabilize eastern Europe. Britain, for its part, was pleased to make an agreement whereby they were pledged to support France on

conditionally and strictly on a defensive basis. British negotiators also saw any reduction in Franco-German tension as salutary for European peace. For the Germans, the Locarno Treaties were an opportunity to accept the territorial demands of the Treaty of Versailles while moving toward regaining its sovereignty. At Locarno the French and German foreign ministers embraced in a public show of reconciliation and swore to put the war behind them. The five treaties produced by the Locarno Conference, collectively called the Locarno Pact, were ultimately aimed at finally pacifying postwar Europe.

Terms

This group of five treaties was introduced by the Final Protocol of the Locarno Conference:

Pact of Locarno, 16 October 1925

Final Protocol of the Locarno Conference, 1925

The representatives of the German, Belgian, British, French, Italian, Polish, and Czechoslovak Governments, who have met at Locarno from the 5th to 16th October 1925, in order to seek by common agreement means for preserving their respective nations from the scourge of war and for providing for the peaceful settlement of disputes of every nature which might eventually arise between them,

Have given their approval to the draft treaties and conventions which respectively affect them and which, framed in the course of the present conference, are mutually interdependent:

Treaty between Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain, and Italy (Annex A).

Arbitration Convention between Germany and Belgium (Annex B).

Arbitration Convention between Germany and France (Annex C).

Arbitration Treaty between German and Poland (Annex D).

Arbitration Treaty between Germany and Czechoslovakia (Annex E).

Chief among the five Locarno treaties was the Treaty of Mutual Guarantee, signed by Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, and Italy. This document guaranteed to maintain the territorial status quo resulting from the frontiers between France and Germany and Germany and Belgium. The demilitarization of the Rhine (as provided in Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles) was reaffirmed and guaranteed. Germany, France, and Belgium pledged not to invade one another—except in the event of a “breach of Articles 42 or 43 of the said Treaty of Versailles, if such breach constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and by

reason of the assembly of armed forces in the demilitarized zone immediate action is necessary.” In this eventuality, France was given the right to resort to force. If either Belgium or Germany claimed a violation had been committed, they were obliged to bring the matter before the League of Nations. Nominally, both as League members and by virtue of the Treaty of Mutual Guarantee, Britain and Italy were committed to aid France in the event of a “flagrant breach” of the Treaty of Versailles. However, the language of Articles 2 and 4 of the Treaty of Mutual Guarantee was very carefully worded in order to distinguish between violation and flagrant violation of the demilitarized zone. This gave Britain as well as Italy considerable latitude in determining whether or not to activate the alliance with France on a given occasion:

Article 2

Germany and Belgium, and also Germany and France, mutually undertake that they will in no case attack or invade each other or resort to war against each other.

This stipulation shall not, however, apply in the case of:

1. The exercise of the right of legitimate defence, that is to say, resistance to a violation of the undertaking contained in the previous paragraph or to a flagrant breach of Articles 42 or 43 of the said Treaty of Versailles, if such breach constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and by reason of the assembly of armed forces in the demilitarized zone immediate action is necessary.

2. Action in pursuance of Article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations.

3. Action as the result of a decision taken by the Assembly or by the Council of the League of Nations or in pursuance of Article 15, paragraph 7, of the Covenant of the League of Nations, provided that in this last event the action is directed against a State which was the first to attack. . . .

Article 4

1. If one of the High Contracting Parties alleges that a violation of Article 2 of the present Treaty or a breach of Articles 42 or 43 of the Treaty of Versailles has been or is being committed, it shall bring the question at once before the Council of the League of Nations.

2. As soon as the Council of the League of Nations is satisfied that such violation or breach has been committed, it will notify its findings without delay to the Powers signatory of the present Treaty, who severally agree that in such case they will each of them come immediately to the assistance of the Power against whom the act complained of is directed.

3. In case of a flagrant violation of Article 2 of the present Treaty or of a flagrant breach of Articles 42 or 43 of the Treaty of Versailles by one of the High Contracting Parties, each of the other Contracting Parties hereby undertakes immediately to come to the help of the party against whom such a violation or breach has

been directed as soon as the said Power has been able to satisfy itself that this violation constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and that by reason either of the crossing of the frontier or of the outbreak of hostilities or of the assembly of armed forces in the demilitarized zone immediate action is necessary. Nevertheless, the Council of the League of Nations, which will be seized of the question in accordance with the first paragraph of this Article, will issue its findings, and the High Contracting Parties undertake to act in accordance with the recommendations of the Council provided that they are concurred in by all the members other than the representatives of the parties which have engaged in hostilities.

In addition to the Treaty of Mutual Guarantee, Germany signed arbitration treaties with France and with Belgium as well as with Poland and Czechoslovakia.

Consequences

Whereas the treaties between Germany and France and between Germany and Belgium were secured by the Treaty of Mutual Guarantee, those between Germany and Poland and between Germany and Czechoslovakia were not. What this meant was that if Germany violated the frontiers of France or Belgium, the other Allied signatories would be bound to come to the aid of either; however, if Germany violated the frontiers of its eastern neighbors, no such support from the Allies was guaranteed. In view of this, France subsequently concluded an agreement with Poland and Czechoslovakia, promising aid if Germany violated their territory. Since these separate agreements were not multinational in scope, the Locarno Treaties actually reduced France's ability to fulfill its commitments to Poland and Czechoslovakia.