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# ‘Das Kind’ Revisited: Lord D’Abernon and German Security Policy, 1922–1925

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In 1968 the American historian, F. G. Stambrook, published an article on the origin of Treaty of Locarno – an agreement which is often viewed as one of the most important in twentieth-century diplomatic history.<sup>1</sup> The treaty was regarded by many contemporaries as a second attempt to put together a workable framework for peace at the end of the First World War, by removing some of the diplomatic tensions which existed in Europe since the conclusion of the Versailles Settlement, and so bringing greater security and co-operation. The principal agreement – signed by Britain, France, Germany and Italy – was one of several concluded at Locarno in the autumn of 1925. Stambrook’s work appeared during a revival of interest in this area of diplomacy and focused primarily on the relationship between Lord D’Abernon, the British ambassador to Berlin, and Carl von Schubert, State Secretary at the *Auswärtiges Amt*. Stambrook’s purpose was to describe how they created the basic proposal (‘das Kind’) for the security agreement signed by the British, French, German and Italian governments at Locarno.<sup>2</sup> He also sought to demonstrate that while there was occasional tension, the relationship between von Schubert and D’Abernon was close and that they held similar views on German foreign policy. The article did much to confirm the impression that their activities placed them at the heart of European diplomacy in the mid-1920s – an idea which D’Abernon had gone to some lengths to create. This view, in turn, is reflected in the huge number of references which occur to the piece in monographs and articles. It is also evident through the willingness of historians in the last thirty years to accept Stambrook’s contention that D’Abernon was the architect of German security policy between 1923 and 1925.<sup>3</sup> Yet beyond the lucid accounts of the general forces at work behind

<sup>1</sup> F. G. Stambrook, ‘“Das Kind” – Lord D’Abernon and the Origins of the Locarno Pact’, *Central European History*, 1 (1968). When he wrote the article, Stambrook was a lecturer in the History Department at the University of Sydney. The only other assessment he produced of interwar diplomacy was ‘“Resourceful in Expedients” – some examples of ambassadorial policy making in the inter-war period’, *Historical Papers*, 1973. Stambrook’s opinions are now predominantly out of keeping with recent studies of the Treaty of Locarno, which tend to concentrate on the weaknesses of the agreement. References to this school of thought are cited elsewhere in this article.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Das Kind’ was a phrase used by both D’Abernon and von Schubert. Lord D’Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1931), III, 121.

<sup>3</sup> References include the most recent and comprehensive account of Austen Chamberlain’s period

western European diplomacy in the mid-1920s, Stambrook's treatment of the actual dynamics of the D'Abernon–von Schubert exchanges is often tentative and incomplete. He tantalises his reader with half-developed ideas and then moves on to discuss other areas.

The purpose of this article is to develop and re-examine the principal points made by Stambrook and to reappraise the relationship between von Schubert and D'Abernon during the period between November 1924 and February 1925. It will also suggest that important issues have been overlooked which had a direct bearing on the actions of both men. The most significant omission is the failure to discuss the Russian dimension to Germany's foreign policy at this time, and the way that it was used to manipulate the British and French governments during the security negotiations. Inevitably, most of the sources used mirror those cited by Stambrook himself and by the German historian, Angela Kaiser. Her work, produced in the 1980s, endorsed many of his conclusions, and suggested that the D'Abernon–von Schubert relationship was very close and that the German government relied heavily on D'Abernon's advice.<sup>4</sup> This article will suggest that the cultivation of closer Anglo–German relations came somewhat lower down the German government's list of priorities than either Stambrook or Kaiser contend.

This attempt to reappraise Stambrook's work can be set in a wider historiographical context. Werner Weidenfeld's assessment, produced a short time after that by Stambrook, of the attitude of Stresemann, the German Minister for Foreign Affairs, towards closer German relations with Britain suggests that Britain played only a small role in the postwar revival of Germany. Weidenfeld claims that while Sthamer, the German ambassador to London, did much to establish good relations with the British government, D'Abernon actually harmed Anglo–German relations because he consistently exaggerated the extent of his influence with the Foreign Office.<sup>5</sup> Stambrook gives the vaguest of hints at this, but fails to develop what is a crucial point. This article will explore this idea and supports Weidenfeld's assessment of D'Abernon.

It is first necessary to reassess D'Abernon's own view of his role in the negotiations and how Stambrook interpreted this. D'Abernon published the diary of his embassy in Berlin in three volumes between 1929 and 1931.<sup>6</sup> He was clearly concerned therefore with how history would judge him. D'Abernon's own accounts of the period between November 1924 and February 1925, not unexpectedly, place him at the heart of the decision-making process. He portrays himself as the catalyst of action, with von Schubert constantly being persuaded by the force of

as Foreign Secretary, R. S. Grayson, *Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe: British Foreign Policy 1924–29* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), 54.

<sup>4</sup> A. Kaiser, 'Lord D'Abernon und die Entstehungsgeschichte der Locarno-Verträge', *Vierteljahrshefte für Zeitgeschichte*, vol. 33, 1986; *Lord D'Abernon und die englische Deutschlandpolitik, 1920–1926* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 1989), 404–45.

<sup>5</sup> W. Weidenfeld, *Die Englandpolitik Gustav Stresemanns: theoretische und praktische Aspekte der Aussenpolitik* (Mainz, 1972), 152, 113–14.

<sup>6</sup> *An Ambassador of Peace*, 3 vols. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1929–31).

his arguments.<sup>7</sup> Stambrook accepts D'Abernon's assessment almost in its entirety, while suggesting that occasionally von Schubert needed a little more persuading than D'Abernon was prepared to admit. He is, however, naive to accept D'Abernon's claim that his actions were motivated by an altruistic desire to bring about Germany's reintegration into European diplomatic affairs.<sup>8</sup> As the principal British diplomatic representative in Germany, his role was to secure British interests in Germany. The Dawes Plan had been drawn up, but by autumn 1924 it was by no means certain whether it would serve the purpose for which it was intended. Reparation payments from Germany were of crucial importance to the operation of the British economy, so it was vital that good relations with the German government were preserved. The conclusion of the Anglo-German commercial agreement in summer 1924 also provides evidence of this belief.<sup>9</sup> Significantly, it was also negotiated by D'Abernon and von Schubert.

Stambrook claims that D'Abernon readily embraced the growing amount of US involvement in German affairs in the mid-1920s.<sup>10</sup> The evidence suggests otherwise. D'Abernon feared that the US government would not be content simply to broker an economic package for the German government, but would also seek closer diplomatic and political links with Germany.<sup>11</sup> Such an eventuality, D'Abernon believed, was likely to be at the price of a close British relationship with Germany. He therefore saw the security negotiations as an important aspect of future British foreign policy strategy; he thought that they would act as a means of containing French aggression towards Germany and of limiting US involvement in German affairs. It is for this reason that D'Abernon initially favoured the conclusion of a security agreement that would be brokered by the League of Nations, a body of which the United States was not a member.<sup>12</sup> That said, D'Abernon severely underestimated the implications for Britain of such a diplomatic arrangement. Curiously, he was of the opinion that an agreement which was overseen by the League would require only 'a minimal British involvement'.<sup>13</sup> Stambrook picks up this point, yet dismisses its eccentricity without further comment. However, as Britain was a permanent member of the League Security Council, 'minimal' British involvement would have been impossible.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, it was always his intention that Britain should play a key role in European security negotiations. The remark was

<sup>7</sup> D'Abernon to Chamberlain, 15 Nov. 1924, PRO/FO371/9804/C17551/737/18.

<sup>8</sup> Stambrook, "'Das Kind'", 238.

<sup>9</sup> G. L. Johnson: *The Berlin Embassy of Lord D'Abernon*, unpublished Ph.D thesis (University of Wales, Bangor), 1996, 154–93.

<sup>10</sup> Stambrook, "'Das Kind'", 243.

<sup>11</sup> D'Abernon to Curzon, 2 Feb. 1922, PRO/FO371/756/C2067/2067/18; D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace*, I, 18–19.

<sup>12</sup> D'Abernon to MacDonal, 11 Feb. 1924, BL Add MSS 48927, D'Abernon Papers.

<sup>13</sup> 'Notes on the Question of Security to show [the] unwisdom of the alliance with France', 24 Dec. 1924, British Library Additional Manuscripts (hereinafter cited as BL Add MSS) 48928, D'Abernon Papers.

<sup>14</sup> Stambrook, "'Das Kind'", 241.

almost certainly intended to appease Chamberlain, who was reluctant to commit Britain to a wide-ranging European security agreement.<sup>15</sup>

Stambrook also fails to discuss the different views held by von Schubert and D'Abernon on the security question. He is right to claim that they both felt that Germany needed protection from French aggression.<sup>16</sup> What he fails to consider is that while D'Abernon believed that the Germans were negotiating from a position of weakness, Stresemann and von Schubert always believed that they were negotiating from a position of strength.<sup>17</sup> Far from adopting the psychology of politicians from a defeated power, von Schubert and Stresemann wished to give greater definition to Germany's right to a role in European affairs on terms equal to those of Britain and France. They favoured pursuing a foreign policy which left diplomatic options open both with the Allies and with the Soviet Union. As von Schubert put it, Germany must be very careful 'not to give the impression of duplicity' but at the same time would 'not to be forced away from [its] course'.<sup>18</sup> D'Abernon never fully comprehended this. It is therefore important to re-examine the extent to which this crucial misunderstanding undermined his relationship with both men. This basic difference also poses questions about the extent to which D'Abernon generated the impetus for the security note of January 1925, or whether the Germans would have dispatched it independently of him.<sup>19</sup>

To evaluate Stambrook's work further, it is necessary to outline the history of the proposals which were to form the German security note of January 1925. The idea for a pact signed by Britain, France and Germany, which would guarantee the security of the Rhineland for a generation and be brokered by the United States, was first suggested in a speech made by the German Chancellor, Cuno, in December 1922.<sup>20</sup> The Treaty of Locarno consisted of a combination of Cuno's ideas and those outlined by Gaus, a legal advisor to the *Auswärtiges Amt*, in 1923. These facts are well known and often noted, but do suggest that the principal architects of Germany's security policy in the mid-1920s were German, and not British. D'Abernon was therefore doing little more than manipulating existing ideas, something which is hardly unusual for a diplomat to do.

What is interesting is why he felt compelled to engage in this manipulation. As has already been suggested, D'Abernon was deeply concerned by the German government's enthusiasm for involving the United States in its affairs and it was a

<sup>15</sup> Chamberlain to D'Abernon, 9 Jan. 1925, University of Birmingham Library, Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>16</sup> Stambrook, "Das Kind", 239; 'Memorandum respecting the Balance of Power in Europe and its effect on the Problem of Security', communicated in D'Abernon to Chamberlain, 7 Jan. 1925, PRO/FO371/10726/C459/459/18; 'Memorandum on Security and the League of Nations', by von Schubert, 11 Feb. 1924, GFM 2368/E490752-57.

<sup>17</sup> Von Schubert to Sthamer, 27 Jan. 1925, GFM 3123/E642125-26.

<sup>18</sup> Von Schubert to Sthamer, 29 Mar. 1925, GFM K2090/K566977-79.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Kaiser, 'Lord D'Abernon und die Entstehungsgeschichte der Locarno-Verträge', 93.

<sup>20</sup> D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace*, III, 24 Jan. 1925, 127-9. 'Memorandum on German Suggestions for a Solution of the Security Question', 21 Jan. 1925, PRO/FO371/10716/C1000/459/18. In addition, the signatory powers would agree not to attack each other if the agreement was breached, unless authorised to do so by a national referendum.

fear of a loss of British influence that persuaded D'Abernon to become involved. He thus endeavoured to persuade the British government that the Germans would be amenable to British advice on security, especially over how to respond to French accusations that the German military were breaching the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. D'Abernon believed that the German government should agree not to use the Rhineland for any military purpose – an assurance which would go beyond the terms of the peace treaty.<sup>21</sup> In return, it would be made clear that Germany would retain full sovereignty in the region and that the terms of the agreement would apply equally to France.

Stambrook does mention that von Schubert was less than impressed by D'Abernon's suggestion. Von Schubert thought it highly unlikely that the French government would sign an agreement which implied that they were just as likely as the Germans to start another war.<sup>22</sup> He also thought it unreasonable to expect the French to grant Germany administrative rights in the Rhineland when French troops continued to occupy the Ruhr. He wrote that 'such an agreement would in fact amount not to a demilitarisation but to a neutralisation in international law of the Rhineland'.<sup>23</sup> He went on to state that the plan might find greater favour in France if it were put forward by a 'third party', but significantly he did not identify which country that could be. Stambrook does not, however, mention that von Schubert had a choice of three possibilities: Britain, the United States and the Soviet Union. D'Abernon made the mistake of assuming that Britain represented his only choice. Stambrook is also critical of D'Abernon here, but in a different way. He states that D'Abernon's plans represented only 'paper assurances with no force behind them' and were not supported by a formal commitment by the British government.<sup>24</sup> These points are valid, and indeed the latter remained true until October 1925. If these assertions are accepted, why then does Stambrook view D'Abernon's role as being of such importance? There is no indication that the German government greatly favoured his ideas and, indeed, it has been suggested that the Germans preferred closer diplomatic ties with the United States than with Britain.

D'Abernon must have realised that friction between Germany and France over alleged breaches of the disarmament clauses of the Treaty of Versailles would make a positive French reaction to a German security initiative unlikely.<sup>25</sup> Yet throughout 1924, D'Abernon tried to persuade von Schubert to dispatch a note based on the Cuno proposals to France. He suggested that a bilateral security agreement would be a better option than the multilateral agreement sought by France, and recommended that French diplomatic strategy, particularly towards eastern Europe, should

<sup>21</sup> D'Abernon to MacDonald, 5 Feb. 1924, cited in Stambrook, "'Das Kind'", 241. The Treaty of Versailles stated that the Rhineland should be demilitarised for fifteen years.

<sup>22</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 5 Feb. 1924, GFM 2368/E490734–37.

<sup>23</sup> 'Memorandum on Security and the League of Nations', by von Schubert, 11 Feb. 1924, GFM 2368/E490752–57.

<sup>24</sup> Stambrook, "'Das Kind'", 240.

<sup>25</sup> Sthamer to von Schubert, 5 Dec. 1924, GFM 9518/H282551–52.

be studied.<sup>26</sup> It was only when the pressure that he applied failed to produce a response that D'Abernon became convinced that the German security note should be addressed to London and not to Paris. Stambrook's claim that D'Abernon was leading events can therefore hardly be sustained. Throughout the negotiations of what became the Treaty of Locarno, it was always the German government which had a clear and unshakable view of its objectives. The British and French governments did not; at least they did not possess a grand, long-term strategy. Consequently, the resulting Treaty of Locarno was one which potentially advantaged Germany more than the Allies because it was the Allies which had to be forced to make the greater number of concessions and compromises. D'Abernon was thus wrong about the weakness of the German diplomatic position.

The next stage in the negotiations form the central part of Stambrook's article. Having rejected the Cuno proposal favoured by D'Abernon, von Schubert suggested that a plan should be adopted for a security agreement based on ideas which had been put forward by Gaus.<sup>27</sup> He had suggested that every country with an interest in the Rhineland should undertake to guarantee its security and maintain the process of demilitarisation. D'Abernon was doubtful whether the British government would agree to make such a large commitment. As a result, he restated his faith in the Cuno proposals and thought that the German government should give further thought to a bilateral agreement with France. Von Schubert, however, firmly rejected the idea, giving weight to his argument by stating that Stresemann also favoured the Rhineland pact option. Faced with such overwhelming opposition, Stambrook claims that D'Abernon enjoyed his finest moment as a diplomat, by proposing and securing a compromise – a security proposal to be based on both the Cuno and the Gaus schemes.<sup>28</sup>

It is nevertheless important to set D'Abernon's involvement in a wider context. It is doubtful whether the German government would have agreed to the compromise had it not been substantially in its interests to do so. Stambrook hints at this yet crucially fails to develop this point.<sup>29</sup> Far from having much faith in the government that D'Abernon represented, the German government was becoming increasingly convinced that the greatest danger to German security came from possible Anglo-French agreements in this area, including disarmament. The British government as well as the French had been reluctant to give much consideration to German demands about admission to the League of Nations.<sup>30</sup> Both von Schubert and Stresemann were not entirely convinced that the British government had abandoned the Geneva Protocol permanently – their fears being compounded

<sup>26</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 29 Dec. 1924, GFM 4509/E124822–23.

<sup>27</sup> D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace*, III, 14 Jan. 1925, 121.

<sup>28</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 14 Jan. 1925, GFM 4509/E124805–9; Stambrook, "Das Kind", 238.

<sup>29</sup> Stambrook, "Das Kind", 250.

<sup>30</sup> D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace*, I, 28 Oct. 1921, 220–1; J. Barros, *Office Without Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 135–7.

because the Cologne Zone would not be evacuated by the deadline of 10 January 1925.<sup>31</sup>

It is also difficult to understand what advantages D'Abernon thought would be accrued to Britain by sanctioning such a compromise plan. Since the end of the First World War, successive British governments had avoided making a large commitment to preserve European security. Nevertheless, without reference to the Foreign Office, D'Abernon's compromise effectively gave von Schubert an assurance that the British government would be prepared to abandon this policy completely. The Rhineland pact idea in particular required extensive British involvement if it was going to work. The Cuno proposal gave Britain a key role through the proposed League of Nations involvement in the security agreement negotiations. It is even more difficult to understand why D'Abernon thought that the British government would agree to such a plan. Stambrook himself points out that D'Abernon was well aware that Chamberlain was generally unsympathetic towards German interests, favouring France instead.<sup>32</sup> He was the least likely to be amenable to an initiative from France's former enemy on an issue as sensitive as security. Yet it was to be to London that D'Abernon was to suggest that von Schubert should dispatch the first German suggestion for the conclusion of a security agreement, based on the Cuno and Gaus proposals. His belief that Chamberlain would be convinced that an agreement brokered by the League would amount to a smaller British commitment to maintain European security than the Rhineland pact proposal was also naive.<sup>33</sup>

It is clear, however, that the wider implications of D'Abernon's proposal for a security pact were not lost on the Germans. Von Schubert felt that if the German government presented an outline for a security agreement to the British and not to the French, that his government would be accused of trying to drive a wedge between the Allies.<sup>34</sup> He had good reason for his doubts. He had had direct experience of Chamberlain's less than accommodating attitude towards German diplomatic initiatives during the negotiation of the Anglo-German commercial agreement only a few months earlier, in the late autumn of 1924.<sup>35</sup> Nevertheless, D'Abernon remained adamant that a German note on security would find a favourable reception at the British Foreign Office, but, as an insurance measure, encouraged von Schubert to write a covering note stating the high regard in which the German government held Britain.<sup>36</sup> Stambrook is right to point out D'Abernon's desire to minimise the delay in the presentation of the German security proposal because he feared that Chamberlain was about to sign a bilateral agreement

<sup>31</sup> Under Arts. 428–32 of the Treaty of Versailles the Allies had occupied three zones along the Rhine. According to Art. 429, Para. I, Cologne and surrounding territory was to be evacuated five years after the coming into force of the peace treaty, that is by January 1925. 'The Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany, signed at Versailles, June 28 1919', HMSO, 1919, 413–15.

<sup>32</sup> Stambrook, '“Das Kind”', 245.

<sup>33</sup> D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace*, III, 21 Jan. 1925, 123–4.

<sup>34</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 20 Jan. 1925, GFM 4509/E124770–72.

<sup>35</sup> Johnson, *Berlin Embassy*, 154–94.

<sup>36</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 1 Jan. 1925, GFM 4509/E124770–72.

with France which could prove hostile to German interests.<sup>37</sup> Once again, this does suggest that D'Abernon's involvement in the presentation of the German security note of January 1925 was prompted by a fear of others' actions, rather than through a personal vision of his own.<sup>38</sup> Stambrook also claims that the security proposal would not have appeared in January 1925 without D'Abernon's 'prompting'.<sup>39</sup> This is true, but only because two months earlier Austen Chamberlain, the most pro-French and anti-German Foreign Secretary of the interwar period had taken office.

Chamberlain's reaction to the German security note was indeed somewhat different from that which D'Abernon had led von Schubert to expect. As von Schubert had predicted, Chamberlain believed that the German decision to dispatch the note to Britain and not to France simultaneously was an attempt to undermine the Entente Cordiale.<sup>40</sup> Stambrook dismisses this point without comment.<sup>41</sup> In fact, von Schubert was greatly worried about Chamberlain's reaction when he discovered that D'Abernon had become closely involved with German security policy without the knowledge and authorisation of the Foreign Office.<sup>42</sup> Von Schubert realised that the arrival of a German security note was therefore likely to be a great and not necessarily pleasant surprise to Chamberlain. He had asked D'Abernon to write to Chamberlain telling him of his involvement, but he had refused.<sup>43</sup> Stambrook claims that D'Abernon's motives were altruistic – that he wished the German government to get all the credit for taking this momentous initiative.<sup>44</sup> This seems unlikely, especially as Chamberlain and other senior Foreign Office officials, notably the Permanent Under-Secretary, Sir Eyre Crowe, suspected D'Abernon's involvement almost immediately, because they had been informed by him that he played a pivotal role in directing German foreign policy.<sup>45</sup> In reality, D'Abernon was in a difficult situation. If he admitted his role, he would incur the displeasure of Chamberlain for acting without official instructions. And it was, indeed, a major breach of diplomatic etiquette. After all, D'Abernon's failure to reveal a whole series of conversations with a leading figure from the German Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which resulted in his almost guaranteeing a major shift in British foreign policy, could hardly be explained as a diplomatic oversight. And yet if he claimed ignorance of the origin of the German proposal, he would give the impression that he was not on top of his job. Clearly at the time the latter option was the lesser of the two evils,

<sup>37</sup> Stambrook, "'Das Kind'", 248.

<sup>38</sup> D'Abernon to Chamberlain, 16 Jan. 1925, AC 52/254, Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Stambrook, "'Das Kind'", 253.

<sup>40</sup> Chamberlain to D'Abernon, 12 Jan. 1925, AC 52/253, Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>41</sup> Stambrook, "'Das Kind'", 261.

<sup>42</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 29 Dec. 1924, GFM 4509/E124822–23. Von Schubert's doubts had also been fuelled by Sthamer's despatches outlining Chamberlain's enthusiasm for an Anglo-French security agreement.

<sup>43</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 20 Jan. 1925, GFM 4509/E124770–72.

<sup>44</sup> Stambrook, "'Das Kind'", 258.

<sup>45</sup> D. Johnson, 'Austen Chamberlain and the Locarno Agreements', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, Vol. 8 (1961), 71–2.



and explains D'Abernon's eagerness to tell a different story through the pages of his published diary.

Von Schubert's doubts about D'Abernon's *modus operandi* still persisted. Stambrook fails to mention that after the dispatch of the note to London, von Schubert was still not sure how much D'Abernon had told Chamberlain of his involvement. An account of a conversation between von Schubert and D'Abernon on 20 January 1925 suggests that he suspected that the ambassador had been economical with the truth. He noted: 'Despite [D'Abernon's] statements, I do not exclude the possibility that he has already reported on this matter, but given the practices of the English this will not protect us against their pretending in their reply that was in fact the first they had heard of the matter.'<sup>46</sup> These are hardly the words of one who felt that he was working closely with D'Abernon, who, on the other hand, felt that von Schubert had confidence in his actions. Von Schubert decided to ask Sthamer what the response of the British government was likely to be to the proposal.<sup>47</sup> More significantly, von Schubert took the decision to turn his attention away from D'Abernon towards French reactions. Pierre de Margerie, the French ambassador to Berlin, was asked to take informal soundings in Paris.<sup>48</sup> Stambrook does mention the overtures to the French government and rightly concludes that the German government had thus partly committed itself to negotiations with France before British reactions to the proposal were known.<sup>49</sup> However, the reasons for D'Abernon's erratic attitude towards Anglo-German relations and his eccentric approach to diplomacy, which were the causes of this situation, are not fully discussed. D'Abernon had in fact recommended that an initial approach to France be made but had abandoned the idea because at the time it had found little favour in Berlin. That von Schubert was returning to his strategy at this time was prompted however by motives far removed from a decision to adopt D'Abernon's advice. Nothing could have been further from the truth.

Yet how far was D'Abernon's idiosyncratic behaviour really a hindrance to future German security diplomacy? Von Schubert's conversations with D'Abernon had been useful for discussing options and ideas. By January 1925, much of the debate was over. The German government had taken the initiative by dispatching a note proposing a security agreement to the British government. Several weeks later, the same proposal was dispatched to Paris. From that point onwards, the German government pursued a policy which was consistent with the general aims of German foreign policy before the dialogues between von Schubert and D'Abernon had taken place – achieving a rapprochement with France, and pursuing closer relations with the Soviet Union. It can thus be claimed that their conversations had not influenced the general direction of German foreign policy, and they should therefore occupy a position of less importance in the minds of historians. What is

<sup>46</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 20 Jan. 1925, GFM 4509/E124770–72.

<sup>47</sup> Von Schubert to Sthamer, 19 Jan. 1925, GFM K2096/K56948–54.

<sup>48</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 13 Jan. 1925, GFM 4504/E122307–9.

<sup>49</sup> Stambrook, "Das Kind", 259; D'Abernon to Chamberlain, 20 Jan. 1925, *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, First Series, Vol. XXVII, 282–4.

more, D'Abernon was made aware of the real status of his discussions with von Schubert. The latter had told him that it was with France that serious discussion would have to be held, and that the German government therefore reserved the right to decide on further tactics.<sup>50</sup> Crucially, his comments also reveal that von Schubert held little hope of profitable negotiations with Britain. Chamberlain's response to the German security note had convinced him that the British government had no intention of taking the German government's initiative seriously. In April 1925, von Schubert wrote:

I told Lord D'Abernon with great emphasis that I must describe the policy of the Allies in both the evacuation and the security questions as merely ludicrous. The Allies were performing a wretched operetta, to no purpose. The affair could not, God knows, be advanced in this fashion.<sup>51</sup>

Nevertheless, D'Abernon was not completely without his uses to von Schubert; but his role was by no means central to the subsequent diplomatic negotiations which resulted in the signing of the Treaty of Locarno. His principal task was to persuade Chamberlain to use his influence in Paris to convince the French government of German good intentions – no easy accomplishment given the personalities of those concerned.<sup>52</sup> D'Abernon did not succeed. His correspondence with Chamberlain was to reveal the fundamental lack of coherence in British policy on European security and disarmament at this time.<sup>53</sup> At the heart of it in 1925 and 1926 lay a rift with Chamberlain which endured throughout the remainder of D'Abernon's embassy caused by their widely differing views about a desirable German role in international affairs. It is therefore debatable whether D'Abernon played a significant and constructive part in either German or British security policy at this time.<sup>54</sup>

The dialogues between von Schubert and D'Abernon did not merely have a bearing on German relations with the Allies, they also helped to influence German policy towards the Soviet Union. It is important to remember that it was not von Schubert who controlled the direction of German foreign policy, but Stresemann. By spring 1925 he had been German Minister for Foreign Affairs for almost two years and had had ample opportunity to work out where his diplomatic priorities lay. It is inconceivable that von Schubert's conversations took place without his knowledge or without his full approval. The significance of the von Schubert–D'Abernon dialogues therefore cannot be understood unless they are examined within a more general assessment of the British ambassador's relationship with Stresemann.

Early accounts of the origins of the Treaty of Locarno emphasise the closeness of

<sup>50</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 20 Jan. 1925, GFM 4509/E122770–9.

<sup>51</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 1 May 1925, GFM 4509/E126115–18.

<sup>52</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 5 Apr. 1925, GFM 3123/E642993–3001.

<sup>53</sup> Examples include: Chamberlain to D'Abernon, 9 Jan. 1925, AC 52/253, Austen Chamberlain Papers; D'Abernon to Chamberlain, 16 Jan. 1925, AC 52/254; same to same, 31 Jan. 1925, AC 52/255.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *Berlin Embassy*, 194–238.

Stresemann's relationship with D'Abernon.<sup>55</sup> Once again it is tempting to accept D'Abernon's many claims to this effect.<sup>56</sup> In a revealing assessment, D'Abernon wrote: 'Once [Stresemann] was reassured of the essential good faith of the English attitude, once he felt convinced that we were not seeking to hold Germany down in a subordinate position but to procure peace in Europe on an enduring basis, his whole attitude towards our policy became one of cordial co-operation'.<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, the degree of their intimacy can be questioned. German Foreign Ministry records reveal the frequency of D'Abernon's meetings with von Schubert, but record comparatively few encounters with Stresemann. They reveal that D'Abernon appeared to find Stresemann's approach to diplomacy difficult to understand, and it is likewise possible to detect that the German Minister for Foreign Affairs took some delight in being deliberately oblique.<sup>58</sup> On one occasion, while reflecting on the history of the security negotiations, Stresemann stated that if the French had invaded the Rhineland as well as the Ruhr, 'Germany would have formed a coalition with Russia, and together they would have swept over Europe'. D'Abernon's report of the conversations suggests that he was not entirely sure how to respond. He wrote: 'I do not know how far Stresemann was serious in his retrospective threat, but I am pretty convinced that no German Government could have carried out the scheme, however great the temptation.'<sup>59</sup> These are not the words of a man at the heart of German security policy. Kaiser's conclusion that Stresemann simply liked to 'give the impression' that relations with D'Abernon were the key to German security diplomacy is therefore entirely reasonable.<sup>60</sup> Stresemann was, for the most part, happy to delegate responsibility for dealing with D'Abernon to von Schubert, a fact which reveals much about the importance accorded to relations with Britain by the German government. Yet it is also reasonable to ask that if D'Abernon was wrong about the extent to which he had Stresemann's confidence, cannot the same be asked about his dealings with von Schubert?

It is clear that Stresemann was anxious not to accord the discussions between von Schubert and D'Abernon too much prominence. A long-time advocate of a 'two-handed' diplomatic strategy which accorded importance to relations with the Soviet Union as well as to the Allies, Stresemann's immediate priority was to reassure the Soviet government about the extent of the German government's commitment to a security agreement brokered by the Allies. As a result, when D'Abernon suggested that a German security proposal should be sent to London, Stresemann instructed Brockdorff-Rantzau, the German ambassador to Moscow, to tell the Soviet government that the security initiative was of 'minor importance' and was simply

<sup>55</sup> E. Stern-Rubarth, *Three Men Tried: Austen Chamberlain, Stresemann, Briand and their Fight for a New Europe* (London: Duckworth, 1939), 36.

<sup>56</sup> D'Abernon's most striking claims to this effect can be found in his character sketch of Stresemann, *An Ambassador of Peace*, III, 10–20.

<sup>57</sup> Lord D'Abernon, 'Stresemann', *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 8 (1930), 209–10.

<sup>58</sup> Stresemann to Brockdorff-Rantzau, 22 Jan. 1925, GFM 4562/E15942–43.

<sup>59</sup> D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace*, III, 5 Mar. 1925, 145–6.

<sup>60</sup> Kaiser, 'Lord D'Abernon und die Entstehungsgeschichte der Locarno-Verträge', 95. Her point here is that D'Abernon's dealings with von Schubert were more important.

'routine' diplomacy.<sup>61</sup> However, in a despatch to von Hoesch, the German ambassador to Paris, Stresemann conveyed a slightly different message. He wrote: 'We would therefore scarcely have been able to ignore [D'Abernon's] urgings, all the more so as they offer us an opportunity to broach this problem with the Allies in quite an unobtrusive manner'.<sup>62</sup> Stresemann was claiming that the German government had been coerced into pursuing a diplomatic strategy which appeared to favour relations with Britain over relations with France. However, the adoption of such a strategy was entirely compatible with his wider plan because it was likely to be from the French government that objections to closer German relations with the Soviet Union would come. At the same time, driving a diplomatic wedge between Britain and France was undesirable because it was only through negotiations with both the British and French governments that territorial revisions of the Treaty of Versailles would be possible.<sup>63</sup> This general strategy explains why von Schubert was so anxious to avoid presenting the German security proposal to the Allies separately. The future of the Polish Corridor is likely to have been as much in his mind during his discussions with D'Abernon as the Entente Cordiale.<sup>64</sup>

As indicated earlier, the importance that the German government accorded to the furtherance of diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union was never fully comprehended by D'Abernon. It is tempting to overlook this dimension of the diplomacy of the Locarno era, as Stambrook does, simply because D'Abernon thought it of minor significance. To D'Abernon, the development of closer ties with the Allies represented the only desirable and practical way of securing the reintegration of Germany into European affairs after the First World War.<sup>65</sup> In terms of economic regeneration and diplomatic influence, he believed that a German alliance with the Soviet Union had little to offer. It was therefore inconceivable to him that Stresemann and von Schubert would consider such an option. D'Abernon wrote:

The relations of Germany with Moscow are the history of a disappointment. Nothing much has come of the Treaty of Rapallo – commercial relations have not developed, the military connection, which was so much feared in some quarters, was and is a mere bogey . . . Germany turns to Russia when there is no one else to turn to.<sup>66</sup>

In 1925, it was now quite clear to D'Abernon that Germany *did* have somewhere else to turn – Britain. Nevertheless, the era when Cuno formulated his proposal for a security agreement with the Allies also coincided with the forging of closer German relations with the Soviet Union through the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo in 1922. The treaty was of great psychological importance to the German

<sup>61</sup> Stresemann to Brockdorff-Rantzau, 19 Mar. 1925, GFM 4562/E155068–90.

<sup>62</sup> Stresemann to von Hoesch, 15 Jan. 1925, GFM 3123/642046/51.

<sup>63</sup> H. L. Bretton, *Stresemann and the Revision of Versailles; a Fight for Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1953), 90.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Z. J. Gasiorowski, 'Stresemann and Poland Before Locarno', *Journal of Central European Affairs*, 18, 1 (1958), 25–47.

<sup>65</sup> D'Abernon to Chamberlain, 16 Jan. 1925, AC 52/254, Austen Chamberlain Papers.

<sup>66</sup> D'Abernon to Chamberlain, 8 Nov. 1924, PRO/FO371/9804/C17265/737/18.

government.<sup>67</sup> The memory of Soviet friendship in Germany's darkest hours, when the western Allies seemed unsure how to implement the Treaty of Versailles, stayed alive long after the economic and political crises of the early 1920s were over. The bond between the two countries that the treaty created went beyond the confines of diplomacy. Because of the circumstances in which it was signed, the Treaty of Rapallo was to give Soviet–German relations an emotional intensity which was always to be absent from German diplomatic negotiations with the Allies.

The period between autumn 1923 and spring 1924 was of crucial importance to Soviet–German relations.<sup>68</sup> The Dawes Plan, accepted in August 1924, established a framework for German economic reconstruction which now enabled the Germans to place greater emphasis on foreign affairs. The Plan also reduced the German need for Soviet economic assistance, and the German government's acceptance of its terms was seen as proof in Moscow that Germany was tilting towards the west.<sup>69</sup> As a result, between the summer of 1924 and the spring of 1926, the Soviet government stepped up its efforts to persuade Germany to adhere to the Treaty of Rapallo and to conclude a second treaty of mutual assistance.<sup>70</sup> Von Schubert was not only aware of this diplomatic pressure, he was directly involved in formulating a German response to it, while also conducting his debate with D'Abernon about security.<sup>71</sup>

The Russian government particularly wanted Stresemann and von Schubert to abandon Germany's application for admission to the League of Nations.<sup>72</sup> This pressure must account in part for von Schubert's reluctance to embrace the idea for a security agreement brokered by the League and was consistent with his later decision to agree to a compromise plan based on the Gaus as well as the Cuno scheme. A dilution of the Cuno plan, which is what D'Abernon's proposal represented, therefore gave von Schubert diplomatic ammunition to send to Moscow which suggested that the German government could be having misgivings about the League and League membership. Given his views on the communist threat to European security, it is inconceivable that D'Abernon would have suggested the compromise plan to enable the German government to pursue such a strategy.<sup>73</sup> This and the fact that neither von Schubert nor Stresemann discussed Russian affairs with him in detail once again indicates that D'Abernon was not at the heart of the decision-making process in German foreign policy between the autumn of 1924 and the spring of 1926.

Von Schubert's skill in this respect in manipulating diplomats from foreign powers can be seen through an examination of his attitude to the German

<sup>67</sup> E. H. Carr, *German–Soviet Relations between the Two World Wars, 1919–1939* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1951), 48–50.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. L. Zimmermann: *Deutsche Aussenpolitik in der Ära der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen, 1958), 271; E. C. M. Breuning, 'The New Course September 1923–December 1924', in 'German Foreign Policy between West and East', 1922–1926, unpublished Ph.D. thesis (Oxford University, 1966), 25.

<sup>69</sup> Brockdorff-Rantzau to Stresemann, 1 Dec. 1924, GFM 5265/E317849–51.

<sup>70</sup> Breuning, 'East Versus West: The Opening Moves', in 'German Foreign Policy', 10.

<sup>71</sup> Memorandum by von Schubert, 13 Jan. 1925, GFM 4504/E122307–9.

<sup>72</sup> Memorandum by Stresemann, 13 Jun. 1925, GFM 2860/555257–67.

<sup>73</sup> D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace*, I, 20–3.

ambassador in Moscow, Brockdorff-Rantzau, an aristocrat with a wide experience of international affairs. He had much the same credentials for his post as D'Abernon. He too had strong opinions about German security policy, although they were diametrically opposite. Yet, throughout the period when he was discussing a possible security agreement with D'Abernon, von Schubert continuously gave Brockdorff-Rantzau assurances that he wished to hear about German relations with the Soviet Union. Von Schubert knew that Brockdorff-Rantzau abhorred the idea of a German security agreement with the Allies.<sup>74</sup> Yet several weeks after the German security note had been dispatched to London, von Schubert told Brockdorff-Rantzau that the initiative was simply 'a defensive move against the encroachments of French expansionist policy, and not a positive commitment of Germany policy which could in any way affect German-Russian relations'.<sup>75</sup> Their correspondence was extensive throughout 1925 and the negotiations of the Treaty of Berlin in 1926. It is not difficult to accept that if von Schubert could manipulate Brockdorff-Rantzau in this way as part of the German 'two-handed' approach to European diplomacy, he was likely to have adopted a similar approach to D'Abernon. Von Schubert was one of the most able officials at the *Auswärtiges Amt* in the interwar period. It is unlikely therefore that he would have needed much advice as to how to court favour with the Allies and how to negotiate a security agreement with them. The cultivation of the notion of an intimate relationship with D'Abernon was merely show and rhetoric to oil the wheels of diplomacy.

The idea that D'Abernon was being manipulated in this way – that he thought that he occupied an important role as advisor to the German government on security policy simply because von Schubert wished him to think so has been hinted at by Martin Walsdorff. He has argued that while von Schubert and Stresemann broadly agreed on the long-term objectives of German foreign policy, there was sometimes friction between them. Walsdorff claims that occasionally von Schubert deliberately made Stresemann's negotiations with the Soviet government more difficult by making 'public declarations' about German desires for a security agreement with the Allies.<sup>76</sup> However, the reason why he would do this is not explained. It is clear too that this argument has a direct bearing on how D'Abernon's position can be interpreted. Although von Schubert was always in favour of a German alliance with the Soviet Union, it is possible that he may have felt aggrieved that Stresemann took much of the credit for the diplomatic initiatives he created. It could be claimed therefore that von Schubert cultivated D'Abernon for no greater purpose than to make a stand against Stresemann. What is more, he could have adopted this attitude without causing damage to the overall strategy of German foreign policy. Stambrook himself suggests that it was D'Abernon and not von Schubert who insisted on turning their proposal for a security agreement into a

<sup>74</sup> Breuning, 'Brockdorff-Rantzau's Candidature for the Post of German Ambassador in Moscow', in 'German Foreign Policy', 22.

<sup>75</sup> Von Schubert to Brockdorff-Rantzau, 22 Jan. 1925, GFM 4562/E154942–43.

<sup>76</sup> M. Walsdorff, *Westorientierung und Ostpolitik: Stresemanns Russlandpolitik in der Locarno-Ära* (Bremen, 1971), 176.

diplomatic initiative and that von Schubert lacked interest in the timing of its dispatch to the Allies.<sup>77</sup>

The dialogues between D'Abernon and von Schubert are also remarkable in a number of other respects. It was not the original intention of von Schubert or D'Abernon to inform Stresemann of their discussions until their proposal for a pact had been dispatched to London.<sup>78</sup> This represents an extraordinary gamble on the part of von Schubert and makes him at least as guilty as D'Abernon of breaches in diplomatic etiquette. The belief that the German government had become reluctantly involved in the negotiation of a security agreement with the Allies could explain von Schubert's anxiety that D'Abernon should take the credit for it. Far from being an honour, admitting to being the 'parent' of 'das Kind' was something which both von Schubert and D'Abernon, for similar reasons, wished to avoid. The uneasiness which these factors created soured their relationship. At the beginning of their conversations in November 1924, D'Abernon had cheerfully noted that von Schubert was prepared to 'listen carefully to any advice we give, and, within limits, accept it'.<sup>79</sup> Yet when he reflected on their relationship six years later, he felt that von Schubert, being a 'typical' German diplomat, was 'difficult to deal with, slow to be persuaded, pernickety, and disposed to quibble on small points, over-careful, making an infinity of reserves and precise pre-conditions on conjunctures and developments which, in all human probability, will not arise'.<sup>80</sup> It is equally significant that they never worked together closely again, which is surprising if theirs was the successful 'partnership' presented in Stambrook's article.<sup>81</sup> After all, there were to be opportunities for them to do so, most notably during the diplomatic wrangling over the admission of Germany to the League of Nations in September 1926.<sup>82</sup> Taking a more global view of the negotiations, some may wish to argue that the ends justified the means – that what mattered most was that the Treaty of Locarno was signed and that its origin and negotiation were in the final analysis of secondary importance. But such an argument overlooks the fact that though much vaunted at the time, the Treaty of Locarno proved to be of limited importance. In the long term, as both George Grün and Jon Jacobson have pointed out, the Treaty of Locarno failed to contain Hitler's foreign policy.<sup>83</sup> What is more, in the short term, it failed to establish a foundation for a better relationship between Britain and Germany, which was D'Abernon's principal objective.

Stambrook's article on the conversations between von Schubert and D'Abernon, which culminated in the dispatch of the German security note to the British

<sup>77</sup> Stambrook, "Das Kind", 257.

<sup>78</sup> Johnson, *Berlin Embassy*, 244.

<sup>79</sup> D'Abernon, *An Ambassador of Peace*, III, 21 Feb. 1925, 142–3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 142–3, 28. A further discussion of von Schubert's diplomatic skills can be found in P. Krüger, *Die Aussenpolitik der Republik von Weimar* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1985), 407–12.

<sup>81</sup> Stambrook, "Das Kind", 252.

<sup>82</sup> Johnson, *Berlin Embassy*, 291–340.

<sup>83</sup> G. Grün, 'Locarno: Idea and Reality', *International Affairs*, Vol. 31 (1955), 477–85; J. Jacobson, *Locarno Diplomacy: Germany and the West, 1925–29* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

government in January 1925, is not without some value. It is scholarly and detailed, but it fails conspicuously to place the dialogues within the wider context of German foreign policy as a whole. We are told that the coming to an agreement with the European Allies about the future security of the Rhineland was important to the German government, but the reasons why are not explained. The Russian dimension to German foreign policy, which so preoccupied all of the governments of the early Weimar period, is completely ignored. Yet it is impossible to understand German Locarno policy unless it is placed within the context of Stresemann's 'two-handed' diplomatic strategy between west and east. At the time when Stambrook was writing, there was sufficient evidence available to historians to enable him to have considered the Soviet aspect of German foreign policy. Stambrook acknowledges that the negotiations between von Schubert and D'Abernon between November 1924 and January 1925 were sometimes tense, but fails to understand that the tension went beyond minor squabbles about who wrote what in which memoranda. Both men were acting without the express authority of their respective governments, with D'Abernon in particular committing the government he served to a major change of strategy. Neither of them were prepared to acknowledge 'parentage' of 'das Kind' at the time, only being prepared to admit to their roles when it became clear that the Treaty of Locarno was to be declared a major diplomatic success. It is debatable how far D'Abernon helped to generate the impetus for the dispatch of the German security note. The closely thought out German diplomatic strategy already alluded to suggests that the Germans would have approached the Allies with such a proposal anyway. The timing of the proposal was more within D'Abernon's control, but did not stem from a feeling of direct and close involvement in German foreign policy strategy. On the contrary, he feared that British influence in German affairs was gradually being usurped by the United States. D'Abernon was therefore negotiating from a position of real or at least imagined weakness – a frame of mind which characterised much of British policy towards the European powers at the time. The inconsistencies within his ideas and the indecisive manner in which he presented them to the German government also suggests the lack of a clear objective in his mind and a failure to understand the general principles of foreign policy of the government he served.