

COL. A. L. CONGER AND AMERICA'S PEACEMAKING DIPLOMACY IN 1919

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In the winter and spring of 1918-1919 Germany experienced a traumatic upheaval. An armistice had been signed on 11 November which brought an end to over four years of bloody warfare. In addition to suffering the shock of defeat Germany was experiencing fuel and food shortages, caused, in part, by the continuation of the Allied blockade of Germany. Many Germans believed that the French, Poles and Czechs were threatening her borders¹, and Germany appeared to some observers to be on the brink of a social revolution. Armed uprisings were commonplace. Further concern was raised over the uncertainty of the peace talks in Paris.

Given this threatening situation General Wilhelm Groener, chief of the High Command, chose to look optimistically at the upcoming demands.² From a position of hindsight this optimism might seem surprising in light of the final terms, but in the spring of 1919, with no hard information regarding the negotiations in Paris, it was possible to be optimistic. President Woodrow Wilson had not renounced his fourteen points publicly and the Allies had indeed encouraged German military opposition to the spread of Bolshevism.³

A month after the Armistice was signed Groener had contacted the chief of the political intelligence section of the American Army at Trier, Colonel Arthur L. Conger. Through Conger he hoped to persuade General John Pershing and possibly President Wilson to take up the German cause at

the peace conference. Groener was not successful in his efforts but by his actions Conger was placed in a position to make a material contribution to the establishment of peace.

Scholars have debated the U.S. role in the major changes which took place in Europe following World War I. Col. Conger's role has also been one of controversy. Some, such as Klaus Schwabe, argue that Conger was probably acting on instructions from higher authorities such as President Woodrow Wilson or General John J. Pershing and was accepted by the Germans as their representative. Others, such as Lloyd E. Ambrosius, think he was acting on his own or as an agent of General Pershing and was at odds with the U.S. diplomatic officials at Paris. Both views, in part, are correct.⁴

Conger was certainly involved in influencing these events but that influence was limited to the German response to the peace settlement and possibly the direction German political leaders took in establishing a new government. Due to the complexity of the situation in Paris and Germany following the armistice Conger, at times, represented only the military and later the wishes of President Wilson.

Colonel Conger, a forty-two year old Harvard graduate, from an upper class family, was fluent in German. He had taken the grand tour of Europe at age thirteen and had studied in Germany where he attended lectures by Professor Hans Delbruck, the noted German historian, in 1910. His father had expected him to enter the church but he had insisted on music while volunteering service to the Theosophical Society. With the outbreak of the Spanish-American War he volunteered for Army service and began a thirty year military career. He spent seven years in the Philippines and later served as an instructor at the Army Staff College and the War College. Until the outbreak of World War I. He was assigned to General Staff duty in charge of G-2A Information Division, accompanied General

Pershing to Paris in 1917 and was thought to be scholarly and practical. A holder of the Silver Star for Philippine service, he had participated in the Muse-Argonne offensive and was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal and the Croix de Guerre.⁵

Conger's major contribution during the war came in the field of intelligence. He not only gathered information, but he also on occasion placed misleading information in the hands of the Germans. In September 1918 General Pershing directed him to "carelessly" leave a copy of orders directing a false corps buildup where German spies might take it, which they did to the allies' advantage.⁶

Unlike most military heroes, Conger's main contributions did not occur until after the conclusion of the active hostilities. In the spring of 1918 Conger, by then a Lt. Colonel, was attached to General Headquarters (G.H.Q.) at Chaumont. As the war wound down, his background and pre-war experiences opened new avenues for him, and shortly after the Armistice was signed, he was detailed to advance G.H.Q. at Trier where he soon took command.⁷

Conger was one of the first American officers to enter Germany. On 1 December 1918 he traveled unescorted as far as Bingen on the Rhine seeking German headquarters in order to arrange a prisoner exchange. He spent the night there and received some state officials from Berlin who sought his help in a problem concerning errant reporters. The next morning Conger drove to Bad-Nauheim where he contacted the officers he sought. Upon returning to Trier he met with the two state officials again and expressed his belief that "the only hope for Germany was the disinterested attitude of the United States." This statement caught the interest of the Germans. In January he helped negotiate the use of German ships for U.S. troops.⁸

These contacts established Conger's credentials

with the Germans. Almost immediately after the first meeting in early December, General Groener of the German High Command wrote Major Joachim N. Stulpnagel requesting that he establish ties with Conger because of his entree to President Wilson. The purpose of this contact was to find out in an "amiable and tactful way" how much equipment the German Army could keep and how much support Germany could expect from the Americans.⁹ Liaison with Groener was maintained through one of Groener's agents, Freiherr von Eltz, and Conger assured the Germans that the Americans were their best hope at the Paris Peace Conference.¹⁰

In March 1919 the British reported that they suspected German rearmament. Conger reported this suspicion to the Germans who then invited him to inspect the German Army on condition that he make no specific report of his findings to the Allies. He informed General Pershing who immediately sent him to make the investigation.¹¹

Conger used this visit not only for inspection purposes but also to make direct contact with the German High Command. The visit was a most opportune one for the Germans and Groener was delighted, having wanted to talk to Conger for some weeks. The visit took place 14-19 March 1919 at Kolberg with Groener and Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg.

The American was interested in ascertaining if Hindenburg was still in touch with General Eric Ludendorff and if he supported Ludendorff's aspirations to revolt against the new German government. Hindenburg assured him that he had not seen the General since the Armistice and that the two were on most unfriendly terms.¹²

The Germans sought to convince Conger of three things: "if the peace was to be based on Wilson's fourteen points, the Allies would not be justified in making any claims

on the Rhineland or even in demanding the return of all of Alsace-Lorraine to France"; second, "that a joint campaign against bolshevism was necessary and feasible"; and third, " that a strong army, based on the principle of universal service, was indispensable to Germany."¹³

Conger was primarily concerned with gathering information concerning German rearmament rather than their demands or suggestions. He did not intend to be used as an official channel to Paris. To avoid this Conger declined to lunch with the cabinet or to meet with it as a body, though he did confer informally with individual members such as Defense Minister Gustav Noske and Commander-in-Chief of the Army, General Walther Reinhardt.¹⁴

General Groener interpreted Conger's attitude as friendly toward Germany. The General was most optimistic in his assessment of their talks and believed that the Colonel might be a pro-German influence on Pershing and Wilson.¹⁵ This was a misinterpretation of Conger's intentions. While Conger was not pro-French¹⁶ neither was he a supporter of the German cause as outlined by Groener.

Many times people hear what they want to hear. This might have been the case with Groener, and, given the circumstances, it can be seen how Groener easily misinterpreted Conger's actions. Conger was concerned early in the year about the possibility of a second revolution in Germany that might open the door to the Bolsheviks, and he had tried to secure economic aid for the defeated country to help forestall this possibility.¹⁷ Earlier Conger had appeared friendly and concerned when he urged the new cabinet to adopt the United States Constitution¹⁸ and he now seemed to have sympathy for the German position. Groener asked him about the American attitude concerning the unrest in the Rhineland, and Conger responded that the

U.S. opposed the far-reaching annexation plans adopted by the French. He also confirmed Groener's suspicion that Lloyd George was pushing for the reduction of the German army to 100,000 men, but Conger did not give the General any overt indication that the reduction would not be required.¹⁹ Still, given Conger's openness and willingness to confirm their suspicions, along with his past concern, the Germans easily overlooked the negative aspects of their meeting.

Following his meeting with the officers at Kolberg, Conger journeyed to Berlin to gain a more balanced assessment of the situation. While in the German capital he met with Professor Hans Delbruck, whom he had first met in 1910, on 20 March 1919.²⁰ Conger told the historian that his government had sent him to find out whether the Germans were really ready to accept the French position or if the military faction was only quiet for the time being while waiting for the right moment to unleash another blow against France. The American observed that what he had seen during his trip so far seemed to guarantee that the Germans would not be led into a new war. Conger then asked Delbruck about the situation in Germany. The professor answered that the prevailing policy of the Entente was to push Germany into the arms of the Bolsheviks and many Germans wanted to join with Russia to fight the Entente. Delbruck was of the opinion that America and England had become the leading policy makers at Paris, but Conger denied that Clemenceau had turned that role over to Wilson and Lloyd George. The American officer then asked what people in Germany thought about the restrictions on them, but Delbruck parried by putting forth a few questions of his own.

Delbruck questioned Conger about America's attitude concerning the Saar, the Kaiser Wilhelm Canal, Schleswig, Danzig and Upper Silesia. Conger answered

honestly and noted that a high war indemnity was to be expected. Discussion on colonies and Alsace-Lorraine was avoided. Conger's answers were borne out by the terms of the Versailles Treaty.²¹

The Delbruck-Conger conversation was quickly reported to the German government and probably contributed to its optimism regarding the upcoming peace terms. The purpose of Conger's visit with Delbruck had been to gather information, but his opinion on subjects of common interest was carefully noted by the Germans who accepted him as a legitimate representative of his government empowered to express President Wilson's attitudes and thinking. His intentions and the fact that he was not in the diplomatic service mattered not at all.

That Conger did not intend to convey any hope for undue optimism is evident from his meeting with Groener, with whom Conger stressed that Germany would not be treated lightly. Conger continued in this vein in April when, as Wilson's representative, he met with Count Ulrick von Brockdorff-Rantzau, the German Foreign Minister and newly appointed chief of the German delegation to the Paris Peace Conference.²²

On 28 April, when the special conference train left Berlin for Paris, the Germans still expected a negotiated settlement. Conger telegraphed Brockdorff-Rantzau that he would confer with him on the way to the French capital. Around midnight Conger boarded the train as it stopped in Duisburg.²³ The American was somber and business like. He told the German diplomat that "Clemenceau will make a speech and then you will probably have an opportunity of saying a few words. Much will depend on your attitude."²⁴ In a conference of this sort form is all important, and Conger was warning the Germans to act humbly and contritely. Brockdorff-Rantzau, a proud career diplomat, seemed not to understand at first. He insisted on adhering

to Wilson's "Fourteen Points," noting "Those are my fundamental principle." At this point Conger spoke bluntly, "If you don't accept the terms you will be compelled to sign."²⁵

Conger made it clear that little or no negotiation was expected by the Allied Powers in Paris and that Germany would be required to sign a dictated peace. "I am relying on the President's word of honor," Conger was told by the German. With some agitation the American told him, "I advise you none the less to give way. It will be inevitable." Conger attempted to discuss a series of specific problems, Danzig, Upper Silesia, colonies, etc., with the Foreign Minister, but Brockdorff-Rantzau remained silent, facing the realization that Wilson's program and ideals were not to be considered. His only comment was "For my part I shall never sign anything that departs from the "Fourteen Points." At this point, as the train neared its destination, Conger stated that he hoped he would not "have to report in that sense." The German replied, "You can repeat not only that is my clear resolve, but also that I have relied on the President keeping his word, but he evidently has broken it."²⁶

The Germans soon realized what was expected of them, and though the German Cabinet was "somewhat incensed" that, as they saw it, Conger had not properly forewarned them of the severity of the terms, his counsel was again sought. On 15 May 1919, Conger received an "urgent request" from Secretary of State Matthias Erzberger for him to come to Berlin. Accompanied by Major Frederick Henrotin, also of G-2, he arrived in the German capital on 17 May.²⁷

In an effort to make sure that Erzberger did not misunderstand his visit, Conger explained at their first meeting on the morning of 18 May that he had not been sent by anyone in authority but rather had come this time, in

response to the German's request, on his own volition and was not speaking for any military or diplomatic authority. He said he hoped to point out certain facts that were important for the future peace of the world and were not at present understood by the German people. At this point Count Johann von Bernstorff, the former German Ambassador to the United States, and Major Henrotin entered the room, and Conger repeated his statements for the diplomat's benefit. He continued "I have done this in the hope that I might clear up some misconceptions, which I was informed were held by the German Government, and which were interfering with the settlement of peace."²⁸

Conger and Henrotin wanted to correct any illusions held by the Germans. This time Conger could not be accused of misleading the German leaders. The Germans seemed to think that Wilson did not support the treaty terms and that most of the American troops had already returned home. Conger refuted this argument and told Erzberger and Bernstorff that he had it on "excellent authority that the President was in thorough agreement with, and prepared to back up, all the terms of the Treaty of Peace as regards Germany."²⁹ The Germans interpreted the return of troops to America to mean that Wilson and the American people would be reluctant to make further use of them in Europe. Conger replied that this was just one more evidence of German misinterpretation of foreign public opinion.

Conger also disabused the Germans of their illusions regarding the French. He stated that the French leaders were not ready for a compromise of any sort concerning the terms of the Treaty, as the Germans seemed to believe, and that French public opinion supported its leaders. The American assured the Germans that France and the United States would cooperate in any further action to settle the peace of Europe.³⁰

Colonel Conger concluded his statements on a

note offering some hope. He stated that it was commonly thought in Paris that the Germans were interpreting the Treaty terms too literally and that "after signature, and as it became apparent that Germany was doing her utmost to live up to the terms of the Treaty, that there would be a more liberal interpretation favorable to Germany".³¹

Erzberger took the news calmly and appeared amused by Bernstorff's discomfort. Erzberger thought that this meeting was not very profitable and arranged a private meeting at 9:00 the next morning, Monday the nineteenth, with Conger and Henrotin. Erzberger stressed that Germany had to have peace and that the government desired such. He wanted the Allied Powers to understand the difficulties faced by the government regarding the Treaty terms and listed nine proposals, taken down by Henrotin, which were to be transmitted to the American officials in Paris. Erzberger's approach to the Treaty was conciliatory, and his remarks were directed to the treaty terms though he did protest the "War Guilt" clause which blamed Germany for the war. Conger made no statement or reply to the proposals but noted that he intended to return at once to Trier.³²

While in Berlin Conger had a further meeting with Hans Delbruck at the professor's request. Delbruck was leaving that evening for Versailles to act as advisor to the German delegation, and Conger was most interested in his views and asked him if he would express them for the record. The professor stated that he was opposed to signing the Treaty as he believed this would dishonor Germany. Instead he said that he intended to recommend that Germany not sign but rather allow herself to be occupied. Delbruck's feeling was "If Germany is to die politically, it is better for her to perish honorably than by agreeing to dishonorable Peace."³³

Conger left his meeting with Delbruck unsettled.

Not only had the historian shown an unwillingness to accept the treaty, but one of Conger's agents also related to him that President Friedrich Ebert had indicated to that agent that he was not as sure as Erzberger and Bernstorff that the Germans would not offer active resistance to the Allied advance. In addition, Conger noted a new martial spirit in Berlin's streets that had been absent two months earlier. The American officer interpreted this as meaning that the German government was inspiring and spreading sentiment among the people of Berlin designed to unite them and that it was working.³⁴

Conger concluded his report on the meeting with Delbruck with a general summary of the situation regarding a resumption of armed resistance. While some members of the General Staff, such as General Erich Ludendorff, were probably organizing such resistance, Conger did not think that Hindenburg, Groener or the other major leaders were part of such a group. He was not so sure about the role of the Government but thought that the Minister of War, Gustav Noske, must be involved. While Conger noted that there was no evidence of such organization in the zone through which he passed to Berlin, he stated that he would not be surprised to see the Kaiser return and rally a loyal Germany to the colors. "This enthusiasm, it must be stated in all frankness, is based on the German Government's propaganda, or other propaganda, to the effect that Germany has been tricked in the armistice proceedings, that the Peace Treaty now offered is not in accordance with the terms of the armistice or with the Fourteen Points of President Wilson."³⁵

Colonel Conger was correct in his assumption that some sort of armed resistance was brewing and that the General Staff was involved. He was equally correct in asserting that the leadership of the General Staff did not support such activity. Some officers, however, actually

considered a military takeover of the Government if it was not willing to lead the resistance. Much of their resentment was directed at the provision of the Treaty calling for a reduction in the size of the army which would put many officers back in civilian dress.³⁶ Even General Wilhelm Reinhardt, who had replaced Hindenburg, was temporarily in favor of resistance even to the point of surrendering the western part of the country while holding on to the east.³⁷

Groener had opposed rejection of the treaty, but before advocating acceptance he had his staff conduct a survey of commanders of the various military zones to determine if resistance was a real possibility. The answer was a strong "no". Consequently, Groener advised against resistance and for signing.³⁸ Noske was approached by representatives of some of the officers and asked to lead the resistance, but after some hesitation, he too refused thinking that acceptance was the best course for Germany.³⁹

In addition to the survey Groener was convinced that he should support the signing because of the opinions expressed by Conger. In meetings with Major Kroegeer of the General Staff held 7-9 June 1919, Conger had made his position perfectly clear. He pointed out that there was little hope for any improvement in the terms of the Treaty, but he said that he would relay to the Peace Commission any demands or proposals the German might care to send.⁴⁰ He also expressed the conviction that if war were to break out again the United States and England, though unwilling, would join with the Allies against Germany.

During these talks with Kroegeer, Conger gave an amazingly personal version of the development of the peace talks and of Wilson himself. The American reported that the original American draft of the treaty was prepared by Secretary of State Robert Lansing and General Tasker Bliss but supported fully by Wilson and the rest of the

American delegation. Major Kroeger saw this as pro-German in the sense that, as expressed by Conger, the draft "supported the interests of Germany insofar as it guaranteed and economically secured the further existence of Germany."⁴¹ Conger stated that Clemenceau, realizing that opposition to the entire American delegation would be difficult, arranged for future negotiations to take place in the Council of Four. Conger noted that Clemenceau thought it was easier to deal with Wilson, "who was not conversant with European circumstances, by simply threatening, when the occasion presented itself not to participate in his League of Nations. This League of Nations had become such a hobby horse of Wilson's that he was willing to make any concession for its sake."⁴²

The American colonel seemed very sure of what future drafts of the treaty would contain. The second version, he said, would include some German counter-suggestions such as plebescites for Upper Silesia and possibly east and west Prussia and some improvement of the western frontiers. He again emphasized that Germany would have to sign the altered treaty because it was the best she could expect and that refusal to sign would mean the invasion of Germany by the united armies of the Allies.

Conger must have known of the thinking of some officers in the High Command when he then proceeded to outline Germany's alternative to signing and its consequences. It would be possible, he said, for Germany, with popular support, to win a struggle in the east against the Poles, but she would be forced to hold on the line of the Oder against the advancing Allies and

there would occur in this region a hopeless struggle for Germany which would end in certain destruction for Germany, a goal which France to its regret was unable to achieve during the war itself. Along with this purely military destruction of Germany

there would be hand in hand a total economic destruction of Germany so that between the Vistula and the Rhine there would remain nothing but a large rubbish heap.⁴³

Conger said that the other members of the Entente would take part in the campaign against Germany and that the friendly feeling which had developed toward her within the American army would be destroyed. However, if Germany signed the revised treaty Germany would develop as a trading partner that the Entente, in their own self-interest, would need.

The Kroeger interview ended with Conger praising Brockdorff-Rantzau for his efforts. He noted that the first requirement for Germany during the upcoming negotiations was the creation of a civil commission for the occupied areas as opposed to France's wish for a purely French military government. Conger promised his services to the High Command for as long as he remained in Europe.⁴⁴

Shortly after this interview, Conger returned to his position on Pershing's staff following the dissolution of the advanced general headquarters of the American Army in Trier. In his memoirs Groener notes, possibly with regret, that the promised path left open by Conger was never again used by Germany.⁴⁵

Conger's visits with the Germans had a greater influence on Germany's decision to sign the treaty than the efforts of any other allied envoy. This is true because Conger's advice helped the one man who in the end bore the responsibility for recommending that the treaty be signed, General Groener. Conger was able to influence Groener and other Germans for a number of reasons. First of all, he was an officer they respected. He was educated, poised and not at all intimidated by them. Having dinner,

brandy and cigars with high ranking officers, a ploy often used by the High Command to impress or influence politicians, did not impress Conger but rather allowed him to establish himself as a man to whom they should listen. This was not difficult for Conger, for he genuinely liked most of the officers with whom he dealt and developed a friendship, or at least a friendly respect for them which was reciprocated. Conger convinced them that his advice and counsel were both realistic and in their own best interest. Another factor in his favor was timing. His mission came at a time when the Germans were willing to listen and take his advice seriously, partly because they thought he was representing the President. At this point Wilson's name still retained some of its messianic magic. The Germans also trusted Conger to be honest and direct in his dealings with them. Finally, Conger was successful because he contacted the key decision makers and worked directly with them.

NOTES

1. Nachlass General Kurt von Schleicher, N42/14 (59-70) "Die im Osten;" and Nachlass General Wilhelm Groener, FM137/22 (214 "Besprechung in Frankfurt a/O. 5.5.19.", 21-34.

2. Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945* (New York: 1964), 364.

3. R.M. Watt, *The Kings Depart: The Tragedy of Germany: Versailles and the German Revolution* (New York: 1968), 406-407.