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In *A Vision of Europe*, an extended version of an argument presented in article form in 2012, Conan Fischer directs our attention to a brief moment in inter-war European history, the three years preceding the Nazi seizure of power in Germany. These years are often presented in sombre terms with the focus on the radiating global economic crisis that crippled international exchanges and produced unprecedented levels of unemployment within countries; on the poisoning of bilateral and multi-lateral relations between states that betrayed the seemingly promising developments in the first half of the 1920s, such as the Washington treaty system in Asia and the Pacific and the Dawes Plan and Locarno treaties in a European and transatlantic context; and on the dangerous polarization of domestic politics, not least in Germany, where the Nazis emerged as a leading political party and movement. Fischer’s portrait, by contrast, is decidedly upbeat. At the core of the book is a high-level encounter in Berlin in September 1931 at which French and German political leaders and diplomats affirmed their commitment to collaboration between their two countries and, more concretely, agreed to create a Joint Commission charged with working out practical measures for economic cooperation. The book’s first five chapters provide the historical background to the agreement, while the sixth and final chapter discusses its ultimate breakdown.

For Fischer, the September 1931 agreement amounted to a promising initiative, one that compels historians to reconsider not only the 1929-1932 period but also the narrative of Franco-German relations during the twentieth century. The first claim is self-consciously revisionist. Previous scholars, Fischer notes, assume that the search for Franco-German rapprochement—a search embodied in French Foreign Minister Aristide Briand and his German counterpart Gustav Stresemann (as well as British Foreign Secretary Austen Chamberlain)—suffered a fatal blow with Stresemann’s death in October 1929. This assumption, however, overlooks the “thinking and forces that underpinned and sustained rapprochement” after 1929 (9). For Fischer, the key actors included high-level politicians, such as Julius Curtius, Stresemann’s successor as Foreign Minister, and Heinrich Brüning, German Chancellor from March 1930 to May 1932; and on the French side, Briand, of

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course, but also Pierre Laval, French Premier from January 1931 to February 1932, and André Tardieu, the on-again off-again Premier and Foreign Minister during 1930 to 1932 who is often identified with the anti-German political right. Supporting these politicians were diplomats in both countries as well as an array of politicians, businessmen and prominent cultural figures, all of whom were motivated by what Fischer describes as a “dogged determination and imagination” to improve Franco-German relations (25).

Several aspects of Fischer’s study are worth discussing. One aspect concerns its sources. In terms of primary sources, Fischer relies heavily on German diplomatic archives, all told some thirty or so folders, supplemented by more limited French diplomatic sources (many of which were lost during the 1940 defeat and subsequent occupation). Other possible sources, whether personal papers, departmental records or parliamentary archives, are absent. While scholarship always involves a choice of sources and the notion of an exhaustive research effort is illusory, Fischer’s source base strikes me as a fairly narrow one on which to write a revisionist account of Franco-German relations from 1929-1932. Perhaps more important, the reliance on the two countries’ diplomatic archives arguably comes at the price of a larger perspective. Mining these archives, Fischer ably recounts the quotidian activities of French and German professionals charged with administering bilateral relations. But what of other countries, most notably Britain. Is it possible to write a history of Franco-German relations in this period without bringing in the British or the Americans, both on whom appear as marginal actors in the book? Leaving aside the role of other countries, an emphasis on diplomacy arguably underplays the larger political context at home and abroad in which diplomats operated–not to mention the political leaders they supposedly served. To be sure, Fischer does not ignore this context: at several points, for example, he refers to parliamentary voices within France and Germany that were suspicious of and sometimes downright hostile to the mutual concessions that rapprochement entailed. But these remain background factors, an obstacle for politicians to side-step or out-manoeuver rather than a structural element that helped to determine the limits of Franco-German relations.

Another noteworthy aspect of the study is Fischer’s argument that Catholicism served as a link between the French and Germans (as opposed to the Protestant British). In chapter four, Fischer surveys the activities of various Catholic social and political organizations in the two countries, but perhaps his most interesting remarks concern Brüning, whose political and personal Catholicism fueled sympathy for a Christian (and anti-Bolshevik) Europe centred on Franco-German rapprochement. As Fischer notes, French political leaders and diplomats found Brüning’s Catholicism reassuring in a way that they did not with the Protestant Stresemann. How heavily Catholicism weighed in the balance of Franco-German relations is hard to gauge, and it is difficult to believe that it exerted much influence on someone like Laval. But Fischer is surely right that this is an aspect worth exploring, particularly in light of the growing scholarship on the Catholic (and Christian) underpinnings of post-war West European unity.2

A final aspect worth mentioning is Fischer’s argument that the 1931 agreement was not simply or even primarily a response to immediate problems, above all the deepening economic crisis. By 1931, he writes, Franco-German economic collaboration had “moved well beyond such utilitarianism,” entrenching itself as “a carefully considered and coherently articulated state-sponsored agenda” (121). Indeed, government ministers and diplomats in both countries conceived of economic collaboration as “a vital first step on the road to wide-

ranging rapprochement, to a partnership that offered to turn on its head the tortured history of previous Franco-German relations. Put very simply, an effort would be made to rebuild Europe not at the point of a gun, but through the good offices of a comprehensive Franco-German alliance forged from the mutual respect and goodwill accorded by one equal to another” (121-122). And for Fischer it is the breadth of this ambition that leads to his second claim – the need to reconsider the course of twentieth century Franco-German relations. A project of such scope must have had extensive roots going back to the early 1920s and even the pre-1914 period; and, no less importantly, it could not vanish without a trace but must instead lay the seeds for a future harvest. “Interwar diplomacy,” Fischer accordingly insists at the outset of the book, “did notch up a series of positive achievements that anticipated key dimensions of the contemporary world, among them templates that subsequently served the cause of post-1945 European integration” (2). The process of European integration has a pre-history that is not limited to the oft-cited Briand plan but includes the 1931 agreement and, more importantly, the project of Franco-German reconciliation that underpinned it. From this perspective, the Nazi years are something of an intermission, a pause in the longer history of French and German efforts “to create a European commonwealth in the place of traditional great power rivalry” (186).

There is much to be said for Fischer’s book: it is clearly argued, the research (though perhaps overly focused) is binational, and Fischer is familiar with the historiography, especially on the German side. That said, the book has its problems. Fischer arguably exaggerates the French and German commitment to collaboration. To be sure, voices on both sides expressed a general interest in the idea. But, as Fischer’s own evidence suggests, the terms of collaboration proved contentious. The Germans, not surprisingly, wanted to attach political conditions in the form of treaty revision. Germany, the Foreign Ministry announced to its diplomats abroad in 1930, would “reject French proposals that would result in the consolidation of the status quo laid down by the Paris Peace Conference” (63). Briand’s response to this position was to inform the German ambassador that “the current European order is founded on treaties, and to put amendment of these treaties up for discussion would precipitate the dismemberment rather than the unification of Europe” (67). As Fischer explains, the French and Germans sought to bypass the difficult issue of political terms by concentrating, at least initially, on economic matters. Yet such a tactic was never likely to appeal to nationalist forces at home–forces that French and German politicians could not ignore. Political and economic issues, in other words, could not be treated in isolation. In early 1932 Brüning discussed with the French the possibility of a loan, only to find that Laval and Tardieu attached conditions that included the fulfillment of Germany’s reparations obligations and an end to naval shipbuilding. Well aware that these conditions were politically unacceptable at home, the German chancellor had no choice but to decline the French offer (93-94).

But larger political questions aside, economic matters themselves proved extremely contentious. Following the September 1931 agreement, the French and Germans quickly established the Joint Commission, which divided into several sub-commissions on specific issues. From the beginning, the subject of French import quotas created tensions. The 1927 Franco-German treaty had been signed at a time when the French economy was booming and when France enjoyed a considerable trade surplus with Germany. By 1932 this was no longer the case, and French interests pressed the government for restrictions on various imports, especially on agricultural goods but also on minerals and manufactures–restrictions that cut into German exports. As a result, sub-commission meetings quickly degenerated into shouting matches as delegations accused each other of bad faith, and by early 1932 the talks had reached an impasse. The political scandal surrounding the publication of Stresemann’s memoirs, which exacerbated existing French doubts about
German insincerity, provided the *coup de grâce* to an already moribund project. In the end and in light of the September 1931 agreement’s short and fraught existence, it is difficult to endorse Fischer’s assessment that “for a few brief months in late 1931, it would appear that the hour of [Franco-German] reconciliation had, indeed, come.” (83)

A final remark concerns the longer course of Franco-German relations. Regarding these relations, Fischer privileges a narrative centred on rapprochement, which he contrasts to the supposedly more common one of traditional enmity between the two countries—what can be called the *Erbfeind* narrative. One might question whether the latter is really so dominant; after all, a considerable body of scholarship exists on Franco-German efforts at rapprochement during the inter-war period—and, indeed, even before 1914. But the more important point is that the two narratives are co-dependent. The one does not exist without the other—not only for scholars but also for historical actors. If apprehensions of conflict between the two countries infused calls for rapprochement with a dramatic urgency, the elusive nature of rapprochement, which was always more of an ideal than a practical program, meant that the possibility of renewed tensions never entirely vanished. If so, the challenge for historians of Franco-German relations is not to favour one narrative over the other but rather to integrate the two.

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3 The French version was published as Henry Bernhard et al. eds., *Les papiers de Stresemann* (Paris: Plon, 1932-1933).