

Recommendation by the British Foreign Office on the question of German rearmament (May 1950)

Caption: In May 1950, the services of the British Foreign Office draft an internal note on the dangers of premature rearmament of West Germany and call on the British delegation participating in the meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Four (the United States, France, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union) not to raise this question in the forthcoming debates.

Source: The National Archives of the United Kingdom, [s.l.], Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU.

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Re-establishment of German Armed Forces

Recommendation

- (a) The United Kingdom Delegation should not raise this subject.
- (b) If the subject is raised by another Delegation our attitude should be that its discussion by Ministers at this time is premature since all three Powers are understood to be in agreement as to the impossibility of early re-establishment of German Armed Forces. Any discussion of the long term aspect should be confined to an examination as to how, if German rearmament were later permitted, German forces might best be integrated into the scheme of Western Union defence.

Background

There has been a good deal of speculation recently in the Press about the possibility and advisability of German rearmament. Certain Allied Generals have made statements openly advocating it. Of more significance is the fact that the British Chiefs of Staff have stated that the successful defence of Western Europe against eventual Soviet attack can only be assured with the participation of Germany. If this view is confirmed by the Western Union Chiefs of Staff, and it is believed that it would be, it must be accepted as the technical statement of the position. This would lead to the conclusion that at some time a decision will have to be reached as to when Germany should be permitted to be re-armed and what form her rearmament should take.

2. The Governments of all three Western Powers have publicly declared themselves against the re-armament of Germany. The German Federal Government has also expressed opposition to projects for German rearmament and the leader of the chief opposition party, the Social Democrats, has been even more definite in his rejection of this idea. To regard these statements of policy, both allied and German, as implying that under no conditions and at no time in the future will Germans ever bear arms again in the defence of their country would be to accept a contradiction of the obvious. A truer picture is obtained from the carefully chosen words used by the American High Commissioner in a speech at Stuttgart on 6th February immediately after his return to Germany after consultation with his Government. Mr. McCloy then said "Germany cannot be allowed to develop political conditions or military status which would threaten other nations or the peace of the World. That means there will be no German Army or Air Force. German security will best be protected by German participation in a closely knit Western European community."

3. Although Germany herself, by reason of the losses which she has suffered during the war and of the measures which the Allies have since taken for the reduction of her war potential, could not again become a menace for many years, there are dangers which must be calculated before any decision to allow her to re-arm is taken: -

(a) The greatest danger is that Germany should throw in her lot with Russia. One would wish to see the Federal Republic firmly committed to the Western camp before allowing it to re-arm. On the other hand, the risk of Germany turning east at some time in the future will probably never disappear entirely, due to the nature of the German people. At the present time the leaders of the political parties, Trade Unions, Churches, and public organisations of all kinds are personally committed up to the hilt and would indeed forfeit their liberty, if not their lives, if they fell into Russian hands. Communism as a force in Western Germany is weak and growing weaker. It is desirable to see the Federal Republic formally obligated to the various Covenants of international cooperation in the Western World, but it does not seem possible to say that we must wait indefinitely until we are absolutely convinced for all time that Germany will not turn east.

(b) The Russians are genuinely afraid of the military might of Germany. Re-armament of Western Germany might provoke them to a preventative war and so precipitate the catastrophe which it would be designed to prevent. On the other hand a decision to launch World War III is one which the Kremlin can only take in the light of a large number of considerations, most prominent among which would be the military and economic

readiness of the country to embark upon this adventure. All indications go to show that from the Russians' point of view conditions for waging war will grow more favourable as the years go by. One must therefore conclude that the readiness of the Soviet Union to regard German re-armament as a *casus belli* will increase with the passage of time.

(c) We have a major interest in keeping the American troops in Europe for as long as possible. At the moment the Germans are willing to put up with the occupation because they realise that the Occupation troops constitute their only protection against the menace from the east. If the Germans were allowed to re-arm, the sense of dependence would disappear and there would be strong pressure on the Western Allies to terminate the occupation. Before, therefore, any decision to allow Germany to re-arm could be taken, it would be essential to have a clear understanding with the United States regarding the duration of their commitment in Europe.

4. While the above considerations indicate certain dangers regarding the re-armament of Germany they do not show that these dangers will get less as time goes on, but to some extent the contrary. Yet there are certain other considerations which make any immediate decision to permit German re-armament unwise and indeed impracticable:-

(a) Experience teaches us that an armed Germany soon develops a high degree of truculence. German re-armament is incompatible with the maintenance of the present system of control by the High Commission under the Occupation Statute. As controls are removed or lightened, this point of difficulty will diminish, but it should be realised that a decision to allow Germany to re-arm is virtually a decision to close down the High Commission, for which Governments are presumably not yet prepared.

(b) In the present climate of opinion in France it is unlikely that any French Government could agree to the re-armament of Germany. Such an idea will probably always be unpalatable to the French, but it should become less so in course of time, firstly because France will, we hope, grow stronger herself and secondly, because the Soviet menace is likely to become increasingly obvious.

(c) In the present economic condition of Germany it would be impossible to organise German re-armament without American assistance. The resources of America are not inexhaustible. If we assume, as we must, that in the distribution of American resources France and the Western European countries should have priority, there will in fact be nothing available for Germany for a considerable time to come.

5. Thus while it seems inevitable that the risks inherent in German re-armament will at some time have to be accepted, it is clear that such a step at present is politically unacceptable and practically impossible. The Chiefs of Staff have recognised this. They accept the view that immediate German re-armament would be imprudent on political grounds. They have further expressed the opinion that apart from the establishment of gendarmerie in Western Germany (which, they say, should be undertaken as a matter of urgency) "there is no hurry about the formation of anything more since we would not contemplate even the partial re-armament of Western Germany until the French Army has been built up". The importance of an early restoration of France's military power emerges clearly from this statement. While we can and should give time for this at present, we may not be able to do so indefinitely.

6. Under these circumstances there would appear to be no useful purpose in the Foreign Ministers discussing the matter at this stage, and it is accordingly recommended that it should not be raised by the Secretary of State during the forthcoming talks. If the question is opened by the French or United States representatives, it would seem sufficient for Ministers to conclude that in its short term aspect the question must be answered by a clear negative. As to the long term aspect it seems desirable that some thought should be given as to how German forces could in the future be integrated into a scheme of Western European defence without creating a menace to Germany's neighbours. This is a matter appropriate to technical study under conditions of great secrecy and need not at this time concern Ministers.