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An individual’s mental map of the modern world is as conditioned by their state as by their own particular upbringing, social and educational background and personal circumstances. Raymond Poincaré was born at Bar-le-Duc in Lorraine in north-eastern France on 20 August 1860 and died in Paris on 16 October 1934. His political career ran from the 1880s to the 1930s in one of the most formative periods of modern French history coinciding with the bedding in and maturing of the Third Republic. For most of that period, he held the principal offices of state repeatedly from foreign and finance minister (four times a minister) to prime minister (four times) and president of the republic and was out of government for only a few years. He played crucial roles in organising France’s foreign and defence posture in the two years prior to the First World War, as well as the final decision to engage France in that conflict, the organisation of the war effort, the subsequent peace settlement, the reparations question, French occupation of the Ruhr in 1923 and the reorganisation of French finances and the stabilisation of the currency from 1926 to 1928. These were all critical exercises for France, Europe and, increasingly, the world. In all these actions, Poincaré’s decision-making was informed by a mixture of overt and ‘unspoken assumptions’ about France’s geopolitical position and interests that conditioned his freedom to choose.

This chapter analyses and evaluates Poincaré’s mental map through a series of narrowing concentric circles beginning with the conceptual underpinnings of how, during the Third Republic, the French perceived time, space and France, then how a Frenchman such as Poincaré would have perceived the world. This will take us to the empirical underpinnings of Poincaré’s world view and finally to how his mental map influenced his policy and decision-taking principally in relation to Germany.
The French, geography and history

Any understanding of Poincaré's mental map must begin with how a French citizen of this time perceived France's geography and its relationship to the wider world. Even in the nineteenth century, despite the loss of Alsace and Lorraine to Germany in 1871, France had the largest land mass in Europe, second only to Russia, approximately the same size as Germany and almost twice the size of Great Britain. This could be an advantage in terms of natural resources or when connected to an expanding population, which France no longer had after the mid-nineteenth century. But it could also be a disadvantage. For the historian Fernand Braudel, France was a victim of the immensity and diversity of its territory. This delayed its development of a unified national economy and the need to engage in international exchange in the way that smaller states such as the Netherlands and Britain did. Consequently, its largely immobile rural population was more inward-looking and locally focussed. Many Frenchmen had little sense of what geographical France represented. It was not until the introduction of free compulsory schooling in the 1880s that the French were made aware of the shape of the French state; before that time maps of France were rare.

However, with compulsory schooling the French more than compensated for their imprecise conception of France's geography. Indeed it could be argued that they developed a greater sense of their own geography and history than most other developed societies, precisely because those two disciplines were so politically important in the establishment of the French Republic. This is particularly important because history – one of the disciplines most consciously used to create a (republican) national identity in the late nineteenth century – has in modern times always been taught in conjunction with geography. One could not, and cannot today, study history in secondary schools or universities in France without geography.1 Ever since the nineteenth century, French historians have emphasised the essential link between history and geography. Jules Michelet (1798–1874) in the preface to his *Histoire de France* (1869), the school textbook on which Poincaré would have been brought up, wrote, ‘Without a geographical basis, the people, the historical actor, seems to walk in the air as in those Chinese paintings where the ground is missing.’ He also wrote: ‘History is all geographical.’ The French geographer Élysée Reclus (1830–1905), in his *L’Homme et la terre* (Man and the Earth), reminds us that geography is nothing more than spatial history, just as history is chronological geography and that ‘each
state is a piece of land and of humanity'.\(^2\) His brother, Onésime Reclus (1837–1916), also a geographer of considerable reputation and an exponent of French colonialism, was the inventor of the term *francophonie* in the 1880s, which allowed the map of France to be extended to wherever the French language was spoken. By 1881 French geographical societies had 9500 members with a particular passion for the exploits of French colonial explorers.\(^3\) Poincaré shared the belief in France’s imperial mission and in the French language as the cement of both metropolitan France and the empire. Another famous geographer of the Third Republic, Vidal de la Blache (1845–1918), whose maps adorned the walls of every French classroom was the inventor of ‘general geography’, which described all lands as belonging to a ‘type’. The title of his *Historical and Geographical Atlas* of 1894 said it all. He noted lyrically in 1903, ‘French soil, it too, is an historical personality. It acts by the pressure it exerts on habits, by the resources it puts at our disposal during our distress; it regulates the oscillations of our history.’\(^4\) Ernest Lavisse’s *Portrait of the Geography of France*, which was published in 1903 as the introduction to his multi-volume history of France, also tellingly devoted 180 pages to the Paris region because that was where ‘national history essentially took place’.\(^5\) The marriage between geography and history was established. The teaching of it was seen as part of moral and civic education, with good pupils able to draw freehand a complete map of France, divided into departments, with the names of all the sub-prefectures. Patriotism was advanced by the lessons, particularly as most history and geography teaching was confined to France, taught by rote and was handed down from the ministry of education, which was conscious of its republican mission.\(^6\) As such *histoire-géo* altered French self-consciousness and confirmed the national identity.

The consequence of this immersion in the importance of geography, and especially French geography, was that the average French schoolchild and citizen had a greater spatial awareness of France than perhaps the nationals of other great powers and a better understanding of France’s relationship to her near neighbours. Paradoxically, France never had her great theoretician of geopolitics like the British school of Mackinder, the German school of Haushofer or the American school of Spykman, yet for the French, in many ways, geopolitics was so natural as to be a platitude. Napoleon had affirmed well before the invention in 1916 of the term *geopolitics* that ‘The policy of a state is in its geography’.\(^7\) Closer to Poincaré’s time, the most famous revelation of a French statesman’s mental map was to be found with General de Gaulle. Born only 30 years after Poincaré, he elegantly remarked, ‘As the sight of a portrait...
suggests to the observer the impression of a destiny, so the map of France reveals our fortunes. What then was the nature of Poincaré’s mental map?

Like most middle-class, well-educated French children, Poincaré was brought up on the strict French textbook diet of geo-historical analysis and reasoning inspired by the writings of Michelet and the French geographical school and, consciously or not, would have been powerfully influenced by them. This together with his social background, upbringing in Lorraine in eastern France, higher education in law and literature, foreign travel and political life contributed to the development of his mental map.

A clue to Poincaré’s mental map can be found in his writings about France and patriotism in his 1910 pamphlet entitled L’Idée de patrie. This was written after he had held office as education and finance minister in moderate republican administrations, but two years before he was to have responsibility for foreign affairs as head of government and foreign minister. Conscious of the historically divisive tendencies within France, geographically, politically and socially, he believed that patriotism could provide the social cement to unite the French. La patrie was a central tenet of republican thinking under the Third Republic. For moderate republicans it was a celebration of the messianic, but benevolent nationalism of the French Revolution and the ‘civilising mission’. Poincaré attacked ‘our antipatriots’, pacifists, internationalists and extreme socialists who would only fight for the class struggle. Patriotism was an important arm in that great republican goal of national unity and for Poincaré a means of drawing together Left and Right. Joan of Arc, who originated from his native Lorraine, was seen as a patriotic symbol in the late 1890s, especially for Poincaré: ‘Joan can unite all the French people through all the fundamental values of patriotism, above party considerations, because she represents the passionate desire for the independence and greatness of the nation.’

In 1912 Poincaré published an elementary school textbook on civic duties, Ce que demande la cité. Here his definition of patriotism was clearly inspired by the historians Michelet and Ernest Renan and the French republican geographers, for whom time and place, history and geography were so naturally linked:

France is the country where you were born, where you grew up, where your relations lived, where your ancestors died. These are all memories which can be summarised in that beautiful word of la patrie.
Patriotism does not contradict our duty to humanity; on the contrary it is a necessary condition of it. The best way to love mankind is first of all to love that portion of humanity which is near to us, which surrounds us and which we know best. Instead of scattering our affections and wasting our energies let us concentrate and use them productively in that corner of soil where nature rooted us.\(^\text{12}\)

And he went on, ‘It is not simply our land, it is also our national soul, that is to say our common hopes or sadness, our glories and our tribulations, our literature and arts, our scientific discoveries, all of the attendant ideas and feelings evoked in us by the name of France.’\(^\text{13}\) This patriotism was quite unlike the xenophobic nationalism of this time associated with the radical right. It was a form of social bonding that celebrated France’s strengths without decrying the virtues of other nations.

France was therefore Poincaré’s geopolitical window onto the wider world: from centre to periphery. France framed his vision of how that world was and how it should be countenanced. For him patriotism was a humanising concept: ‘The idea of the family helps us to conceive of the idea of la patrie; the idea of la patrie helps us to conceive of the idea of humanity.’ Though not very different from the views of most moderate Republicans, this was the lens for looking at what Fernand Braudel later called ‘France beyond France’ – France and the world. What then were the more empirical underpinnings of Poincaré’s mental map?

**Empirical underpinnings**

In his own lifetime Poincaré was the victim of a certain geographical determinism. His geographical family origins in Lorraine were both a help and hindrance. The stereotypical character traits associated with a crude geographical determinism applied to that north-eastern region have been attributed to Poincaré-the-Lorrainer. For admirers, robust Lorraine characteristics of order, steadfastness and resolve destined him for high office; for critics, a native coldness instilled by the harsh climate of the Eastern marches rendered him calculating and heartless. Even the uneffusive republican centre prime minister at the turn of the century, René Waldeck-Rousseau, was said to have remarked of him that ‘He has a stone for a heart’.\(^\text{14}\) More specifically, admirers have seen in his Lorraine origins a guarantee of patriotism following the German annexation of Alsace and much of Lorraine in 1871, when he was ten years old. For his enemies, in France and abroad, the amputation of much of his homeland ingrained in him a rabid anti-Germanism, a ceaseless longing
for ‘revanche’, an intemperate desire to restore the ‘lost provinces’ to
France by any means, even war. Myth and counter-myth have drawn
on his geographical and social origins for fuel, mining deeply differing
preconceived perceptions of the man, when in reality those formative
years were far more ambiguous. At the time of his investiture to the
Académie Française in 1909, the historian Ernest Lavisse said of him, ‘You
have sometimes been reproached for a certain coldness. It is true that
being born on the banks of the Meuse, a river which flows not into
the Mediterranean, nor the Gulf of Gascony, but into the North Sea,
your words do not precede your thoughts and you wait until you are
moved before becoming emotional.’ Poincaré himself was willing to
indulge this geographical determinism when describing the dominant
‘Lorraine character traits’: ‘We lack imagination, spontaneity, lazy grace.
We patiently till our soil before sowing. We study our affairs laboriously
before resolving them.’ Or ‘Nor do we favour grand gestures too much
or sonorous phrases. We neither vent our emotions in speeches, nor
do we spill them out across the dinner table after a copious banquet.’
And he continued, ‘if occasionally it so happens that a Lorrainer pushes
his reserve to the point of apparent coldness ... he has a loyal heart, an
upright mind, a tenacious will. He is patient and never gives in.’
Yet despite this strong identification with Lorraine and the Meuse locality,
it did not signal any regionalist yearnings. From early adulthood, he dis-
played the Jacobinist centralising tendencies of republicans, such as his
father. Sentimentally he might be a Lorrainer, but he soon proved to be
a ‘Parisian Lorrainer’, for whom national unity took precedence over all
local affiliations.

For Poincaré, and his generation, Lorraine was not a region of France
like any other; it was the mutilated remnant of the Frankfurt Treaty. Cer-
tainly as a ten-year-old boy in Western Lorraine, he experienced first
hand the invading Prussian armies during the 1870 Franco-Prussian
War. He was forced to flee the family home to a series of hotels in
Dieppe and then Belgium with his mother and brother for two and a
half months, leaving his father in the family home in Bar-le-Duc. When
he returned, he had to live under German occupation for three years
until France had paid to Berlin the 5 billion gold francs imposed at the
Frankfurt peace settlement. During that time, his region was admin-
istered by a German ‘gouvernement général’ headquartered in Nancy.
But its policy was to show goodwill to the local population. Thus local
German troops were not always perceived negatively. Poincaré’s con-
temporary diaries, which he wrote every day throughout his life, reflect
this muted attitude to German occupation. They show that his own
bedroom was billeted by a Prussian officer, but that there was little animosity towards the occupier: "Today we had the very pleasurable visit of six soldiers who had come to be billeted." However, the reaction of the local population to the German occupiers was only muted until mid-December 1870. With one-third of French territory occupied by Prussians, hostility to Germany soon grew, especially in "French" Lorraine where he lived, reinforcing France's national sentiment and cementing the new Republic whose very existence from the outset was built on hostility to Germany. A fundamental shift in the perception of Germans quickly took place which the Third Republic would strengthen and codify. This transformation was reflected in Poincaré's personal diaries for the period, which he rewrote in 1874 to make them more anti-German.

The German geographer Friedrich Ratzel writing in 1897 remarked that a state's history is always "a part of the history of neighbouring states." For a man of the frontier such as Poincaré, Germany was part of his history. Quite naturally for someone living close to the Franco-German border he took an interest in Germany. He did so because of the recent Franco-Prussian war, but also despite it. His relationship with Germany was ambivalent, thereby mirroring Franco-German relations themselves. Borrowing from the geographical determinism and symbolism that was current at this time one can conclude that the river Meuse was the link between the Rhine and the Seine. Like the future French foreign minister and Lorrainer Robert Schuman, architect of the European community and Franco-German rapprochement, Poincaré was conscious of the need to work with Germany more than many French politicians. From 1871 Poincaré learnt German. In his diaries (the rewritten version), he confessed his motivation with typical schoolboy heroics: "because if ever... and I hope so... I go to fight in Prussia... do not worry I will not get myself killed. If ever, say I, I fight the Germans in their country, I must be able to say to them, "You are my prisoner!". Naturally there was more to it than that, and Poincaré continued to learn German in secondary school, corresponding with his French friends from boarding school in both German and Latin. He knew German history well. He also took great pleasure in tourist trips to German cities, even the legendary spa town of Ems, so closely linked to the genesis of the Franco-Prussian War. Yet his knowledge of Germany never extended, at any point in his lifetime, to having German friends; it was a clinical relationship based more on convenience than sentiment.
Raymond Poincaré

It is true that Poincaré was fiercely proud of his native Lorraine and his family’s longstanding Lorraine origins and never shied from saying so at every conceivable moment and proving it with his active membership of the Association des Lorrains de Paris, of which he was since 1902 a founding member, and whose active President he became. Even though he was a Parisian Lorrainer, the umbilical link to his homeland was never cut. He was a local councillor, then député and senator for his homeland throughout his political life. In 1908, he had built for himself and his wife a comfortable house, the Clos, in the small village of Sampigny in the Meuse using a local architect, local materials and Lorraine furnishings and was a regular visitor at weekends and holidays throughout his life, ending his days there. Thus he remained a man of the Eastern frontier, with a profound sensitivity to its outlook and proximity to its large German neighbour.

Although his lifelong experiences of Lorraine at war had a profound impact on him, too much has been made of this as somehow instilling in him a pathological desire for revanche. Of course, like most French citizens, he wanted the return of the ‘lost provinces’, but not by war. He knew from harsh first-hand geographical experience that any future war with Germany would have his native Lorraine as the battleground with devastating consequences. As with many other French people, the bitter memory of the Franco-Prussian war subsided. In 1874 he was already writing that ‘France, everyone knows, imprudently declared war on Germany’, testifying to his Republican sympathies. But the fundamental ambivalence towards Germany, and how to deal with her, remained. In 1878 he explained in a speech that the time for recriminations with Germany was over: ‘It was not that we fear war, we hate it. But our love of peace... should not seem to anyone to be marked by weakness.’ He wanted neither chauvinism nor submission. In 1910 he expressed his sorrow for the French living in the ‘lost provinces’: ‘Unfortunately, we could not give them the slightest glimmer of hope. Nobody was forgetting them, but we so disapproved of the idea of a war that we kept silent in order not to give them a pretext.’ In 1911, following the settlement of the Moroccan crisis between France and Germany, though an opponent of the Caillaux government, he refused to subscribe to the views of other Lorraine parliamentarians who denounced the compromise with Berlin. By 1912, now in office, he was praising France’s leader in the Franco-Prussian War, Adolphe Thiers, for having denounced the folly of war before it began. Only a few months after his election as President of the Republic during an official visit to his native Bar-le-Duc on his birthday, 20 August 1913, he clearly pointed...
out the commitment of this geographical area and its population to peace:

Nowhere, as much as in our Eastern provinces, have the centuries taught the population the horrors of war and the benefits of peace; nowhere, has patriotism learnt so directly the harsh lesson of things. (…) There is no-one who is not ready to make all sacrifices to maintain France's great power status and the control of her actions in the world. Fed by robust farm workers and valiant soldiers, Lorraine abounds in measured spirits and in well tempered souls.26

As someone who had carried out his military service from 1879 to 1880 in the 26th infantry regiment of the chasseurs à pied at Nancy in Lorraine and who had scrupulously performed his subsequent reserve officer training on the Vosges or in Lorraine, he fully understood the military and strategic significance of his homeland. This sensitised him to all the symbolism and emotion conjured up by the 1916 German siege of Verdun and the remarkable struggle and resistance of French soldiers, in the heart of his Lorraine, with French losses calculated at the time at nearly 23,000 dead, 73,000 wounded and 53,000 lost. The dedication of a whole volume of his 11 volumes of memoirs to Verdun demonstrated the town's importance in his mental map. The final pages lay bare the emotion that the word Verdun evoked in him. More significantly still, he explained the appeal of Verdun to the enemy and the heritage dating back to Gallo-Roman times that explained why the French could not surrender a stone or blade of grass of this symbolic site. He details his six visits to Verdun from February to September 1916 as President of the Republic, where the national significance of the battle is overlaid with more personal feelings for his native region and family home, as on 1 March:

I saw as we went by the dear home of my brother and my sister-in-law…. Nubécourt, where our soldiers are in the process of cutting down the beautiful poplars around ‘Mother’s grave’. Why don’t they cut mine down in Courcelles-aux-Bois, or anywhere, but not these! My grand-father’s statue is broken from shells which have exploded in front of my grand-parents house, which is reduced to a few rickety slabs of wall.27

When the battle was finally won, Poincaré visited Verdun on 13 September to decorate the town with the Légion d’Honneur and the
Raymond Poincaré croix de guerre, in front of senior ministers and representatives of all the Allies. The occasion was of considerable patriotic symbolism: the heroic town that fought off the Germans where the nation spilt its blood for la Patrie. Poincaré’s speech spelt out the destiny of the native soil: ‘This name of Verdun (...) represents henceforth for neutrals and for our allies what is most wonderful, most pure, and the best in the French soul. It has become a synthetic synonym for patriotism, bravery and generosity.’

From that day Verdun also became for Poincaré a metaphor for French resistance to the more political post-war German pressure on France over reparations. In November 1921, with Germany refusing to repay the sums requested and the Allies refusing to exercise pressure on Berlin, he raged, ‘The hour has come to repeat to the Germans as at Verdun: No more coming through! You will go no further!’

As a young man he went on trips to Savoy, Switzerland and Germany, but subsequently gained a great taste for Italy, which remained an abiding love. He made regular trips to France’s ‘Latin sister’, to take in the art and history. He learned and spoke good Italian and eventually, in his late forties, married a French woman of Italian extraction, the love of his life and of considerable influence on him. He also travelled to Spain and in 1900 went on a cultural cruise to Palestine and Asia Minor. What is significant in his choice of destination in those early years is the absence of any account of trips to northern Europe or to the United States. He appears never to have visited Britain as a tourist (despite being able to speak tolerably good English); only in later years when, in his official capacity as premier and head of state, he became aware of Britain’s role as a guarantor of French security, would he visit Britain. He did agree during the First World War to become Rector of Glasgow University, and there played upon the Auld Alliance between France and Scotland. As a man of the north he seemed drawn to the south and ‘Latin’ Europe.

This early passion for Italy and southern Europe displayed itself in a growing and very conscious attachment to a notion of ‘Latiness’ and France’s cultural links with southern Europe. Ever since the establishment in 1888 of the ‘Union des peuples latins’, French patriots had worked to unite France with her southern neighbours. In 1902, following the signing of the Franco-Italian non-aggression agreements, the French ambassador in London, Paul Cambon, believing that this was a step to a broader ‘Latin’ pact had supported a Franco-Hispano-Italian union to counter German power. Although its necessity was diminished in the short term by the signing of the Entente Cordiale two years later, the
concept merely mutated. In 1912 when Poincaré became premier and foreign minister, an Anglo-Latin Exhibition was organised in London in 1912 to foster links between artists, business and commerce. During that year and subsequently as President of the Republic, Poincaré’s foreign policy prioritised improved relations with Italy, Spain and Britain, symbolised by official visits to all three before war broke out in 1914. Even after the war, before the Italian fascist Mussolini’s ‘March on Rome’ scuppered the idea of a Latin Union, in 1921 Poincaré extolled its virtues and the compatibility of Latin and English civilisations in a Belgian newspaper article. In the years following the end of the First World War he appears to have switched his focus to the Latin culture across the Atlantic by writing a regular column for an Argentinian newspaper, *la Nacion*.

The affinity Poincaré displayed for closer ties with Britain was not replicated with relation to the United States, particularly after the failure of the American Senate to ratify the Anglo-American security guarantee pact with France in 1920. There is no record of him ever making a trip to the United States. As American power grew during the 1920s, he became more sceptical about her hegemonic political and cultural role in European affairs. But he was desirous of cultivating closer strategic ties with Russia (and its French-speaking court), making two official trips to France’s foremost ally before the First World War in August 1912 and July 1914.

What is striking for someone who played an enormous role in foreign affairs from 1912 until the end of his political career in 1929, is how little interest he displayed in foreign policy matters during his numerous trips abroad before 1912 (other than noting on a trip to Italy that Italy was Germany’s friend and was developing economically at a prodigious rate). In proto-Gaullist fashion he was conscious of the distinctiveness of France’s temperament, even if that might not be to the liking of foreigners, as he explained in his short book *The Idea of Patrie*. He quoted the philosopher Schopenhauer: ‘Other parts of the world have monkeys, Europe has the French’, to which he remarked in existentialist mode, ‘We are insulted therefore we exist’. Poincaré’s geopolitical views were unsurprisingly Europe-centric, although he was a supporter of the French empire and a member of a number of colonial societies from the Comité du Levant to the Comité de l’Asie française. Within that Europe, despite his northern French origins, he was geo-culturally attracted to southern Europe and to cultural notions of ‘Latiness’, which explained his suspicions about Anglo-Saxon and American influence in Europe at the end of the 1920s.
How did this mental map affect Poincare's geopolitical outlook?

Despite having displayed no interest in foreign policy prior to his assuming the premiership and foreign ministry in January 1912, Poincaré had one foreign policy concept firmly in mind: the balance of power. For him the Triple Entente of France, Russia and Britain should balance the Triple Alliance of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Italy. This was not particularly novel as a foreign policy goal, for Britain was committed to such an idea, albeit with greater flexibility in the application. But for Poincaré balance of power meant balancing German power. With punctilious legalism, he was opposed to any French ambassador attempting to win over members of the Triple Alliance to the Entente side, for fear that this could be construed as a provocative move by the opposing camp. Even after the First World War, he continued to believe in the necessity of a balance of power of sorts in Europe.

It could be said that ever since 1870 (arguably even up to the present), for most French politicians, French geopolitics has been dominated by Germany. As the experienced diplomat Harold Nicolson remarked in his book *Diplomacy*, published in 1939,

> French policy has, for the last sixty years, been governed almost exclusively by fear of her eastern neighbour and is thus more consistent than that of any Great Power. The eyes of all French diplomatists remain eternally fixed on the 'blue line of the Vosges', and their whole policy is directed towards defending themselves against the German menace. This constant preoccupation is apt to render French policy tense, rigid and inelastic.31

The central role of Germany

Contrary to an old myth, Poincaré’s attitude to Germany was not built on outright hostility, as his Lorraine origins might have suggested. Ambivalence characterised his views of Germany. With ambivalence he, the Republican, viewed the Franco-Prussian War, recklessly started by Napoleon III, but through which Germany inflicted a harsh peace on France. Ambivalence also conditioned his early mental map of Germany, which mixed fascination for her culture and fear of her military strength, and was translated in foreign policy terms by a desire for peaceful co-existence. During the 1911 Agadir Crisis, which diplomatically pitted France against Germany over Morocco, he wrote in his memoirs, ‘In all the ministries to which I belonged, whether from 1893 to 1895 or
1906, I approved the specific ententes with Germany. I never thought that loyalty to our memories dictated, in relation to our neighbours, a sort of chronic animosity and prohibited us, them as much as us, on all points of the globe from the hope of specific agreements. The desire to have a working relationship would characterise his foreign policy in the pre- and post-war periods. It was after all Poincaré who in 1914 was the first French president ever to dine at the German embassy in Paris; it was Poincaré who ratified the Franco-German treaties of 1914 on the two states’ respective spheres of influence in the Ottoman Empire; it was Poincaré who was the first prime minister in the history of the Republic to receive a German foreign minister in Paris, which he did in 1928 for the Kellogg–Briand pact outlawing war as a means of settling international disputes. When attacked by a German journalist after the war for favouring revanche, he replied,

He described me as being brought up by parents belonging to the French grande bourgeoisie and nourished on the idea of revanche. Well Henri Poincaré [his cousin], the great mathematician, Lucien Poincaré [his uncle], the deceased recteur of the Paris Academy, belonged to my simple and modest family and neither one nor the other said a word about revanche. As for myself, if I had spoken about it at twenty-six years old to my first Meuse voters, I would have been certain of being beaten and my political life would have ended before it had begun. From that time, our Lorraine region had suffered from war. It had been invaded in 1792 as in 1870; it had been ravaged. Its wounds had never closed. Therefore it was passionately attached to peace.

As the French historian Francois Roth has written, ‘This text somewhat idealised reality, but it was sincere and, on the basis of its conviction, one could not and one cannot find anything to contradict it. An in-depth examination of texts and speeches from 1887 to 1914 reveals numerous confirmations and carries away the argument.’ The German historian Gerd Krumeich, though a critical observer of Poincaré in domestic affairs, studied German reactions to Poincaré’s policies before the war and concluded in the same vein: ‘It is evident that the German anti-poincarism following the 1914–1918 war and such as it appears even today in historical works has no foundation in history. It is explained by the actions and bitter controversies after the war. . . . The simple fact that contemporary observers of Poincaré’s policy before 1914 never concurred in the particularly aggressive nature of this policy is an important result of
our research.’ Krumeich continues, ‘it is more important to remember that German policy had seen in Poincaré, before 1914, a strong and of course blunt man who managed French policy for the good of France, and who was at the same time an active and positive factor in the European balance, even where it confronted the Reich’s policy’. He concluded by asking whether ‘the German government would not have hesitated more, in July 1914, about precipitating events, if the action of President Poincaré had not been in a certain way paralysed at that moment by the effects of domestic politics and if he had remained the strong man of 1912 and 1913’.35

Willingness to work with Germany did not exclude, however, taking precautions against her. Just as before the First World War Poincaré strived to build geostrategic alliances around Germany to act as a counter-weight to her, so in the post-war era he attempted to do the same. Because revolutionary Russia was no longer available, the value of Britain increased accordingly. But failing that he was still prepared to work with Germany when again he became premier and foreign minister between 1922 and 1924.

With anybody else, accommodation of Germany, where practicable, might have been seen as flexibility. Given Poincaré’s cold personality, his legalism and belief in the sanctity of legal texts, perceptions of his German policy were very different from the reality, particularly when supplemented with a heavy dose of successful post-war German propaganda aimed at undermining Poincaré’s credibility and that of the Treaty itself.36 His willingness to work with Germany was, however, mitigated by his regard for the Versailles Treaty as a formal legal text that required respect. Germany had been found guilty, now she must pay the price. He made this plain as President of the Reparations Commission in 1920: ‘However incomplete it might be, the treaty itself gives us the means to ensure its application. In order to apply its essential clauses, we are at liberty to take coercive measures. For any failure to carry out the contracted obligations, we have the right to delay the evacuation dates of the occupied territories.’ Though in reality he was willing to show flexibility to Germany, the fact that he did so on occasions with a peevish bad grace did not help him win the public relations battle. ‘With Germany more than with any other people, suspicion is mother of safety’, he stated bluntly on 15 April 1920.37 The fact that he did not believe it necessary to tailor what he said to the audience he was addressing did not endear him to many. But rhetoric not reality created the portrait of unfailing hostility to Germany. Poincaré’s mental map of a Franco-German borderland ravaged by war, but characterised by economic exchange,
helped him more than many politicians to understand the necessity of a Franco-German working relationship.

There is clear evidence of Poincaré attempting to work with Germany when he returned to power as premier and foreign minister from 1922 to 1923. But reparations remained the sticking point. He only ‘backed into the Ruhr’ and its occupation reluctantly in January 1923, even though the Treaty allowed it, when he believed all else had failed to get Germany to maintain her reparation payments. By the end of the Ruhr episode Poincaré had come to the conclusion that an international reparations settlement was only possible if France was to retain the support of the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ abroad and that of the Radical Party at home, as well as provide financial stability and some practical solution for French security. This meant working more closely with Germany. Poincaré had been steering a course between the nationalist Right’s policy of coercion of Germany and the socialist Left’s policy of unilateral abandonment of the Ruhr. As Jacques Seydoux, one of Poincaré and the Quai’s most far-sighted senior advisors, put it on 27 December 1923, France was moving towards a ‘financial reconstruction’ of Europe by which it was no longer possible to deal with Germany as ‘victor to vanquished’. This is the view of recent historiography which has, in the words of the American historian Jon Jacobson, rescued Poincaré from ‘the aggressive and vengeful role which at times has been assigned to him in German, British, and American historiography’. In accepting the necessity of working more closely with Germany, Poincaré was also embarking French diplomacy on a route that his foreign minister Aristide Briand would take to Locarno. This did not escape the watchful Georges Clemenceau, who remarked tartly, ‘Mr Poincaré let him get on with it’, adding, ‘He saw. He understood. He permitted.’

Briand like Poincaré understood the weaknesses of the 1925 Locarno agreements for France. Locarno may have stabilised the frontiers between Germany and its western neighbours, but Britain and Italy were the guarantors of the agreement and their guarantee was less than cast iron. That weakness inspired Briand’s idea for a United States of Europe in 1929 as a means of completing Locarno and ensuring that German power was constrained. This commitment to a European security system was clear in Briand’s speeches when the Locarno treaty was signed and again during the ratification debates the following year. On 26 February 1926, he asked the Chamber, ‘Do you think I went without emotion to that rendezvous where I was to meet German ministers? […] I went there, they came, and we talked European.’ It was clear, not least to Poincaré, that Briand was thinking of the European project as a solution to France’s
security problems. Briand told a secret meeting of the Chamber’s Foreign Affairs Commission on 23 February 1926 that the day would soon come when Europe would have to be a federal unit like the United States and that France’s future lay in that direction. Significantly, five months later, Poincaré formed his fourth cabinet on 23 July 1926 and called on Briand to become foreign minister. Had Poincaré also understood the importance of Europe as the key to French security vis-à-vis Germany?

It was during Poincaré’s premiership that his foreign minister, Briand, developed the initial plan for a European Union which he set out in his speech to the League of Nations on 5 September 1929. That speech came just over a month after Poincaré’s was forced to resign from the premiership on health grounds. Although Briand spoke of his Plan to very few people, and did not even inform the Quai d’Orsay, Poincaré was most probably aware of it. Poincaré would probably have understood the more practical strategic advantages for France that lay behind Briand’s seemingly starry-eyed vision. It was founded on the idea that an alternative means of delivering French security in Europe was to wrap Germany up in a series of political and economic agreements to reduce her freedom and ability to engage in military conflict with France, which is what Briand’s plan intended. A sign of Poincaré’s commitment to a more integrated Europe was made plain in November 1928. He and Briand became members of the comité d’honneur of the newly founded Comité fédéral de Coopération européenne, led by the fervent Europeanist Emile Borel, and dedicated to building a European union.

As far as Franco-German relations were concerned, it was certainly during Poincaré’s fourth cabinet from 1926 to 1928 that Briand pushed further détente with Germany. Germany was granted entry to the League of Nations on an equal footing with other nations, and the International Steel Entente was concluded between France, Germany, the Sarre, Belgium and Luxemburg, as a sort of proto-European Coal and Steel Community, a quarter of a century before the real thing. As Inter-Allied Military Control of Germany was brought to an end so a Franco-German commercial treaty was signed, which Jacques Bariéty has described as a substantial source of ‘economic pacification of the continent’. During the general election campaign of April–May 1928, Poincaré spoke publicly of Franco-German reconciliation and an early evacuation of the Rhineland if a reparations settlement could be reached with Germany. By June 1928 in personal conversations in Paris with the German Foreign Minister Gustav Stresemann, Poincaré was suggesting in proto-Gaullist vein a Franco-German rapprochement to protect Europe from Americanisation and Bolshevism. The idea was for France
and Germany to ‘forget the past’ and ‘come together to work out the major European problems’ posed by American financial power and Bolshevism. Poincaré, it would seem, understood the importance of Europe to France’s security and destiny. As the future President of the Republic, Georges Pompidou put it in the 1970s, France ‘by its geography and its history is condemned to play the European card’. Or as the French historian, native of the ‘lost provinces’, Marc Bloch remarked, ‘There is no history of France, there is a history of Europe.’

Conclusion

Poincaré’s mental map of French geopolitics in the 1920s was in many ways little different to that prior to the First World War. Germany was key to all his strategic calculations. But his views of Germany were far more practical than he has often been credited with. As a Lorrainer, he understood better than anyone the need to preserve peace and French security. He had attempted to do that by building a system of alliances prior to the First World War that would guarantee France in the event of conflict with Germany. After the First World War he had attempted to do the same, but Russia was no longer available, the United States withdrew into its shell and Britain was unwilling to acquiesce in a treaty with France, no matter how much Poincaré and others might try through the 1920s. With increasing financial problems and unsupportive allies, he, like Millerand and Briand, was left with no alternative but to work more closely with Germany. This was not so repugnant to a Lorrainer, however great the myth to the contrary. As he explained to the Meuse councillors in 1927,

Foreigners badly informed or resolved to distort the truth have often presented the Lorraine people as chauvinistic and less sensitive than others to the seduction of peace. That is to want to pass us off as blind or foolish. (...) Even before Germany’s aggression, there was no region in France more anxious than this to avoid an armed conflict. You know well that in the event of a conflagration, you will be the most exposed in your person and in your possessions.

Peace but also pragmatism and realism were Lorraine traits, as he explained in 1930, ‘For Meusiens, the love of peace is not a vague and sentimental aspiration: it is a living idea, born of repeated invasions and the frequent sadness of war, it is a deliberate willingness,
which rests on the realities of yesterday to improve, if possible, the realities of tomorrow." That pragmatism might also extend to working with the region’s closest neighbour, whose trade and commerce were already central to the region and to the French economy as a whole. As a Lorrainer, Poincaré understood more than most the need for France to work with Germany, even if it were a relationship based on convenience rather than sentiment. Given that reason and his admiration for European arts and culture, Briand’s idea for a United States of Europe could seem attractive. Who knows, perhaps in his mind, he had mentally mapped a France and Latin culture dominating a United States of Europe that would be a bulwark against growing American cultural and economic hegemony. But nobody ever attributed to him the benefit of foresight . . . .

Notes

1. The subject is known familiarly as ‘histoire-géo’, and the body that oversees the interests of the profession is known as the ‘société des historiens-géographes’.
6. Ibid., 189–90.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid., 20–1.
12. Raymond Poincaré, Ce que demande la cité (Paris, 1912), 107.
13. Ibid.
17. On the initial ambivalence of French public opinion in 1870, see S. Audoin-Rouzeau, 1870 La France dans la guerre (Paris, 1989), 262–6, passim.
25. Poincaré, Ce que demande la cité, 47. In 1912 he signed a contract with publishers Hachette to write a biography of Thiers.
28. Cited in ibid., 44.
30. ‘L’état présent des relations anglo-françaises’, La Libre Belgique, 29 August 1921. I am grateful to my PhD student Fabrice Serodes for drawing this information to my attention.
33. Cited in Roth, Poincaré, 582.
34. Ibid., 582.
37. Chroniques de Quinzaine, Tome 1, 63, 67, cited in Amson, Poincaré, 313.
20 Raymond Poincaré


47. See ibid., 194.


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