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The Agrarian Road to Peace:
Henry Morgenthau's Post-War Planning for Germany

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At the Second Quebec Conference in September 1944, victory lay on the horizon. Western leaders had every right to rejoice at the contemplation of the fate of their foe, Hitler's Germany.¹ The Second World War ravaged Europe since Germany's blitzkrieg invasion of Poland in September 1939 and the British had been the only major Western power fighting Germany until America's entry in the war in 1941. After many setbacks and failures throughout 1941-42, the military prospects of the Allied armies were finally looking up. By 1944, Red Army troops in the east made tremendous headway westward and the Anglo-American forces established successful beachheads along the Normandy coast, pushing past the hedgerow country of France, deeper into German territory.² The once mighty German Reich was shrinking. Victory lay at the fingertips of the Allies, and they knew that it was only a matter of time before the might of the German war machine crumbled. By September 1944, the Allies asked themselves an

¹ Russell A. Buchanan, *The United States and World War II: Volume II* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1964), 488.

² For a detailed military analysis of the Allied successes by late 1944, see the forward by Lieutenant George M. Elsey U.S.N.R, *The Presidents Log for the 1944 Quebec Conference: September 9-21, 1944 [OCTAGON]*. Grace Tully Collection, 5-6.

important the question: once the war is over, how will we treat Germany? American President Franklin D. Roosevelt and British Prime Minister Winston S. Churchill asked this question at the meeting in Canada. But an American statesman by the name of Henry Morgenthau Jr. sought to provide them the answer in the form of an agricultural alternative for the German people. Morgenthau's plan was accepted at Quebec. Unfortunately, the leak of the plan to the press and its fierce opposition by Henry Stimson in the War Department, led to its eventual demise.

The Second Quebec Conference was the eleventh meeting between Roosevelt and Churchill since 1941. The main concern of the meeting in Quebec was to discuss the allocation of Allied resources for the fight against Japan, now that the second front was successfully established due to the D-Day landings in June. Post-war treatment of Germany was also discussed. Roosevelt and Churchill's mentalities regarding the Germans were quite clear at their meeting. Churchill said at the conference, "the German working man should be allowed sufficient food for his bare need, and work, but no more."³ Roosevelt expressed severe thoughts prior to the meeting saying, "you either have to castrate the German people or you have got to treat them in such a manner that they can't just go on reproducing people who want to continue the way they have in the past."⁴

Henry Morgenthau Jr., the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury, was the main member of Roosevelt's cabinet to accompany him to Quebec. He played on the thoughts of these two wartime leaders and entered the central spotlight of the post-war German issue. Churchill himself requested Morgenthau to be present saying that the issue was extremely vital to the British.⁵

³ Winston S. Churchill, *Octagon Conference*, "Minutes of First Plenary Meeting Held at the Citadel, Quebec, on Wednesday, 13 September 1944, at 1145," Sept 13, 1944, 242.

⁴ William L. Hitchcock, *The Bitter Road to Freedom: The Human Cost of Allied Victory in World War II Europe* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 171.

⁵ Winston Churchill, *Quebec Conference*, Presidential Secretary Files, September 12, 1944, 2.

While at the conference, the treasury secretary put forward a plan that went on to bear his name, the Morgenthau Plan. Even though the plan initially had the support of Roosevelt and Churchill, it met full scale abandonment shortly after its adoption.

Exactly how the treasury secretary found himself tangled into post-war foreign policy can be traced back to his visit to France and Britain in August 1944, just two months after the D-Day landings on the Normandy coast. Historians focus on a document put out by the State Department that caught the attention of Morgenthau. This State Department document called for the economic re-stability of Germany following its defeat, an idea diametrically opposed to the treasury secretary. Moreira stated that, “Morgenthau read the paper silently, growing more and more furious.”⁶ Blum quoted Morgenthau in detail,

I was making the trip primarily to see how the Treasury’s financial arrangements for the liberated areas of France were working out.... But as we were swinging out over the Atlantic, one of my assistants pulled out of his briefcase a copy of a State Department memorandum on reparations in Germany. I settled back to read it, first with interest, then with misgivings, finally with sharp disagreement.⁷

Morgenthau took it upon himself to be intimately involved in post-war foreign policy thereafter. Further, he had a certain closeness to Roosevelt not enjoyed by other cabinet members. He was able to use this to his advantage prior to the conference. This in turn enabled him to be invited by Roosevelt to discuss post-war policy with Churchill. However, choosing the treasury secretary on for these decisions was against the usual protocol in American foreign diplomacy.

The notion that the Treasury Department should be mixed in with affairs of post-war plans of this magnitude baffled many in Washington and in the press, particularly since

⁶ Peter Moreira, *The Jew Who Defeated Hitler: Henry Morgenthau Jr., FDR, and How We Won the War* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2014), 245.

⁷ John Morton Blum, *Roosevelt and Morgenthau* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1970), 566.

Roosevelt invited Morgenthau, and not Secretary of State Cordell Hull to help him discuss his plan with Churchill. Arthur Krock, a correspondent for the *New York Times*, wrote, “Both Foreign Minister Eden and Foreign Under-Secretary Cadogan were summoned to Quebec for conference, but the Secretary of the Treasury, and not the Secretary of State, was the only cabinet member summoned from Washington.”⁸ It seemed only logical that the secretary of state should be at the helm of such matters right next to the president. Nevertheless, Morgenthau went to the conference with the goal of getting Churchill and Roosevelt to sign off on his plan, a plan that if adopted would rock post-war Germany to its very foundation.

The post-war path that Morgenthau took with him to the conference in Quebec proved to be decidedly opposite of the plans recommended to the president by both the State Department and the War Department. Morgenthau had a simple goal, “I want to make Germany so impotent that she cannot forge the tool of war—another world war.”⁹ Making the correct post-war adjustments to Germany following its defeat served to be the ultimate goal among Roosevelt’s cabinet members, regardless of their disagreements on “means”.¹⁰

Morgenthau believed the only way to be certain that Germany could never again wage a world war would be the destruction of their heavy industry. German heavy industry, particularly in the Ruhr region, made Hitler’s war machine possible. The treasury staff estimated the Ruhr to be responsible for forty percent of the German armament production.¹¹ Further, Morgenthau

⁸ Arthur Krock, “Why Secretary Morgenthau Went to Quebec,” *New York Times*, September 22, 1944.

⁹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Morgenthau Diaries, book 768,” “disarmament of Germany,” September 4, 1944, 144.

¹⁰ Henry L. Stimson, “Morgenthau Diaries, book 772,” “memorandum for the President,” September 15, 1944, 4.

¹¹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Morgenthau Diaries, book 768,” “disarmament of Germany,” September 4, 1944, 126.

believed that agriculture should replace the industrial capabilities that led to an aggressive Germany. In his own words, “Germany’s road to peace leads to the farm.”¹²

Specifically, the destruction of the might of German heavy industry had to focus on three industrial capabilities. The first group was the metals group; blast furnaces, forges, i.e. the process of turning iron ore into iron and steel. Second was the chemical group; which was the source for German rubber, explosives and gasoline. The final group that was conducive for German war making capabilities was the electrical group.¹³ Once these industries were gone, they would then be rebuilt in those parts of Europe that suffered from Nazi aggression. This would serve as an economic recompense to the countries of Europe and in turn would pave the way for a transition to an agricultural Germany.

In order to accomplish this, the Treasury Department, along with the State and War Departments created a series of drafts that served as memos to President Roosevelt. The Treasury Department’s draft was the harshest and the most controversial proposal. At the beginning of the conference, the notion that Germany should be stripped of its industry and made into an agricultural community came as a surprise to Churchill saying that the plan was like, “chaining his body to a dead German.”¹⁴ In spite of Churchill’s dead German analogy, he, along with President Roosevelt signed off on the Morgenthau Plan to the treasury secretary’s great delight, “The thing up at Quebec, all together, was unbelievably good. And as far as I went personally, it was the high spot of my whole career in the government. The thing that we have

¹² Henry Morgenthau Jr., *Germany is Our Problem* (New York and London: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1945), 48.

¹³ *Ibid*, 18-19.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Morgenthau Diaries, book 772,” “Report on Quebec Conference,” September 19, 1944, 208.

been working with here, with regard to the attitude towards Germany—the Treasury viewpoint was wholly accepted.”¹⁵

The treasury secretary was sure of the economic goals and moral values of his plan from its formulation to its acceptance. When Morgenthau reminisced about a meeting he had with Secretary Patterson on September 27, 1944, Patterson jokingly asked Morgenthau if he found his own agricultural plan offensive. Morgenthau replied, “not in the case of Germany.”¹⁶

Morgenthau’s ecstatic self-celebration was short lived, however, as the plan found no support from the other departments in Washington even after its adoption by Roosevelt and Churchill. Its greatest opponent came from the War Department, led by Henry L. Stimson. Henry Stimson is a unique figure in American history. A veteran statesman during the First World War he was called again to service as head of the War Department during World War II. Stimson knew firsthand what consequences would befall any victorious nation if a post-war policy like the Morgenthau Plan were thrust upon Germany. To Stimson, the treasury plan seemed all too much like a repeat of Versailles, post-war conditions so harsh that a new war would be brought to fruition. In Stimson’s own words “such methods, in my opinion, do not prevent war; they tend to breed war.”¹⁷ According to historian David F. Schmitz, Stimson’s post-war principles were based on “liberal international trade, convertible currencies, and reconstruction of the defeated nations.”¹⁸ Morgenthau surmised that the farm leads to peace, but to Stimson, the farm led to war.

¹⁵ U.S. Department of the Treasury, “Morgenthau Diaries, book 772,” “Group,” September 19, 1944, 153.

¹⁶ Henry Morgenthau Jr., “Morgenthau Diaries, book 776,” “Conference with Secretary Patterson,” September 27, 1955, 35.

¹⁷ Henry L. Stimson, “Morgenthau Diaries, book 769,” “Letter,” September 5, 1944, 28.

¹⁸ David F. Schmitz, *Henry L. Stimson: The First Wise Man* (Wilmington: SR Books, 2001), 166.

Turning a heavily industrialized country like Germany into an exclusively agricultural nation was one of the key hallmarks that led to its opposition. Stimson believed, oddly enough, that agriculture would starve some thirty million Germans.¹⁹ Morgenthau however continued to see no logic in the economic argument that Germany would starve as a farming nation. The treasury secretary went into tremendous detail outlining the reasons why not only would Germany survive, but the importance in the debate to think of the safety of the world, and not just German discomfort.²⁰

Following the plans adoption at Quebec, Stimson firmly resolved to make his apprehensions known to Roosevelt and to be the main voice to lead the opposition against the newly adopted treasury plan. Stimson argued against the treasury plan on economic grounds, even before its adoption at Quebec, “In substance, my point is that these resources constitute a natural and necessary asset for the productivity of Europe. In a period when the world is suffering destruction and from want of production, the concept of the total obliteration of these values is to my mind wholly wrong.”²¹

For Stimson, putting the Morgenthau Plan in full effect would not just seal the fate of millions of Germans, but thereby would also seal the fate of the continent of Europe. Stimson was fully aware of the European dependency on German industry. Further, the logic of the plan transcended economic concerns for Europe and was opposed on moral grounds as well. In his own words, “Sound thinking teaches that prosperity in one part of the world helps to create prosperity in other parts of the world. It also teaches that poverty in one part of the world helps to

¹⁹ Harry White, “Morgenthau Diaries, book 769, “Conference in the Secretary’s Office,” September 6, 1944, 109.

²⁰ Morgenthau, *Germany is Our Problem*, 48.

²¹ Henry L. Stimson, “Morgenthau Diaries, book 771,” “Memorandum for the President,” September 9, 1944, 51.

create poverty in other parts of the world. Enforced poverty is even worse, for it destroys the spirit not only of the victim but debases the victor.”²²

Stimson put his full weight against the Treasury Departments post war plans. The rivalry between the War Department and the Treasury Department in late September even escalated to a point where the Treasury Department, at Morgenthau’s orders, tried to find inconsistencies in Stimson’s past handlings on reparations, stating, “you ought to look up Stimson’s record on reparations, and you will find how bad he was, and he hasn’t changed any since then.”²³ This served a pure political purpose to get on Roosevelt’s good graces. Historian Michael Beschloss writes that the treasury secretary attempted to use Stimson’s past against him in winning over FDR. In other words, Morgenthau attempted to bring the President to his camp, reminding him of Stimson’s loyal service to Herbert Hoover, who Roosevelt particularly disliked.²⁴

Stimson refused to be such a staunch critic of the Morgenthau Plan without having the responsibility of telling the President that the adoption of the Treasury plan was a dreaded mistake. Justus Doenecke writes, “When on October 3, Stimson carefully read the agreement to Roosevelt at lunch, he reported that the president ‘was frankly staggered by this and said he had no idea how he could have initialed this; that he had evidently done this without much thought.’ ‘Henry Morgenthau,’ FDR said, ‘pulled a boner.’”²⁵

²² Henry L. Stimson, “Morgenthau Diaries, book 772,” “Memorandum for the President,” September 15, 1944, 6.

²³ Henry Morgenthau Jr., “Morgenthau Diaries, book 776,” “German Reparations,” September 27, 1944, 77.

²⁴ Michael Beschloss, *The Conquerors: Roosevelt, Truman and the Destruction of Hitler’s Germany 1941-1945* (New York: Simon & Schuster 2002), 143.

²⁵ Justus D. Doenecke and Mark A. Stoler, *Debating Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Foreign Policies, 1933-1945* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, INC, 2005), 78.

According to Roosevelt's biographer, Frank Freidel, Roosevelt "in effect pleaded *nolo contendere*."²⁶

By late September 1944, another issue occurred that served to be a decisive blow to the would-be success of the Morgenthau Plan, its leak to the press. To say that panic took hold of Morgenthau and his staff is an understatement. One of the first tasks that the Morgenthau ordered was to find out who leaked it in the first place and the most obvious answer, to Morgenthau at least, was from his own staff. In a treasury meeting on September 26, Morgenthau called his staff together to get to the bottom of who was responsible, "somebody here in this room talked. Now, I don't know who it was. I don't suppose I ever will know, but it gives me a very uncomfortable feeling."²⁷ The results thereof being flat out denials of ever talking to any newspapermen all the way to second guessing themselves. Morgenthau, the day before, even went so far as to hold a mock press conference with his staff just in case the subject were to be pushed by the press.²⁸

Many other variables were involved concerning the leak of the plan to the press besides it being supposedly too harsh on Germany, and the press had lots of ammunition to use against it. First, one of the main concerns of the press was to drive home the notion that Roosevelt's cabinet was split. This was an issue the cabinet members wished to take care of immediately. A piece put out by John M. Hightower said, "President Roosevelt's cabinet committee on German peace policy has split wide open, it was learned today over a plan sponsored by Treasury Secretary Morgenthau for completely destroying Germany

²⁶ Frank Freidel, *Franklin D Roosevelt: A Rendezvous with Destiny* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1990), 560.

²⁷ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Morgenthau Diaries, book 775," "Press Leak," September 26, 1944, 13.

²⁸ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Morgenthau Diaries, book 774," "Press Conference," September 25, 1944, 123-132.

as a modern industrial state and converting it into an agricultural country of small farms.”²⁹

Roosevelt’s cabinet having a lack of cohesion on post-war policy was only one issue. How the plan impacted the fighting man in Europe was another. The news of the plan reached the ears of Hitler’s minister of propaganda, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, who used the details of the plan to his advantage in a propaganda effort to get the German soldier to fight harder against American forces.

American newspapers published negative reviews of the plan. One such of these papers called attention to Morgenthau’s “fevered mind,” and that “a festering sore would be implanted in the heart of Europe.”³⁰ *Christian Science Monitor* suggested that the consequences of the Morgenthau Plan cost American lives European battlefields, “harm has been done because the alleged Morgenthau Plan leaked out just at the moment when the Germans scored their first significant military success in many months at the Arnhem bridgehead,” wrote one article.³¹ As the *Washington Post* put it, the plan’s leak was “Aiding Dr. Goebbels.”³²

As Peter Moreira points out, both the American media and the German media stressed the brutality of the Morgenthau Plan, but the Nazi press particularly emphasized the Jewish nature of the plan, considering that Morgenthau himself was Jewish. “In Berlin, Joseph Goebbels considered the Morgenthau Plan proof the Jews were planning

²⁹ John M. Hightower, “Cabinet Group Snarls over German Peace Policy,” *Big Spring Daily Herald (Big Spring Texas)*, September 24, 1944, 7.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 6.

³¹ Joseph C. Harsh, “Not All of Morgenthau Plan Scrapped: An Intimate Message from Washington,” *Christian Science Monitor*, September 28, 1944, 20.

³² Marquis Childs, “Washington Calling: Aiding Dr. Goebbels,” *Washington Post*, September 29, 1944, 6.

to harm Germany if the country fell. ‘Roosevelt and Churchill Agree to Jewish Murder Plan!’ screamed a headline in the *Völkischer Beobachter* newspaper.”³³

These events occurred during a pivotal moment in Roosevelt’s presidential career, the 1944 presidential elections that would seal for him an unprecedented fourth term. Roosevelt knew that he had to respond accordingly to any accusations of having a lack of unity among his cabinet members regarding post war policy. Especially regarding an American post-plan that was responsible for the killing of American soldiers.

Roosevelt’s foresight on the possible issues and complications of the publication of the Morgenthau Plan were well founded. Thomas Dewey, the Republican nominee for president attempted to use the unpopularity of the plan to his advantage against Roosevelt. As Roscoe Drummond, a correspondent for the *Christian Science Monitor* wrote in November 1944, Dewey’s “most solemn, gravest charge” was the accusation that Roosevelt’s lack of unity and consistency amongst his cabinet members brought the conclusion of the war to a standstill.³⁴ Dewey himself stated, “the blood of our fighting men is paying for the improvised meddling which is so much a part of the Roosevelt Administration....His own confused incompetence thus prolonged the war in Europe.”³⁵

Henry Morgenthau could not salvage his plans for Germany from the massive amount of negativity it encountered. The treasury plan quickly lost its steam.

The Morgenthau Plan was a very bright flash in the pan due to two events that sealed its fate; the harsh resistance it met from Stimson and the War Department and the leaks of

³³ Moreira, *The Jew Who Defeated Hitler*, 265.

³⁴ Roscoe Drummond, “Dewey Charges War Delayed; President Plans New Parley with Churchill and Stalin,” *Christian Science Monitor*, November 6, 1944, 1.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 1.

the details of the plan to the American press. Some of these events had greater weight in Roosevelt's abandonment of the plan than others but it effectively went off the table by late September and early October 1944.

However, in spite of the plan being decidedly tossed overboard, Morgenthau refused to let his post-war planning ambitions die with his plan. Even after its abandonment and after the death of President Roosevelt, Morgenthau still tried his upmost to influence the White House on a harsh post-war peace with Germany. His last chance to influence the president would come when Harry Truman planned to meet with the Allied Powers in Potsdam in July 1945 after the end of the war. Harry Truman wrote in his memoirs,

When he found out I was going to Potsdam in July, Secretary Morgenthau came in to ask if he could go with me. I told him I thought the Secretary of the Treasury was badly needed in the United States-much more so than in Potsdam. He replied that it was necessary for him to go and that if he could not he would have to quit. "All right," I replied, "if that is the way you feel, I'll accept your resignation right now." And I did. That was the end of the conversation and the end of the Morgenthau Plan.³⁶

Though Truman said quite plainly in his memoirs that the Morgenthau Plan ended with him accepting the treasury secretary's resignation, the Postdam Conference adopted post-war policy that was in reality quite close to the treasury plan. In an oral history interview with Josiah Dubois Jr., the Special Assistant to the Secretary of the Treasury 1944-1945, the agreement at Potsdam was "a hell of a lot closer to the Morgenthau Plan than the State Department memorandum....But, of course, it was never followed through.

³⁶ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs of Harry S. Truman: Volume 1, Year of Decisions* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1955), 327.

The U.S. officials did do just what Morgenthau was afraid of, and in effect what the State Department memorandum recommended.”³⁷

Though this would be the case, Morgenthau’s attempt to influence Truman at Potsdam would be the last time he would have the opportunity to have a serious say in post-war policy as secretary of the treasury. His last chance was a failure.

Henry Morgenthau Jr. served one of the longest tenures in the Treasury Department’s history. His reputation is sealed in history as an effective administrator with extremely close ties to Roosevelt. As an influential member of the War Refugee board, his main responsibility was to secure asylum for European Jews, and his efforts are well recorded. Yet, his longest legacy to history is the birth and failure of his post-war plans on Germany.

Morgenthau’s official biographer, the historian John Morton Blum, wrote that Morgenthau’s most difficult challenges, personally and politically, were his involvement in post-war policy.³⁸ Considering all the accusations from the press, opposition from Stimson, Dewey, and others in the public and in Washington in general, Morgenthau remained committed to the consistency of his plan on all grounds. Believing in his cause for a safer world, he fought hard and endured much, only for his greatest political aspiration to fail.

In conclusion it has been shown that despite the political success Morgenthau received from his post-war plans for Germany, it nevertheless became a dismal failure on

³⁷ Josiah E. Dubois, Jr., interview by Richard D. McKinzie, June 29, 1973, Camden, New Jersey, Oral History Interview with Josiah E. Dubois, Jr., transcript, Oral History Interviews, Harry S. Truman Library and Museum, Independence, Missouri, <https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/oral-histories/duboisje#transcript>.

³⁸ Blum, *Roosevelt and Morgenthau*, 559.

the record of the Treasury Secretary. Political and press opposition to an agrarian Germany led to its demise of which Morgenthau could not salvage even after World War II.

About the author

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