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BRITAIN, FRANCE AND THE GERMAN PROBLEM
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE RHINELAND CRISIS, 1936

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CHAPTER I

THE PROLOGUE

The Paris Peace Conference meant more than the cessation of hostilities with Germany and her allies; it brought about a profound political and territorial transformation of Europe. These two aspects were, however, closely connected in that the settlement of 1919 had as its foundation a disarmed and defeated Germany. This was a delicate basis for European peace, for the moment Germany felt capable of revising the Versailles settlement the continental status quo would be jeopardized. Yet if that settlement was threatened by an increase in German strength, so was it endangered by German weakness. The Weimar Republic could not defend successfully the settlement of 1919 unless German strength were allowed to recover. For more than ten years it was thought in western Europe that the political and economic instability of Germany was of deep concern for all.¹ Bolshevism waited quietly at the gates, anxious to remove another capitalist power. Yet, by the mid-years of the next decade, the fear that German impotence might draw the west into the turmoils of central Europe was, slowly in the case of Britain and quickly in the case of France, transformed into a fear of the Reich's increasing strength. On the eve of the second great war, Britain and France were attempting to rally Bolshevik support behind an

¹A. J. P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (London, 1961), 67.

anti-German front. The wheel had gone full circle, its revolution determined almost exclusively by the nature and seriousness of the German problem.

Anglo-French relations in the inter-war period had as their focus this persistent problem. For Britain, throughout most if not the entire period, that problem was not strictly German but Franco-German. France's fear of a possible German invasion rendered her relations with the Reich extremely tenuous. To Britain, however, no attempts at European stability could or would be wholly successful if Franco-German relations were not made congenial. Underlying the general issue of European peace, the Franco-German problem raised in Britain the question of the nature and extent of British commitments on the continent. In the nineteen-twenties, Britain had been partially distracted from European affairs by her transition from a war to peace-time economy, social discontent and the General Strike, the battle between Labour and the traditional parties, the naval disarmament conferences and the question of the status of the Dominions. Her attitude toward Germany had been one of guilt and hope combined, guilt that the settlement of 1919 had become too harsh and hope that the Weimar government would restore Germany to her economic prominence in Europe. Her attitude toward France, on the contrary, had been one of annoyance and suspicion, annoyance because of the Third Republic's obsession with her own security, and suspicion lest that obsession be manifested in terms of direct intervention in the affairs of the German republic. The nineteen-thirties proved no more conducive to British involvement on the continent. Economic difficulties at home, the dilemma of having to justify rearmament to a population so thoroughly

indoctrinated with pacifism, the problem raised by Japan in the Far East which was intensified by American isolationism, the whole question of India's status and finally the threat to her Mediterranean position raised by the Abyssinian crisis, all made the Nazi problem but one of a whole spectrum of problems. Consequently Britain scrupulously avoided extensive commitments on the continent. Nazi revisionism between 1933 and 1938 failed to coerce or persuade British policy makers to risk involvement in Europe. Not until 1939 did she commit herself east of the Rhine. She risked little more in the west. After 1925 she was bound by a written guarantee to the preservation of the common boundaries between France, Belgium and Germany. Since 1914 she had been bound by an understanding only that any assault on French or Belgian soil would be met with immediate British aid to the victim. Beyond these commitments Britain would not venture.

With the exception of what France took to be the German problem, perhaps no other factor was more important to her foreign policy than Britain's refusal further to involve herself on the continent. In 1919, France, though a victor, was exhausted, battered and demoralized. Germany, though the loser, had not been permanently crippled. Instead, a substantial part of German opinion became convinced that the politicians had surrendered the country on the eve of victory. There was from the beginning a spirit of resistance to and of contempt for Versailles and of revulsion for the stigma it had given her as the power solely responsible for the war. France, bereft of her Russian ally, abandoned by the United States and unable to secure more precise pledges of British assistance, was left alone and afraid. Sécurité became for her the

overriding issue. This concern for the protection of her population and agricultural and mineral resources bred a thoroughly defensive attitude. Throughout the inter-war period, France laboured to make herself a self-contained military unit. Legislation was passed to enable a speedy transition from a peace to war-time economy.² A complex bureaucracy was created for the specific purpose of regulating war manufactures. The eastern frontier became an elaborate network of fortifications. Offensive strategy was gradually replaced by long and complicated procedures to develop France into a nation at arms. A nation at arms, but in one sense, without them. For with the neglect of offensive thinking came a neglect of the new offensive armaments. Tanks, planes and mobile artillery were largely overlooked. Obsolescence crept into an army which laid its emphasis on the infantry and the bullet.³ The need for rearmament in accordance with twentieth century technological developments was tragically underrated.

Paradoxically, as the French military became more and more convinced of the merits of defence, Foreign Office advisers at the Quai d'Orsay insisted on increasing French obligations to other European states. As a result, while the General Staff was reminding itself of the folly of penetrating beyond its outer line of defence, the diplomats

²R. D. Challener, The French Theory of the Nation in Arms (New York, 1955), Chapter 5, entitled, "The Organization of the Nation in Time of War, 1919-1928."

³Pierre Cot, Triumph of Treason (Chicago, 1944), Chapter 6, entitled, "The Military Preparations of the War."

were busily assuring France's satellite countries⁴ in eastern Europe of her determination to assist them in the event of their being victims of aggression. France was committing the error that Britain had so carefully avoided. She had extended her commitments far beyond the point her military were prepared to go. To be precise, the General Staff simply could not envisage offensive operations further than the Rhine. It would remain to be seen of what practical significance a remilitarization of the Rhineland would have on French commitments east of the Rhine.

In spite of the fact that Britain and France did not view the German problem in the same light, their foreign policies between the wars were not free of a basic inter-dependence. Although Britain found it difficult to appreciate fully French concern for sécurité and in particular the commitments France had undertaken to relieve that concern, the preservation of France as an independent nation remained a basis of British foreign policy. Geography alone made it imperative that France and the Lowlands be free from the influence of any nation which might aspire to invade the British Isles. This fact serves to explain the implicit, though unwritten,⁵ understanding that Britain would fight in defence of French or Belgian soil. On the other hand, since the attitude adopted by Clemenceau at Versailles, the French had assumed that Anglo-French solidarity was the best guarantee of their security. Close

⁴France signed defensive military agreements with Belgium (1920) Poland (1921) Czechoslovakia (1924) Roumania (1926) and Yugoslavia (1927).

⁵Unwritten until March 1936.

relations with Britain would remain the fundamental determinant of French foreign policy.

Within the larger framework provided by these underlying assumptions, there certainly remained sufficient room for both the expansion and contraction of the bonds which linked the two former allies. Indeed, the fluctuation of Anglo-French relations in the space of twenty years provides one of the most interesting aspects of inter-war diplomacy. The Peace Conference was followed by a steady deterioration of the ties between the two countries, a deterioration that reached a peak in 1923 when Premier Poincaré ordered French military intervention in the Ruhr.⁶ The failure of that course of action brought his downfall. With Herriot's accession to power, a new era of Anglo-French friendship was inaugurated, an era that reached maturity in the Briand-Chamberlain-Stresemann⁷ Locarno pact of 1925. For the remainder of that decade, the golden age of Locarno continued to hold relations across the Channel in comparative stability. When the question of world disarmament came to a head through the convening of a general conference in 1932, those relations again began to cool. By the time Hitler had made his historic withdrawal from the Conference and the League, Britain and France had

⁶This intervention in one of Germany's most vital industrial areas was occasioned by German defaults on reparation payments. Ostensibly this act was undertaken to enforce those obligations but really it was intended to be a showdown to demonstrate once and for all that Germany could not resist French power. See A. Wolfers, Britain and France Between the Wars (New York, 1963), 57-59.

⁷The Foreign Ministers of France, England and Germany respectively in 1925. Stresemann was also Chancellor of the German Republic, 1923-1929.

almost come to blows. Then Barthou⁸ appeared, eager to find some final solution to the German problem, a solution that would not be undone whenever France's relations with Britain became contentious. Whereas Barthou's skilful diplomacy prevented any renewal of the decline in relations with Britain, his successor was less cautious. Laval⁹ loosened the bond with Britain to the last thread. It trembled under the weight of Abyssinia but it was not to be undone. On Flandin's¹⁰ initiative that bond was again tightened. The Rhineland crisis of March 1936 brought Anglo-French relations to a new intimacy, an intimacy that was hardly interrupted until March 1939 when Chamberlain appeasement ended with the German entry into Prague.

Another theme which formed an integral part of Anglo-French relations, particularly in the nineteen-thirties, is that of drift. In one sense, it is misleading to speak of British or French or Anglo-French policy since those policies were so frequently characterized by a bewildered wait-and-see attitude. The reactions of both powers to the German problem were particularly exemplary of this attitude. To some extent France was less of an offender in this respect than Britain. In that decade she strengthened her ties with Poland and the Little

⁸Louis Barthou, French Foreign Minister from February to October 1934.

⁹Pierre Laval, French Foreign Minister from October to June 1935, and both Foreign Minister and Premier from June 1935 to January 1936.

¹⁰Pierre-Etienne Flandin, French Foreign Minister from January to June 1936.

Entente and secured new rapprochements with Russia and Italy, all for the purpose of containing the German menace. Yet conscription was reintroduced in Germany, the Rhineland was remilitarized, the Anschluss was effected and Czechoslovakia was partitioned, then swallowed, with nothing more than diplomatic protests from France. She watched the territorial and disarmament provisions of Versailles being slowly consumed by the Reich, but did nothing because she preserved the hope that Hitler's appetite could be satisfied. This was not a policy of concessions, nor a policy of stalling for time. It was drift, caused by genuine doubt and confusion and intellectual failing in the formulation of policy. Had these Versailles provisions been used as barter for agreements to everyone's mutual advantage, there might have been some justification for calling it a policy of concessions. Had the interim between the first German unilateral repudiation and the last been used for a deliberate well-organized and expeditious rearmament program, it might have been justified as calculated stalling. Instead, this drift was based on the fallacious belief that the next German demand would be the last. It was the course of least resistance and France pursued it consistently until even that course offered nothing but war.

The British governments of the nineteen-thirties were even more susceptible to this undirected drift. Britain of course did not consider the German problem to be as serious as France did and felt that it was in part owing to the unjust nature of the Versailles settlement. Nonetheless, she continued to declaim loudly against any unilateral abrogation of any international treaty. Nazi methods were repugnant to her even if the ends themselves seemed valid. Clearly the sanctity of all

international agreements was at stake. Until 1936 German violations had been confined to the Versailles Treaty, but in March of that year Locarno became the Reich's new victim. The pact of 1925, unlike Versailles, had been freely signed by all parties. It was not a diktat, yet Hitler treated it no differently. If Britain were sincere in her protestations concerning the sanctity of treaties she certainly would make this new violation the test case. Instead, she preferred to await the outcome of events. It seemed more reasonable to wait-and-see how the Locarno powers and the League Council would view the German violation.

The attitudes of Britain and France toward the League Council in 1936 had a dismal and tragic prologue, a prologue out of which emerged the final theme in the Anglo-French dialogue on the German problem. Very much like the Versailles settlement itself, of which it was an adjunct, the League of Nations was differently received in Britain and France. Its role in the revisionist controversy was one of the factors that contributed to the strain imposed on Anglo-French relations throughout most of the inter-war period. The British viewed the newly created world organization as an instrument capable of righting the injustices of the Versailles treaty. The French considered the League a practical means of preserving the Versailles status quo and one body strong enough to keep the German peril to a minimum. The Germans harbored still another opinion. Even the Weimar Republic saw the League as another manifestation of the imposed Versailles settlement. How could the world body do anything but defend a system to which it owed its very existence? Germany had not participated in the drawing up of the Covenant; she had not even been invited to join the League until 1926. What respect,

much less affection, could she be expected to entertain for an organization conceived out of her defeat?

Because of the failure of the United States to join the League, it became in effect an Anglo-French condominium. The contributions of these two powers would either make or break this experiment in international law and justice. Unfortunately, whereas Britain viewed that body as a world conciliation board whose narrowly defined objective was neither to prevent nor end war but to preserve peace, France saw it as an armed anti-German alliance whose interests and authority were essentially European. Hence, when the League encountered the first major obstacles of the nineteen-thirties, it met them with the confusion produced by the conflict between its lord and its master. Britain's reaction to the Manchurian and Abyssinian crises was entirely in accordance with her concept of the League. The threat of war was dismissed as being an unreliable insurance of peace. Pacific measures alone were believed to be the guarantee of peace. Nor did these two early crises evoke a French reaction within the League that was appreciably different from the British. Not that the League was envisaged by France as merely another facet of conciliation; rather it was a deterrent against aggression, especially German aggression within Europe.

The League was not free of technical flaws, but its failure rests as much on the operators as on the mechanism. When the trouble-spots of the 'thirties were encountered, control was lost and the League too swerved into the midst of drift. When the third major crisis of the decade appeared before the League in March 1936, it faced a weakened and disillusioned tribunal. At last France had the opportunity

to make her anti-German alliance work. The question was, would she? With France on her doorstep Britain might easily have permitted the League to assume the role of conciliator, the role she had always attributed to it. Again, the question was, would she? Could the League recover from the blow the Abyssinian crisis had dealt it, or would the Rhineland crisis simply confirm its impotence? Would Britain and France realize that in fact they were the League or would they continue on, unaware that responsibility for that body's impotence lay with them.

In its simplest terms, the Anglo-French discussion of the German problem had as its primary obstacles the Versailles peace settlement and the Nazi revolution. Not until Germany was revitalized by Nazi fanaticism did the problem of treaty revision become acute; and not until then did the Anglo-French debate over revision have fact rather than hypothesis to deal with. The treaty of Versailles provided the foundation on which the revisionist controversy was to grow. Germany had been disarmed; she had been forced to pay reparations for the damages she had done; she had lost territory; she had been compelled to accept responsibility for the war; and she had had imposed upon her a form of government to which she was unused.

Certainly one of the more irritating features of Versailles for Germany was the new status of the Rhineland. The Saar valley, a vital industrial area, was taken from her jurisdiction and placed under the supervision of an international commission of the League. However, Article 47 provided for a plebiscite to be held in fifteen years time (1935) in order to allow the inhabitants of that region to express

their will whether they wished to live under German or French sovereignty. Articles 42 and 43 of the treaty were particularly annoying to the Reich. Because of their special relevance to this paper, they merit closer examination. Article 42 stipulated that:

Germany is forbidden to maintain or construct any fortifications either on the left bank of the Rhine or on the right bank to the west of a line drawn 50 kilometers to the East of the Rhine.

Article 43 added:

In the area defined above the maintenance and the assembly of armed forces, either permanently or temporarily, and military manoeuvres of any kind, as well as the upkeep of all permanent work for mobilization, are in the same way forbidden.¹¹

The final mortification came for Germany through the provision of Article 428 which stated:

As a guarantee for the execution of the present Treaty by Germany, the German territory situated to the west of the Rhine, together with the bridgeheads, will be occupied by Allied and Associated troops for a period of fifteen years from the coming into force of the present Treaty.¹²

In part, the treaty of Locarno of 1925 represented a reaffirmation of the Rhineland clauses of Versailles. Locarno of course was more than just a confirmation of an old agreement. The settlement included a treaty of mutual guarantee of the Franco-German and Belgo-German frontiers, between Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain and Italy;¹³ arbitration conventions between Germany and Belgium and between

¹¹Treaty of Peace between the Allied and Associated Powers and Germany (London, H.M.S.O., 1919), 26.

¹²Ibid., 206.

¹³Britain and Italy were the external guarantors whose role it was to guarantee the other three signatories against aggression.

Germany and France; arbitration treaties between Germany and Poland and Germany and Czechoslovakia and a Franco-Polish and Franco-Czechoslovak treaty for mutual assistance in the event of unprovoked aggression. Nonetheless, for Europe the Rhenish statute, coupled with the first treaty of mutual guarantee, remained incomparably significant. For the Locarno system was far more than just a re-statement of even the Rhine-land clauses. Article 44 of Versailles had stipulated that any breach of the two articles preceding it would be termed an "hostile act".¹⁴ Locarno made a finer distinction. A violation, it implicitly suggested, could be hostile in itself, or it could be the antecedent to outright hostilities. If a treaty violation were tantamount to the initiation of aggression with the purpose of seeking hostilities with the victim, it would be termed 'flagrant'. If it were merely a narrowly restricted violation which did not require immediate action, it would be recognized as 'non-flagrant'.¹⁵

Regardless of whether the violation of Articles 42 and 43 of Versailles were flagrant or non-flagrant, the victim was obligated to inform the League Council of the breach of obligation. If the victim determined the violation to be of the second category it was bound to await the League's decision on whether a violation had occurred. When that decision was made, then and then only could the victim demand assistance from its Locarno colleagues.¹⁶ However:

¹⁴Treaty of Peace..., 26

¹⁵Eden corroborates this interpretation in, The Earl of Avon, The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators (London, 1962), 342.

¹⁶"The Locarno Agreements and the League of Nations," Article 4, paragraphs 1 and 2, of the Treaty of Mutual Guarantee between Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain and Italy, in The Monthly Summary of the League of Nations Supplement, December 1925.

In case of a flagrant violation of article 2 of the present treaty or of a flagrant breach of articles 42 or 43 of the Treaty of Versailles by one of the high contracting parties, each of the other contracting parties hereby undertakes immediately to come to the help of the party against whom such a violation or breach has been directed as soon as the said Power has been able to satisfy itself that this violation constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and that by reason either of the crossing of the frontier or of the outbreak of hostilities or of the assembly of armed forces in the demilitarised zone immediate action is necessary....¹⁷

The Locarno agreement apparently had confirmed the status quo created by the Versailles settlement. Britain in return for an ill-defined obligation on her part had at last brought about a reconciliation between France and Germany. No precise military arrangements could be made between the guarantors and the potential victim since that victim could as likely have been the aggressor. Like the League, Locarno would have a toothless existence. Yet France and Germany were also pleased. France finally had the British guarantee; Alsace and Lorraine were no longer in jeopardy; and Germany had freely consented to respect the demilitarized Rhineland zone. Stresemann had equal reason to be satisfied. Germany had assumed no obligations against revision in eastern Europe; no longer would she live in fear of another intervention in the Ruhr; and German equality in treaty negotiations had been reinstated. All had been deceived by "l'équivoque de Locarno".¹⁸ This was to be the great amelioration of relations between Germany and the Third Republic; but it was all based on a misunderstanding. Briand was pleased that

¹⁷Ibid., Article 4, paragraph 3, 4.

¹⁸René Albrecht-Carrié, France, Europe and the Two World Wars (New York, 1961), 167.

Germany had at last reconciled herself to the Versailles status quo. Stresemann was delighted that France had finally taken the first step toward a complete revision of that settlement. When their delusions were revealed, Locarno withered, scattering new seeds of discontent.

As false as Locarno's promise was, Franco-German relations in the last half of the decade ostensibly remained stable. Stresemann's optimism did not go entirely unfulfilled, for on British suasion France consented to the withdrawal in January 1927 of the Control Commission which had supervised and reported on German disarmament. Germany's reparation burden was eased in 1929 by the Young Plan and finally was removed in 1932 by and after the Lausanne Conference. Moreover, in 1930 the last of the allied occupation forces were evacuated, five years ahead of the schedule arranged at Versailles. In this atmosphere of co-operation and friendship the Kellogg-Briand Pact was signed by the United States and France in 1928.¹⁹ Within a year most of the countries of Europe had subscribed to this pact which renounced war as a solution to international controversies and enshrined the principles of conciliation and international goodwill. Europe seemed poised on the threshold of a new and peaceful world order. Convinced of the genuineness of Locarno's lustre she stepped into a new decade and a new abyss.

¹⁹Other signatories of the Pact included, Germany, Belgium, Great Britain and the Dominions, India, Italy, Japan, Poland and Czechoslovakia.

CHAPTER II

EUROPEAN PROBLEMS AND ANGLO-FRENCH RELATIONS, 1933-1935

In retrospect, the Nazi accession to power on 30 January 1933 confirmed the decease of the Locarno Spirit. At the time, however, the reaction of western Europe in particular was not entirely unfavourable to the Reich's new government. Since Versailles and the troubled conscience which that treaty had produced, there had developed the realization that the source of the German peril no longer lay in Germany's strength but in her increasing weakness. Her vitality was being sapped by an unpopular form of government and also by the destructive influence of the world depression. Virtually without tanks, planes, heavy artillery or trained reservists and hamstrung by unemployment and financial crisis,¹ Germany in 1932-1933 appeared less an object of fear than a victim deserving of pity.

Much of what Hitler had promised his own people was not unattractive to those of Britain and France. Certainly, the promise of political and economic stability anywhere on the continent in the early nineteen-thirties offered hope for all. The unattractive elements of Nazism could be temporarily overlooked. Mein Kampf might be excused as a product of early disillusionment; anti-Semitism was not unique to the Nazis; and the abolition of the Versailles Diktat seemed not an altogether unjustifiable demand. Hitler had not seized power. There

¹A. J. P. Taylor, op. cit., 74.

had been no march on Berlin. Instead, he had been implored by Premier von Papen to restore the authority of the Reichstag by providing it with a working majority. His consent seemed to mean a victory for conservatism not extremism, for only three Nazis, including himself, were given seats in the eleven-man cabinet.² They were meant to be pawns in the hands of von Papen, now the Vice-Premier, and President Hindenburg, pawns which would furnish the necessary majority but would themselves be invested with limited authority.

The 30 January meant infinite changes in German domestic policies but initially very few in foreign policy. Whereas at home Nazi extremism manifested itself in the abolition of political parties and labour unions and the profound transformation of economics and finance, the Reich leaders assumed an obvious but effective mask of moderation and restraint before their foreign counterparts. The Wilhelmstrasse continued to perform its usual functions unhampered by the amateurish diplomacy that came to characterize the rest of the decade. Occupied with the task of creating and strengthening his personal regime, the Führer was content to give the professional diplomats almost a free hand in the formulation of the Reich's foreign policy.

The focus of international politics in early 1933 was the Disarmament Conference at Geneva. After years of preparatory work and investigation, the various commissions had completed their labours as best they could and a conference was convened in 1932 to study their

² A. Bullock, Hitler, A Study in Tyranny (New York, 1962), 256.

conclusions. If the technical experts had found it impossible to agree on provisions that would be acceptable to all nations, their political overseers had no better success. The French, deprived of the Anglo-American guarantee of 1919, were determined to accept arms equality with Germany only if Britain would reaffirm her guarantee of 1925, a guarantee strengthened by joint staff talks and a larger British army. Britain, however, embarrassed by the failure of the United States to ratify the guarantee to France, and more than a little annoyed by French fear of a Germany already disarmed, refused to engage in further commitments on the continent. For the German diplomats the issue was clear. Either the other powers would disarm to Germany's level in accordance with their Versailles pledge, or Germany would rearm to the level of her former foes. Whether disarmament was envisaged, as it was in Britain, as a prologue to European security, or whether, as the French demanded, systems of security were first established in order to make disarmament feasible was of little concern to Germany. It was the principle of arms equality that underlay her demands.

Germany was in an enviable bargaining position. Day by day the rift in Anglo-French relations widened. If French demands for sécurité were met, the principle of arms equality was a dead issue. If that principle were accepted by the Conference delegates, France would not disarm. Germany's threat to withdraw from the Conference alarmed the other powers and pleased the man who was as yet waiting in the wings of the German stage. When he came to power, Hitler was confident that the professional diplomats would not retreat from the position on the question of disarmament that they had already so firmly defended.

In the summer of 1933 there appeared to be a breakthrough in the cloud that had enveloped the Conference. Pressed by Britain and Italy to consider a "theoretical" equality of arms, that is, to accept the principle with a view to working it out gradually in practice, France seemed ready to rescue the Conference. But again her trepidations won out. France might agree to this new suggestion, Daladier remarked, but only if there were a British guarantee that the convention would be observed. The British Foreign Secretary, Sir John Simon, refused the French conditions. Great Britain would promise only to give serious consideration to any contravention of the proposed agreement. It was too vague a promise for the French. When the Conference resumed in the fall, France offered to concede eventual equality of armaments to Germany, if the latter would remain at her disarmed level for another four years. It was too high a price for the Reich to pay for equality. Britain also was displeased. The schism between the attitudes of Britain and France was further widened. Through it passed the German diplomats, through it and out of the Conference. On 14 October 1933, Germany officially announced its withdrawal from the Conference and a week later she resigned from the League of Nations.

Hitler's first demonstration of Nazi daring in foreign policy was met with deep shock, if not surprise. Withdrawal from the Conference was not a new threat; it had been used to advantage by the diplomats of the Weimar Republic. But, whereas these men had yielded to Anglo-French persuasion, Hitler met the entreaties of Arthur Henderson, the President of the Disarmament Conference, with conciliatory but firm determination. Germany, Hitler offered, would even accept the principle of inequality

if she were allowed to create a 300,000 man army and an airforce equivalent to one half that of the French.³ It was a clever move, calculated to glean extra advantages for the Reich, either through the military terms of the proposal if accepted, or the increase in the rift between Britain and France if the latter rejected the bait. France, confident that Britain would see through Hitler's scheme, promptly turned down the ungenerous offer. Formal negotiations were at an end and the Conference was dead. From the fall of 1933, with the failure to arrive at a disarmament formula, its very antithesis went to the fore. Re-armament and the traditional methods of diplomacy gained ascendancy; disarmament and diplomacy by world conference joined each other in defeat.

The first to return to the more familiar diplomatic channels was Mussolini. He did not like large-scale international conferences where smaller powers rubbed shoulders with the great. The very name of "Versailles" reminded him of Italy's discontent and the Disarmament Conference was, by its nature, repugnant to him. Any man who believed that "Pacificism is cowardice in the face of sacrifice"⁴ was unlikely to view disarmament with any real sympathy. For Mussolini, the pacification of Europe meant the enjoyment of special privileges by the powerful. Even before the Disarmament Conference had reached its dreary conclusion, the Duce had conceived a plan which was much more to his liking.

When the British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald and Foreign

³The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 48-50.

⁴Quoted from G. Salvemini, Prelude to World War II (London, 1953), 30.

Secretary Sir John Simon arrived in Rome for a brief visit in March 1933, Mussolini revealed to them his plan for a Four Power Pact. The four great powers of Europe, Britain, Italy, France and Germany would collaborate to keep the peace. They would recognize the need for revision of the peace treaties; they would grant Germany equality of status while at the same time receiving from her the promise to exercise this equality gradually and with the consent of the other three powers; and they would endeavour to adopt a common policy both within and without Europe. In effect, it was to be another great Concert of Europe. MacDonald and Simon left decidedly impressed and determined to press their views on the French.⁵

France would have none of the plan, or at least, very little of it. She was not disinterested in a rapprochement with Italy, but she was not willing to obtain it at the cost of the revision of the Treaty of Versailles. Of particular importance to France were the susceptibilities of her eastern allies and none of them had shown any enthusiasm for a pact, which appeared to leave Germany a free hand in eastern Europe. The continent seemed on the verge of a new political realignment with Mussolini securing the south-east for his own preserve. Poland and Czechoslovakia were particularly alarmed. The Duce's ill-disguised attempt to direct German expansion to the north-east was loudly condemned and France was begged to scuttle the whole enterprise. Her Foreign Minister Joseph Paul-Boncour eagerly complied. On 7 June 1933 the pact was initialled in Rome under Mussolini's beaming countenance. It was,

⁵I. Kirkpatrick, Mussolini: A Study in Power (New York, 1964), 288.

however, an empty victory and everyone knew it. France had done her job well for the pact no longer contained reference to treaty revision or Germany's equality of rights. As a result, the pact was ratified by Italy alone, the other powers preferring to dismiss it as a dead issue. In October 1933, Hitler delivered the coup de grace to this abortive effort at great power collaboration.

Prompted in part by the implications of Mussolini's Four Power Pact and by the eventual collapse of the Disarmament Conference in October, the Soviet Union began a reassessment of her own foreign policy.⁶ Geographically and ideologically sealed off from the rest of Europe, the Soviets had heavily relied on the 1922 Rapallo agreement and the 1926 Treaty of Berlin with Germany. These had been satisfactory arrangements both from the military and economic points of view, but they were not to last. The nineteen-thirties resurrected the threat of Japan in the Far East and ushered in the Nazi revolution in Germany, and the Italian Four Power Pact, each of which played a role in the change in Russian foreign policy.

The Far Eastern problem was by far the most serious for the Soviets in the early part of the decade. The Manchurian question had been settled in Japan's favour and now her troops were stationed on the Russian frontier, ready to continue their march of conquest. The German peril in 1933 consisted of little more than ideological bickering. Indeed, it was a Nazi Reichstag that ratified in May 1933 a protocol which extended

⁶B. Budurowycz, Polish-Soviet Relations, 1932-1939 (New York, 1963), 8-9.

the duration of the Rapallo agreement.⁷ Clearly, Hitler was undecided about the nature of Germany's attitude towards the Soviets. He was caught between his own anti-bolshevik zeal and his knowledge that the Reichswehr wanted a continuation of Russo-German cooperation. In effect, Russo-German relations between January and the fall of 1933 were based on mutual toleration. There were no overt breaks although incidents such as the Reichstag fire were used to instil a slow but effective poison into the relations between the two powers.

Had Hitler really wanted to foster better relations with the Soviet Union, he might well have avoided involvement in the Duce's Four Power Pact. The frequently voiced expressions of Lebensraum and Drang nach Osten were particularly resented in Russia; and any plan which indirectly aimed at realizing these dreams could not avoid Soviet censure. The Italian scheme was, however, doubly alarming for Stalin's regime. Not only did it deliver north-eastern Europe to the Reich, but it appeared to be a concerted attempt of the four great capitalist powers to isolate the Soviet Union.

Faced with peril from both east and west, the Soviets turned again to the traditional Russian rapprochement with France. It was not a friendship but a convenience, an essential convenience for both. Most Frenchmen had little affection for communism, nor had they forgotten the investments they had lost.⁸ Russia distrusted and feared western capitalism.

⁷G. Hilger and A. G. Meyer, The Incompatible Allies (New York, 1953), 252.

⁸Debate of 11 February 1936, in Journal Officiel. Débats Parlementaires. Chambre Des Députés, 1918-1940 (Printed on Microcard, Washington, D.C. 1963), 346-359. Hereafter referred to as Débats.

In fact, one of her motives for moving closer to France had been to split the capitalist bloc. Yet fear produces the strangest of bedfellows. Russia, harassed by Japan at a moment when the Rapallo agreement was slowly vanishing, needed France to check Nazi initiative; France, faced as ever with the lingering German problem, hoped that encirclement would work.

The thawing of Franco-Russian relations became apparent as early as 1932, for in September of that year the two countries signed a pact of non-aggression.⁹ Within another three years, the Soviet Union was to be restored to a prominent place in European diplomacy; she became a council member of the League of Nations in September 1934, and in May 1935 she signed the agreement with France, an agreement that would provide a new focus for Franco-German-Soviet relations. Anglo-French relations were also influenced by the Franco-Russian rapprochement. Anti-bolshevism was sufficiently prevalent in Britain to create a good deal of criticism of French attempts to ally with the communists against the great anti-communist bulwark, Nazi Germany. To the more practically-minded observer, ideology was far less of a ground for criticism than was the simple fact that France was becoming more and more involved in eastern Europe. Britain had scrupulously avoided any commitments east of the Rhine and yet she still might be drawn into that strange area to help France make good for obligations. The prospect of becoming involved in a region about which few Britons knew and still fewer cared, did nothing to endear the Third Republic to His Majesty's Government.

⁹For the terms of this pact see the Appendix of W. E. Scott, Alliance Against Hitler (Durham N.C., 1962).

The year 1933 had done little to restore the confidence France had once had in herself. The depression was just beginning to reveal itself as a profound national problem and not just a temporary and local phenomenon. Daladier, Sarraut and Chautemps¹⁰ had each tried to form a lasting government in that year; the most successful had remained in power for nine months, the least successful, for twenty-eight days. The Disarmament Conference had failed, as had the Four Power Pact; and the failure of both had been blamed on the French. France's relations with Britain, Italy and Germany were characterized by varying degrees of suspicion and mutual recrimination. Relations with Russia had improved, but this development had been accompanied by the first thin crack in the dike France had so carefully constructed in eastern Europe.

On 26 January 1934 a ten year pact of non-aggression between Poland and Germany was made public. France was caught off guard, for her old ally had kept the last stage of negotiations completely secret. Marshal Pilsudski, confident that German revision would first be directed toward Austria, had skilfully initiated a move toward the Third Reich. His decision had not been precipitate and it had only been encouraged, not motivated, by Mussolini's Four Power Pact.¹¹ Since the fall of 1932 when Josef Beck had been appointed Foreign Minister, Poland had undertaken a slow but progressive campaign to improve her relations

¹⁰Eduard Daladier, Premier from 31 January 1933 to 24 October 1933. Albert Sarraut, Premier from 26 October 1933 to 24 November 1933. Camille Chautemps, Premier from 26 November 1933 to 27 January 1934.

¹¹Z. I. Gasiorowski, "The German-Polish Nonaggression Pact of 1934," The Journal of Central European Affairs, April 1955, XV, 8.

with the Reich.

To France, the secrecy in which the pact had been negotiated and the nature of the pact itself suggested a complete reorientation of Polish foreign policy. That it was not. Poland was no more pro-German than she had been in 1921 when she had made the alliance with France. Poland had been striving then and was still striving for an independent foreign policy, an independence she hoped to secure by being a friend to all and none. In July 1932 she had signed a non-aggression pact with Russia; in January 1934 a similar agreement was made with Germany. What Poland had to fear more than anything else was a Russo-German rapprochement, a rapprochement based on the carving up of Polish autonomy. Her fate in 1939 was testament to the reality of such a fear. An independent Polish foreign policy rested on the capacity of its Foreign Office to be simultaneously pro and anti-German, Russian and French.

Polish initiative had been welcomed in Germany with outward restraint and inner enthusiasm. It appeared as if it might be the first opportunity of propelling the French eastern satellites into a new orbit around the Reich. Besides, it was difficult to tell how much of Pilsudski's policy was bluff. He had ordered a partial mobilization of Polish forces in April 1933¹² and rumour had it that he had asked Britain and France for a preventive war against the Reich. Generally speaking, the prospect of securing the north-eastern frontier, of undermining Poland's ties with France and of rallying another anti-bolshevik power to his side, all for an agreement he could scrap at an opportune moment,

¹²Ibid., 11.

was too appealing for the Führer to ignore.

By the summer of 1934 the Reich could afford to breathe somewhat easier. The Nazi governing machine was firmly established; the June purge had removed indiscriminately the most dangerous and the most harmless of Hitler's opponents; and the Führer had arranged to become the Reich's new president the moment death carried away the infirm Hindenburg. Russia had been temporarily alienated but Poland had been partly gained. France had become more wary, but Britain and Italy continued to exhibit sympathy for the Reich, the former because Hitler seemed independent enough to check the bolshevik menace, the latter because he seemed on the verge of becoming an Italian vassal.

The abortive Nazi coup in Austria in July, 1934 surprised them all. The Austrian Nazis, susceptible to German incitement but resistant to appeals for moderation, staged a short but bloody coup in which the Austrian chancellor, Dr. Dollfuss, was brutally murdered. Anschluss, the union of Germany and Austria, was certainly not unwelcome to the Führer; but it failed, and at a most unpropitious time for the Reich. Only five months before, in February, the British, French and Italian governments had issued a joint declaration which insisted on Austria's continued independence. Hardly a month before, Hitler had been warned by Mussolini during their Venice meeting, that Anschluss would meet with Italy's strongest opposition.¹³ Yet the coup had been attempted. Britain and France were united, in mutual concern, indignation and inaction. Mussolini, less indignant but more genuinely alarmed, sent troops and

¹³I. Kirkpatrick, op. cit., 290-292.

air units to the Brenner Pass. It appeared that any German attempt to help the Austrian Nazis regain control would be met by Italian resistance.

Europe emerged from the events of July 1934 with some valuable experiences. To Hitler it was an intolerable humiliation. He had no choice but to repudiate those responsible for the coup and to assure Italy that Germany had no aspirations in Austria, no aspirations that is until Italian consent could be secured. For the next four years the gaining of this consent was to be one of the major objectives of Nazi foreign policy. Mussolini's own feelings towards the putsch had not been unmixed. He too had been embarrassed by Nazi audacity so soon after he himself had forbidden any compromise of Austrian independence. On the other hand, he could contrast Nazi daring with Anglo-French inaction. July 1934 confirmed Mussolini's contempt for the western powers.¹⁴ He would continue to cooperate with Britain and France since solidarity with them would help discourage Germany from undertaking a new Anschluss, but he would never again act on the Brenner or elsewhere without securing a worthy price for his efforts. Paradoxically, the Duce's increased contempt for western pacificism was matched by an increased respect for him on the part of Britain and France. After 1934, his value to the peace of Europe was not seriously contested by either western power.

The German problem provided the focus for Anglo-French relations in the inter-war period. To most Britons that problem remained acute not because of German intransigence but rather because of French willingness

¹⁴Ibid., 296.

to exaggerate the problem. Except to a few men like Sir Robert Vansittart,¹⁵ Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, the German peril was explicable only in terms of the Reich's weakness, not its strength. The Foreign Office to some extent remained a refuge for realists. The reports of ambassadors Sir Horace Rumbold and Sir Eric Phipps¹⁶ left few doubts about the character of Nazi Germany. But the politicians remained unconvinced. Successive Prime Ministers, MacDonald with his apparent admiration for Fascist grandeur and vitality, Baldwin with his unconcealed indifference to foreign affairs, and Chamberlain with his belief that Germany could be trusted, all distorted or ignored the ominous warnings from Berlin. The British governments and the British public simply were reluctant to admit that Germany could again be a real peril to European peace.

In France, that peril could never be forgotten. The Third Republic did not of course live the entire inter-war period in terror of immediate invasion. France was not unaware that Germany had been disarmed; she herself had seen to that. It was rather the fear of the German war potential that so transfixed France. With industrial and man-power reserves superior to those of France, Germany was certainly capable of erasing the Versailles system if given an opportunity. Nazi Germany, with her energy and fanatic zeal was capable of making a great contribution to European peace and economic stability; yet she was

¹⁵See his recent biography by I. Colvin, Vansittart in Office (London, 1965).

¹⁶British ambassadors to Berlin: Rumbold, 1928-1933; Phipps, 1933-1938.

equally capable of great destruction. In 1934, her powers had not yet reached a danger level but already her daring at the Disarmament Conference, her détente with Poland and her alleged responsibility for the Austrian putsch, had given some hint of events to come. France could no longer wait to see in which direction Nazi initiative would run.

In the light of the respective attitudes of Britain and France toward the German problem, it is not surprising that the latter became increasingly dependent on her old ally. After all, for France, Germany was the problem and Anglo-French solidarity, the solution. Since Britain was less alarmed by the problem and since her assistance was felt to be necessary by France, her own independence was increased. Ironically what was to happen throughout the nineteen-thirties was that France became so involved in preserving the entente with Britain that the real issue for her, the German problem, became obscured. As early as Locarno there is some evidence of this trend. In 1925, Briand pledged France to respect the Franco-German frontier, in exchange for a similar promise from Stresemann. But in one very real sense France had made a compromise in order to secure a British guarantee of her eastern frontier. Germany, in 1925, was militarily incapable of violating her pledge. France forfeited her right to intervene in the Rhineland in return for a German promise that had meant little. The reassuring hand of Britain on the continent was what France desired. It seemed unimportant whether that hand supported or suppressed her own independence of action.

In the Barthou-Laval period (February 1934 - January 1936), France came close to releasing the British grip. Neither Louis Barthou

nor Pierre Laval was prepared to risk Britain withdrawing her hand from the affairs of western Europe, but both were unwilling to watch the strangulation of French diplomatic independence. When Barthou became Foreign Minister in the Gaston Doumergue government of 7 February 1934 he immediately assumed the task, begun by his predecessor Paul-Boncour, of continuing the Franco-Russian rapprochement. With the reluctant approval of Britain, Barthou attempted to create an "Eastern Locarno" whereby France and Russia would guarantee the frontiers between Germany and her eastern neighbours.¹⁷ The attempt to bring the Reich into a new territorial guarantee failed. Barthou had to content himself, probably with little regret, with strengthening French relations with most of the east European countries. If Germany refused to pledge herself to a policy of non-aggression, then, Barthou concluded, she would have to be contained by other means.

In February 1933, Czechoslovakia, Roumania and Yugoslavia, collectively known as the Little Entente, pledged themselves to the principles of collective security and anti-revisionism. By means of personal visits to the capitals of these French satellite countries, Barthou reaffirmed their ties with France and their determination to resist possible German aggression.¹⁸ On the day that he himself assumed his portfolio, the Foreign Minister was greeted by the announcement

¹⁷W. D. D'Ormesson, France (London, 1939), 120-127.

¹⁸F. L. Schuman, Europe on the Eve, 1933-1939 (London, 1939), 97-98.

of a Balkan Entente¹⁹ which had been inspired by the francophile Foreign Minister of Roumania, Nicolae Titulescu. Barthou's Grand Alliance against Germany was taking rapid shape. In April 1934, his visit to Warsaw ended in a reaffirmation of the Franco-Polish alliance of 1921. Clearly the German-Polish Pact had not been indicative of any Polish desire to sever her ties with France. Finally, in June of that year Litvinov assented to a Franco-Russian mutual assistance pact. It is true that again Barthou had sought Sir John Simon's approval of this projected pact with Russia, but even if his finger were never far from the British pulse he still exhibited an initiative and degree of independence to which French foreign policy had not recently been accustomed.

In October 1934, less than a month after the Soviet Union had entered the League of Nations but long before the mutual assistance pact had been concluded, Barthou was assassinated in Marseilles.²⁰ The October tragedy was rife with implications for French foreign policy. Because the assassins were thought to have been trained in Italy, French-Italian relations received a brief but jolting set-back. Although Barthou had been unwilling to rely exclusively on Mussolini as the only bulwark against German aggression in south-eastern Europe, he had taken great care to foster better relations with Italy, particularly after July and Mussolini's actions on the Brenner. On the other hand, Barthou had refused to betray Yugoslavia to Italian Fascism. Italian-Yugoslav relations had been seriously deteriorating and the death of the Yugoslav

¹⁹The members of which were, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, and Roumania.

²⁰For a detailed account, see Q. Howe, The World Between the Wars, II, (New York, 1953), Chapter 6, "The Axis Strikes".

King in Marseilles on that day in October, put the two nations on the verge of hostilities. It would be increasingly difficult for Barthou's successor to reconcile French friendship with both Adriatic powers. Perhaps no consequence of the Marseilles assassinations could be more significant than the succession of Barthou by the wily Pierre Laval.

Ridiculed and maligned as he has been, the Laval of the nineteen-thirties was no bungling novitiate in the realm of international diplomacy. Capable and cunning as well as devious and unprincipled, Laval may well have been the man to solder Barthou's Grand Alliance, had he not made the Duce's African blunder his own. Many of Barthou's ideas were fulfilled by Pierre Laval. He did not discard the ties with the countries of eastern Europe, although he did place less emphasis on them. It was Laval who, first as Foreign Minister and subsequently as Premier, carried through the negotiations with the Soviets and who was to sign the pact in May 1935. It is true that he refused to put teeth into the pact by carefully avoiding any arrangement for joint staff talks; but if the emphasis were removed from the entente with Russia, it was transferred to that with Italy. There can be no doubt that Laval was less devoted than Barthou to Anglo-French solidarity.²¹ Laval was not, as has been alleged, an Anglophobe; but he was not so enamoured of British policy to make it the sole determinant of his thinking. Anglo-French solidarity for Laval as for all French Foreign Ministers of that decade remained the touchstone of French foreign policy. Laval was simply more willing to test its resilience.

²¹The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 120.

The year 1935 opened on an optimistic note for the French Foreign Office. The pact with Russia had been given preliminary approval by both parties. The October tragedy had been conveniently forgotten, and Franco-Italian relations had recovered from their steep decline. France herself seemed ripe for an extension of military service, a fact which lent credence to the hope that French morale was improving. The Saar plebiscite was scheduled for mid-January and, although there was little reason to believe that the vote would go in favour of France, the dream remained that Germany would thereafter be content with the Versailles status quo.

Nothing was more indicative of this idle hope than the Anglo-French proposals which followed soon after the Saar plebiscite of 13 January. Technically, it had been a free vote, enforced by an international police force, a vote that overwhelmingly expressed the desire of the Saar inhabitants to return to the sovereignty of the Reich. The F hrer's personal assurance that this would be the last of Germany's territorial demands on France gave further support to the belief that the Nazi regime would now give serious consideration to proposals envisaging a political stabilization of western Europe.

In early February Britain and France sent a set of proposals to Berlin for examination. Among the suggestions made were: a proposed release of Germany from the Versailles disarmament provisions and a concession of equality of arms for her if she would respect (a) Austrian independence, (b) the integrity of states east of Germany by signing an Eastern Locarno pact, and (c) the integrity of all states by resuming obligations under the Covenant. Of particular interest, at least from

the British point of view, was the suggestion of an air pact in which the Locarno powers would give aerial assistance to any of their number that had been attacked from the air. No longer would Britain be a guarantor purely and simply, for her own soil would be guaranteed by the Locarno colleagues.²² The German reply to these proposals was restrained but conciliatory. She refused nothing but requested that bi-lateral pacts be substituted for one multi-lateral pact. Such a suggestion was unattractive to the western powers. Bi-lateral pacts were too easily evaded or discarded; however neither Britain nor France wished to assume responsibility for preventing discussions with Germany. Instead, a date for the Anglo-German conference to discuss the proposals in depth was set for 8 March 1935.

Although destined for failure, the February proposals made a substantial contribution to French morale. At long last there seemed reason to hope that Britain was finally willing to help solve the German problem. Once again the Anglo-French dialogue achieved a degree of intimacy. Yet in spite of his role in the discussions out of which those proposals emerged, Laval proved unwilling to rely on Anglo-French solidarity as the exclusive answer to French sécurité. After months of painstaking efforts to soften the Fascist attitude, Laval journeyed to Rome in January 1935 and signed the famous Rome Agreements on 7 January.²³ With regard to Germany France and Italy agreed to consult if Hitler insisted on pursuing his rearmament program. The German threat to

²²R. M. Rayner, Twenty Years Truce (New York, 1943), 185-186.

²³H. Cole, Laval: A Biography (London, 1963), 57-58.

central Europe was to be removed by a pact between Austria and her neighbors in which each would reaffirm the others' independence and promise to avoid intervention in each other's internal affairs.²⁴

Austrian independence would be guaranteed once again by a joint Franco-Italian pledge. In order to insure the solidarity and spirit of cooperation which such a pledge would require, several colonial settlements were made by the two powers,²⁵ and, in particular, Laval assured Mussolini that the French were disinterested in Italian efforts to win concessions in Abyssinia. Although Laval later asserted that his assurance to Mussolini had applied only to economic concessions, it is likely that this assurance, perhaps supplemented by some subtle hint, convinced the Duce that France would not intervene in Italy's projected invasion of Abyssinia.

In June 1935, the Rome Agreements were reinforced by specific Franco-Italian military conventions. If one can rely on Flandin's account, Laval would have preferred to have avoided such an arrangement for fear of antagonizing the Reich.²⁶ In view of his refusal to reinforce the Franco-Russian pact with a military convention, it appears that a rapprochement with Germany was his ultimate objective. He desired to give

²⁴This pact was never effected.

²⁵France ceded, (a) a strip of French Equatorial Africa adjacent to the Italian province of Libya and (b) a small triangle of Somaliland adjoining Eritrea. Also, the status of Italians in Tunis was regulated.

²⁶P. E. Flandin, Politique Française (Paris, 1947), 172-173.

Hitler the impression that France had collected a strong anti-German bloc, but he was reluctant to let the Führer believe that this Grand Alliance was prepared to crush the Reich at any moment. It was a two-edged sword and it was difficult to wield. This time Laval failed, for the military conventions were concluded by representatives of the French and Italian General Staffs.²⁷ One French army corps was to be sent to the Italian right flank on the Yugoslav border and one Italian corps to the French right flank around Belfort. In addition, certain Italian air force units were to be stationed behind the Belfort zone for the purpose of possible air attacks on southern Germany.²⁸ Equally important was the mutual guarantee of their entire frontiers. The French documents make it clear²⁹ that the Rome convention enabled France to remove ten divisions from her south-eastern frontier and post them in the north-east. Any future alienation of Italy could thus have very definite strategic implications for the French defensive network, since a certain number of troops would have to be returned to the southern frontier.

One month before the military convention had been completed in Rome, Laval had brought Barthou's rapprochement with the Soviet Union to fruition. On 2 May, the pact of Mutual Assistance was signed in

²⁷ French representatives: General Gamelin (Commander-in-Chief of Army, Navy and Air Force), General Denain (Minister of Air), Admiral Durand-Viel (Chief of Naval Staff). Italian representatives: General Badoglio (Chief of Staff for National Defence), General Valle (Minister of Air).

²⁸ M. G. Gamelin, Servir, II (Paris, 1946), 162-177.

²⁹ Note from the Army General Staff to the Military High Committee, of 18 January 1936, in Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1932-1939, 2^e Série (1936-1939) Tome 1 (1^{er} Janvier - 31 Mars 1936), Paris, 1963, No. 82, 116-120. Hereafter referred to as D.D.F., II, 1.

Moscow. Though formidable in appearance, the pact, like Locarno, was not fortified with military staff talks. Laval refused to involve France in commitments any more precise than the general terms of the agreement.³⁰ In brief, those terms consisted of a pledge to consult immediately on measures for the enforcement of Article 10 of the Covenant,³¹ if either were threatened by aggression from another European state. Moreover, if either were actually a victim of unprovoked aggression, the other would come to its immediate assistance. Fourteen days after this pact had been concluded, Czechoslovakia and Russia signed a similar pact, a pact however, that was contingent for its operation on the active intervention of France. In other words, if either eastern power were the victim of unprovoked aggression the other was obligated to come to its assistance only if France herself first honored her obligations to the victim.

An adequate appraisal of the Franco-Italian military convention and the Franco-Soviet pact cannot be made without the light shed upon them by the events of the preceding March. For had it not been for Hitler's startling initiative in that month, Laval may well have further prolonged the negotiations with Russia, and his opposition to the military arrangements with Italy ^{might} have been more effective. As it happened,

³⁰Refer to J. W. Wheeler-Bennett (ed.) Documents on International Affairs, 1935, I, (London, Oxford University Press, for The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1935) 116-119. Hereafter referred to as, R.I.I.A., Documents.

³¹The Covenant of the League of Nations, Article 10, in Treaty of Peace...., 12.
 "The members of the League undertake to respect and preserve as against external aggression the territorial integrity and existing political independence of all members of the League. In case of any such aggression or in case of any threat or danger of such aggression the council shall advise upon the means by which this obligation shall be filled."

his own hopes of securing a rapprochement with the Reich received a stunning rebuff through Hitler's most recent act of daring. The German peril had been suddenly intensified and for once Laval became the pawn and not the master of events.

At the end of February Hitler had been faced with the problem of what to do with the Anglo-French proposals.³² Multi-lateral pacts were not to Germany's interest, but what excuse could be found to extricate herself from the problem of having to kill the discussions? Before the first week of March had elapsed, Hitler found his chance. Not only would he scrap the proposed Berlin conference set for 8 March, but something more concrete could also be attained. The British White Paper on Defence of 1 March was to provide Hitler with his opportunity, for not only did this statement on defence consist of a speeding up of the British rearmament program, but it also justified this step by means of German rearmament:

This rearmament, if continued at its present rate, unabated and uncontrolled, will aggravate the existing anxieties of the neighbours of Germany, and may consequently produce a situation where peace will be in peril.... Nor is the increase of armaments confined to Germany.... We could not afford to overlook all those increases, and so have had to begin to meet our deficiencies....³³

Hitler saw it as a weak rebuke and an unconcealed god-send. He quickly contracted a diplomatic virus and cancelled Sir John Simon's visit to Berlin. On Saturday, 9 March, Nazi Germany officially notified the

³²For the proposals of February 1935, see Chapter II, 34-35.

³³R.I.I.A., Documents, 1935, I, 38-47. See Section 3, paragraph 2.

countries of Europe of the existence of a German air force. It was the first of Hitler's Saturday coups, and the first open repudiation of Germany's treaty obligations. But it produced little surprise in the British Foreign Office. The content of the declaration had been common knowledge for some time. Simon was so little perturbed that, in a superb piece of diplomatic elasticity, he overlooked the F hrer's snub and re-expressed his desire to meet later in the month to discuss the February air pact proposals. Clearly, Hitler had not yet saved himself from the embarrassment of having to torpedo the Anglo-French propositions.

So the F hrer tried again. On 11 March the text of a draft bill, published by the French Ministry of War, proposed a new military law for the period 1936-1939, authorizing an age reduction for conscripts from twenty-one to twenty, and an extension of the period of service from one to two years. Cabinet approval of the measure was given on 12 March, and on 15 March Flandin announced to the Chamber his decision to give effect to the measure by way of a special prerogative provided for the Premier by the military law of 1928. The following day Hitler struck. On 16 March, another Saturday, the Reich published a decree reintroducing conscription in Germany and placing the future peace time strength of the army at thirty-six divisions. Quite obviously, the F hrer had not chosen such a course simply to encourage the British to cancel their pending Berlin visit. The introduction of conscription, which would produce a larger army, was a necessary foundation for the Reich's ambitious foreign policy and, therefore, was an act which justified itself to the Nazis. But clearly, Hitler had no compunction

about killing two birds with one stone. Nonetheless, the one still eluded him. Simon and Eden refused to postpone their talks with the Nazi leaders. The Anglo-French proposals, though a dead issue, would continue to haunt Europe for another year.

The German announcement of conscription produced far more surprise and considerably greater alarm than had her declaration concerning the air force. Both France and Italy, in accordance with their recent entente, loudly denounced the move. Sir John Simon complied with the French request that Britain protest the German initiative, and then soon after departed for Berlin. All that Laval could wring from his British colleague was a promise to discuss the new international situation at Stresa in April. Britain's apparent lack of sympathy for the French position was rewarded by the similarly unsympathetic attitude adopted by the Reich for Britain. Hitler and his Foreign Minister, von Neurath, made it perfectly clear how unacceptable most of the February proposals were. Germany would not agree to an Eastern Locarno; she would not sign any multi-lateral pacts unless they were strictly non-aggression agreements with no obligations beyond consultation. The principle of equality of armaments, the Reich contended, could no longer be used as a bargaining point, for that principle had already been accepted as fact by all Germans, if not by the other peoples of Europe. Nor would Germany return to the League of Nations as long as certain inequalities remained, inequalities such as the loss of her colonies. The Reich did favour the suggestion of a Western Air Pact, but only on the basis of parity in air power. This, Hitler concluded, was a minor point, since it had but to be recognized in theory; Germany, he said, had

already reached air parity with Britain in practice. However to prove her peaceful intentions, Germany was prepared to open negotiations for a naval limitation agreement.³⁴ If Britain were prepared to grant the Reich a navy with a tonnage in capital ships of thirty-five per cent of her own, the arms race could be curtailed at least in that field. In spite of the fact that even the desire to negotiate would immediately indicate British acceptance of another German abrogation of the Versailles settlement, Simon accepted the Führer's offer. Having tentatively agreed on a pact that would inevitably place additional strain on the Anglo-French entente, Simon returned to London and began preparing for a conference that ostensibly would reaffirm Britain's ties with France.

Hardly two weeks after having given initial approval of an arrangement which France was sure to resent, the British Foreign Secretary, accompanied by Prime Minister MacDonald, Sir Robert Vansittart and the Abyssinian expert Mr. Thompson, met with the French and Italian representatives³⁵ at Stresa. There, in the undisturbed and majestic atmosphere of Isola Bella and Lake Maggiore, the three powers confirmed their partnership in an anti-German front. The Reich's most recent unilateral repudiations of the Versailles settlement were recognized as having

³⁴It is now clear that Hitler had previously hinted at the strength of German air power to Lord Allen of Hurtwood in January 1935, and that instead of being taken aback by this announcement or the offer of a naval deal, "Simon went to Berlin...with the express intention of inviting German naval experts to come to London..." D. C. Watt, "The Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935: An Interim Judgment," The Journal of Modern History, June 1956, No. 2, 166.

³⁵France was represented by Laval and Léger, Italy by Mussolini, Suvich and Ambassador Aloisi.

fostered the insecurity which Europe increasingly felt.³⁶ Austrian independence was again reaffirmed and both agreed that that country's autonomy would continue to underlay their common policy. Finally, and of particular interest, Britain and Italy restated their pledge to guarantee the Locarno status quo. In fact, the Stresa Conference was little more than a re-statement of former pledges, and not an altogether accurate one at that. The nearest the Stresa front had ever come to reality was in July 1934, and because it only approached reality, the myth behind it had been revealed. The future was to make that revelation all the more vivid. Indeed, the Stresa meeting carefully avoided any specific reference to the future. The reason is no mystery. France was nearing completion of the pact with Russia, a pact that was unpopular in both Britain and Italy. Britain was about to commence negotiations with Germany, negotiations she knew would be unattractive to France and Italy. The latter was in the process of making preparations for the invasion of Abyssinia, an invasion which, she might have known, but professed not to know, would be repulsive to France and Britain. But the Duce's intentions though widely suspected, as Mr. Thompson's presence indicated, were not even questioned. Instead, Mussolini saw to it that Stresa's general pledge to peace referred only to European peace:

The Three Powers, the object of whose policy is collective maintenance of peace within the framework of the League of Nations, find themselves in complete agreement

³⁶On 16 April, a joint British, French, Italian resolution was presented to the League requesting formal condemnation of Germany's recent acts.

in opposing, by all practicable means, any unilateral repudiation of treaties which may endanger the peace of Europe, and will act in close and cordial collaboration towards this purpose.³⁷

Anglo-French cordiality, as reflected in the joint February proposals to Germany and the common pledges at Stresa, suffered another distinct reversal as 1935 ran its tragic course. The Franco-Russian pact was signed in May. It was no more attractive to the British than it was to Laval, although for different reasons. To the latter, the pact involved the risk of further alienating the Reich by conjuring up the old bogey of encirclement. To the British, the pact represented an alliance with bolshevism and further French commitments in eastern Europe. On the other hand, Britain proved no more averse to acting independently of French desires. In June, negotiations began in London on the proposed Anglo-German Naval agreement.

On the basis of the available evidence, it would appear that Simon's intention had been to introduce Germany into the arrangements made by previous naval conferences, and not to complete a bi-lateral pact.³⁸ However, from the moment of his arrival in London on 4 June, Ribbentrop, the German negotiator, stubbornly refused to hear of any wider scheme of limitation until Britain had approved and accepted Hitler's thirty-five per cent ratio proposal. With the discussions on

³⁷ A. J. Toynbee, Survey on International Affairs, 1935, I (London, Oxford University Press for The Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1935), 161. Hereafter referred to as, R.I.I.A., Survey.

³⁸ D. C. Watt, op. cit., 167.

the verge of a complete breakdown, the British Cabinet suddenly decided to accept the German demand. It was undoubtedly a decision made in reluctance and, to some extent, confusion. The Cabinet itself was in the process of transformation. Baldwin was about to become Prime Minister and Sir Samuel Hoare had just succeeded Simon as Foreign Secretary. Other Cabinet positions were changing hands. Domestic events obscured the horizon, particularly over the Channel. In that atmosphere, the Anglo-German Naval Treaty was signed on 18 June 1935.

French reaction was a mixture of rage and contempt. Not only had Britain turned her back on Stresa, but she had made an agreement that seemed to jeopardize French naval strength. The prominent French journalist Andre Géraud (Pertinax) indicated in a contemporary article that whereas France had accepted a battleship limitation of 105,000 tons at the London Naval Conference of 1930, the Anglo-German treaty allowed the Reich 183,000 tons. Even more important than the technical defects of the treaty, Géraud insisted, were its political weaknesses. The February proposals had had as their basis the principle of preliminary consultation between Britain and France before effect was given to any proposed policy. Britain had violated this principle.³⁹ However, views differ on the validity of this charge. Sir Samuel Hoare, while admitting that the actual negotiations were "carried on behind the backs of our French friends," still insists that the French were informed of the general intent of the negotiations.⁴⁰ Laval says simply that the treaty was

³⁹ A. Géraud, "France and the Anglo-German Naval Treaty," Foreign Affairs, 1935-1936, XIV, 31-61.

⁴⁰ S. Hoare (Templewood), Nine Troubled Years (London, 1954), 142-146.

negotiated and signed "without our knowledge".⁴¹

Regardless of how well informed the French government had been, the nation as a whole saw the naval treaty as a deliberate abandonment of Stresa and Anglo-French solidarity. Undoubtedly this bitterness partly strengthened the arguments of those who wanted the military conventions with Italy. The French Right in particular was so irritated by the British move that it delighted in frustrating British policy when the Abyssinian crisis emerged. Mussolini, who had paid little attention to what had been said at Stresa and far more to what had not been said, accepted the naval treaty for what it was. Britain had not concerned herself with Italian reaction, a fact which was not pleasing to the pompous Duce; but she had set a convenient precedent. Britain had left Stresa for Berlin; soon Italy would leave it for Addis Ababa. France, feeling herself alone, betrayed by an old friend, would not dare to risk the entente with her only other friend.

Since the Wal Wal incident of December 1934, there were few in Europe who doubted that Abyssinia would long be free from Italian intervention. It was not a wealthy land, nor a land particularly suitable for colonization, but it could be a theater for a glorious war, a distraction to a discontented Italy and its gain could be an Italian status symbol and a satisfaction for Adowa.⁴² Besides, the Duce had

⁴¹P. Laval, The Unpublished Diary (London, 1948), 29.

⁴²In 1896 the Italian army had been defeated by the Abyssinian Emperor Menelik at Adowa.

nowhere else to begin the next great Roman empire. It was Abyssinia or nothing. In October 1935 Italian troops marched forward to meet the disorganized and inadequately equipped forces of the Abyssinian emperor.

The Stresa front, a feeble progeny from conception, was slated for a brief existence. The more perilous its fate became, the more tenuous grew Anglo-French relations. Had the British and the French foreign offices been allowed to pursue their policies unimpeded, the ties between the two countries would have been less seriously threatened. The permanent heads of both offices, Sir Robert Vansittart and Alexis Léger saw the German problem as the overriding issue in international affairs. France believed that the defection of Mussolini from the Stresa front would intensify the German peril. The British diplomats realized that the more obsessed France became with that peril, the more difficult the whole problem would be to resolve. Unfortunately, domestic events in both countries drove a wedge farther and farther into the Anglo-French bloc.

In Britain, the first blow was delivered by the "British National Peace Ballot," the results of which were announced on 27 June 1935. It was, however, not until October of that year that the ballot became truly pertinent. Italy had attacked Abyssinia. The British electorate had expressed the opinion in the ballot that any aggressor should be compelled to stop, by means of economic sanctions. Even a considerable majority had approved a policy of military sanctions.⁴³ On the surface it appeared

⁴³A. F. Havighurst, Twentieth Century Britain (Evanston, Ill., 1962), 244. See also, F. L. Schuman, op. cit., 174-176.

as if Britain had suddenly become the great proponent of collective security. In fact, the results had been far less decisive. Of particular import was the failure of the ballot's formulators to ask how many would favour the application of economic and/or military sanctions by Britain alone. As it was, approximately one-third of the 11.5 million voters remained doubtful of or voted against the imposition of military sanctions by all the League members. Interesting too was the fact that whereas over six million voted in favour of military sanctions, 10.5 million voted in favour of an "all-round reduction" in armaments. No one seemed to wonder how military sanctions could be enforced without armaments. Partly as a result of the very confusion of public opinion, British policy over Abyssinia exhibited an equivocation that was antagonizing both to that opinion and to that of France.

Nothing was more indicative of this equivocation than the role assumed by Sir Samuel Hoare. In September he was the League's most effective champion:

The League stands, and my country stands with it, for the collective maintenance of the Covenant in its entirety, and particularly for steady and collective resistance to all acts of unprovoked aggression.⁴⁴

Yet, in December, after that act of aggression had been transformed from hypothesis to fact, Hoare was prepared to avoid more stringent measures of collective resistance if Mussolini would return to the channels of diplomacy. The Hoare-Laval plan, whatever its virtues, seemed to be,

⁴⁴R.I.I.A., Documents., 1935, II, 102.

and was, a direct rebuff to international law and morality; however, had it not been leaked to the press, it may well have bridged the rift between Britain and France and probably have been accepted by the Duce.⁴⁵ Instead, it increased British suspicion of the unprincipled Laval, the man responsible, so it was alleged, for this attempt to buy off Mussolini. It left a disillusioned Left in France. Anything might have been expected from Laval, but who would have thought the plan would have received the concurrence of the British Foreign Secretary, the man who had so recently posed as a League champion? To the French Right, the attempt seemed but confirmation of British duplicity. It seemed folly to risk the entente with Italy for the sake of preserving this malignant bond with the British.

The baffling course of British foreign policy toward the Abyssinian crisis was but one of the impediments encountered by the Quai d'Orsay. France had problems of her own. The depression was reaching ominous proportions in France and the adherence to the economic sanctions policy of the League did nothing to solve this national dilemma. Her political ills were equally pressing. In conformity to the shift in Soviet foreign policy, the extreme Left in France had assumed a distinctly patriotic flavour. The militancy, hitherto nurtured for the purpose of social revolution, was transferred to a demand for the protection of French sovereignty. Disarmament was stressed less and less, and the Nazi-Fascist threat more and more. Since Litvinov had brought Russia into the confines of the League, collective security and the Covenant were no

⁴⁵ Leo Amery, The Unforgiving Years (London, 1953-1955), 184.

longer ridiculed as capitalist idealism but viewed as the sword and manifesto of international justice.

The significant change in the foreign policy of the French Left was, to some extent, cancelled out by an almost antithetical change in Rightist thinking. Repelled by the taint under which parliamentary democracy lay as the result of the political and financial scandals of the year before, and increasingly concerned by the threat of bolshevism in France, the extreme Right and its militant Leagues exhibited a distinct sympathy for Mussolini's predicament. Yet confusion was not lacking. Caught between its admiration for Nazi authoritarianism and daring and its fear lest France fall victim to that daring, the French Right found itself in an unresolved débâcle. If it concerted with the Left to enforce the authority of the League, Mussolini would almost certainly be forced from the Stresa front. If, on the other hand, the League were not adequately supported, what possible use could it be against Germany? The League, almost by French definition, had been an alliance against Germany. If that alliance could neither prevent nor end war outside Europe, what possible chance did it have on the continent? If Britain were not forced to give more than verbal support to the League against Italy, would she not resort again to words when Germany next stepped out of line? This was another French dilemma, and another which she failed to solve.

CHAPTER III

THE ALARM

The year 1936 was ushered in on a wave of cautious optimism. The aimless drifting of British and French foreign policy appeared to have lost popular support. Sir Samuel Hoare had been forced to resign and Pierre Laval's days were numbered. British and French opinion seemingly had rallied behind the League and the Italian aggressor was now under the yoke of sanctions. Moreover, the German problem apparently had become less serious. It had been almost one year since Germany had announced the re-introduction of conscription. In the interim, she had adopted an outward air of respectability and had shown little inclination to take advantage of western Europe's distraction.

On the other hand, if public attention in Britain and France had been focused on the Italian problem, for the Quai d'Orsay and the British Foreign Office the German problem remained foremost. Great Britain certainly had never regarded the German problem to be as perilous as did the French. For her, the problem of Franco-German relations was more alarming. With the exception of Vansittart, whose burning Germanophobia made him a spiritual compatriot of the French, the Foreign Office and successive Foreign Secretaries had labored to eliminate French distrust of Nazi Germany. But subsequent to the resignation of Hoare and the fall of Laval, a new era in Anglo-French relations was inaugurated. The pivotal feature of the policy pursued by Eden was to be the improvement

of British ties with France. It was not difficult to see in early 1936 how a further alienation of Mussolini would be greeted by a France determined to keep the Stresa front as her primary defence against the Third Reich. The fall of Laval on 23 January had produced little change in the French government's attitude toward the Abyssinian crisis. Although Flandin, the Foreign Minister in the new Sarraut Cabinet, was unlikely to demonstrate Laval's independence in foreign policy, he left no doubt in Eden's mind that even a truant Italy was a valuable ally against Nazi aspirations.¹

Another problem which the Sarraut government inherited from Laval when it assumed office in January was the promise the former premier had made to submit the question of ratification of the Franco-Russian Pact of Mutual Assistance to the French Parliament. It was this pact, signed by Laval himself, that was to provide the focus for the Franco-German dialogue that took place between January and March 1936. Intended to provide further insurance for French sécurité, the pact was ironically destined to make a significant contribution to the tactical manoeuvres of Nazi foreign policy. For in terms of French domestic politics, the controversy, created during the debate on ratification, confirmed the predominance of French extremism. The pact became a contest between extreme Right and Left wing elements. More moderate elements were lost in the grey confusion which lay between the precise pictures painted by the two extremes. As a result of this political schism, France proved herself incapable of determining whether bolshevism or

¹The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 328.

fascism was the greater menace to her security. The pact also provided the Third Reich with another asset, for it furnished Hitler with a badly needed pretext for his next venture in international politics. Claiming that the pact was incompatible with the obligations assumed by the Locarno signatories, Germany soon would declare herself liberated from the 1925 agreement.

There can be little doubt that Germany's arguments against the Franco-Russian pact were merely convenient pretexts for freeing herself from the Locarno obligations. Long before the question of ratifying the pact had been raised in the French Chamber, there had been indications that Locarno and the demilitarized zone would be the next objectives of Hitler's diplomatic Blitzkrieg. In his memoirs General Gamelin reported that:

From the autumn of 1935 our intelligence service and our Deuxieme Bureau enabled us to inform the government that Germany was actively preparing for the reoccupation of the demilitarized zone.²

The Commander-in-Chief referred to two other letters of 21 October and 26 December sent to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which contained equally strong warnings of German intentions in the Rhineland. Warnings from the diplomatic service also had appeared in 1935. In a clear reference to the demilitarized zone, François-Poncet, the French ambassador in Berlin wrote:

In 1936, the effects of Reich diplomacy will clearly tend to free Germany of a servitude she judges to be too harsh. Invoking the demands of national security, Germany will

²M. G. Gamelin, op. cit., II, 194.

strive to make possible the establishment of garrisons and fortifications on her western frontier.³

The accuracy of the ambassador's forecast soon became apparent. The early months of the new year were characterized by a German press campaign against the Franco-Russian pact. Countless objections were raised by the Reich's efficient propaganda machine to undermine French faith in the pact. Once again the old fear of encirclement was brought out to justify German opposition. Equally disconcerting for France was the avowed complicity of the Foreign Office, which indicated that it was no longer a restraining influence on the more impetuous German leaders. However, though the Wilhelmstrasse's participation in these campaigns was in itself an alarming indication, it was the significance of the campaigns themselves with which the French were concerned. In a dispatch of 8 January 1936, François-Poncet emphasized one possible reason for the German press barrage. It might well be to:

prepare the ground, not only for diplomatic intervention, but for more daring decisions, such as simply the installation of garrisons or the construction of fortifications in the Rhenish demilitarized zone.⁴

In spite of French protests, the German press campaign continued and caused the fears and suspicions of France's diplomatic and military personnel to grow. These fears were duly reported to the Quai d'Orsay. Reports from Moscow, Warsaw, Rome, Berne, Cologne, Dusseldorf and London complemented the warnings which emanated from Berlin. Yet at the same

³François-Poncet to the Foreign Office, memorandum of 31 December 1935, in A. François-Poncet, The Fateful Years (New York, 1949), 190.

⁴François-Poncet to Laval, dispatch of 8 January 1936, in D.D.F., II, 1, No. 30, 41.

time dispatches of another nature came from these same centers which to some extent contradicted the messages of alarm. The warnings themselves consisted of two distinct types, one which dealt directly with German preparations within the zone itself, the other which pertained to rumours circulating in the diplomatic capitals of Europe.

In the first category, the alarm sounded by ambassador Clauzel in Berne and consul-general Dobler in Cologne was the most detailed and impressive. Clauzel, basing his reports on information furnished by Colonel Dubois of the Swiss Military Staff, indicated in a series of communications dating from 10 January to 13 February that military activity within the demilitarized zone suggested the imminence of a German coup: military earthworks had been constructed in the Eichberg mountain chain, certain key railway depots had been enlarged, German deserters had reported the existence of arms and munitions dumps in the zone, and an apparently authentic German service order dated December 1935 had informed Nazi leaders of the Ortsgruppen in the zone that re-occupation could be expected in the course of 1936.⁵

The equally insistent warnings from Cologne appear to have confirmed the concern expressed in Berne. Within the demilitarized zone, Dobler reported, fortifications were well maintained, the few barracks that were occupied could be evacuated immediately for the use of an invading army, and the seemingly well-informed prefect of Cologne had predicted that reoccupation would take place in the spring of 1936.

⁵Clauzel to Laval and Flandin, dispatches from 10 January to 13 February 1935, D.D.F., II, 1, Nos. 27, 79, 144 and 173.

Both in Dusseldorf and Cologne, responsible quarters anticipated the return of German troops within three months. Coblenz, Durlach, Cologne, and Dellbrück were all centres of feverish activity as everything from fieldworks and artillery bases to anti-aircraft floodlights was in the process of being erected. Outside the zone military aerodromes had been constructed at Münster, Lippstadt, Kuackenbrück, Guttersloh, Marl, Werl and Bielefeld. All in all, Dobler reported, there existed an atmosphere which could mean but one thing, an attempted reoccupation of the zone.

Many of the reports received by the French Ministry of War gave added credence to the information supplied by the diplomatic personnel. General Renondeau, the military attaché in Berlin, informed Laval's Minister of War, Fabry, that he was sure that reoccupation of the zone was approaching and that "only the date remained uncertain". Nazi foreign policy supervisors, "were preparing a justification of this act for world opinion," and were only waiting for France to become embroiled in external or internal difficulties before putting the plan, "which must be completely ready," into operation.⁶

In another note found in the Ministry of War archives, the subject of "the possible consequences of the Franco-Soviet pact" was examined. In discussing the Third Reich's attitude towards the pact the author wrote:

One can not avoid the feeling that it [the Reich] seeks in the pact a pretext for divesting itself of the engagements assumed at Locarno.... It is possible that this ratification will give the Germans the awaited opportunity to reoccupy the Rhineland.⁷

⁶Renondeau to Fabry, dispatch of 15 January 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 63, 91-93.

⁷Author and destination unknown, note of 27 January 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 106, 152-153.

Two other documents from the Ministry of War confirm the fact that France was adequately warned of German intentions in the zone. The document of a later date, 25 February, suggested that Germany would consider herself released from her Locarno obligations upon ratification of the Franco-Russian pact; and immediately after ratification reoccupation was envisaged in accordance with the Nazi method, the *fait accompli*.⁸

The second document, a dispatch of 12 February from General Maurin, Minister of War in the Sarraut Cabinet, to Flandin, stated: the German press had just started another campaign towards the reoccupation of the demilitarized zone; certain measures had been taken to facilitate the manoeuvre such as the stationing of militarized Landespolizei along the Rhine and the preparing of garrisons capable of handling reoccupying forces. The date for this attempt, the author surmised, could be anywhere from the spring of 1936 to early 1937.⁹

Less specific but nonetheless alarming were the reports based on the ceaseless exchanges of view which characterize a diplomatic capital. Careless indiscretions and slips of the tongue, irresponsible threats and boasts and idle prophecies created squalls of rumours which offered something for everyone. Whatever their origin, whisperings of imminent events were seldom in want; and among such whispers in the early months of 1936 was the hint of an impending coup in the Rhineland.

⁸ Author and destination unknown, note of 25 February 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 227, 322.

⁹ Maurin to Flandin, dispatch of 12 February 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 170, 245-247.

From ambassador Corbin in London came reports of British concern lest the German press campaigns were indicative of an intention to reoccupy the zone.¹⁰ Noël warned from Warsaw that Beck, the Polish Foreign Minister had returned from a recent trip to Germany highly sceptical of the possibility of preserving the Rhenish statute of Versailles and Locarno.¹¹ The French ambassador to Moscow, Alphand wrote in a dispatch of 15 January referring to the demilitarized zone. "Here they believe that Germany has definitely decided to violate [Locarno] if she has not already done so."¹² And the French consul in Dusseldorf reported on 14 February that in that city one could sense the expectancy of the Rhenish public for the "imminent act of remilitarization".¹³

THE ALARM DAMPENED

The alarm that had been sounded by various diplomatic and military personnel did not go unheard. On the other hand, it did not escape certain dampening influences. France quite rightly felt that she had broader issues to consider than a simple estimate of her own capacity to preserve the demilitarized zone. Above all, she had to consider the sensitivities of the other Locarno signatories. How would Britain greet a

¹⁰Corbin to Flandin, telegram of 10 January 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 29, 40.

¹¹Noël to Flandin, telegram of 1 February 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 124, 174.

¹²Alphand to Laval, dispatch of 15 January 1936, D.D.F. II, No. 65, 96.

¹³Henry to Flandin, dispatch of 14 February, 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 188, 280.

French attempt to prevent reoccupation by means of military reprisals? What was Mussolini's position? Would he use a German coup in the Rhineland to realign himself with his Stresa partners, or would he use it as a justification for disregarding Stresa? Moreover, how would any country in Europe greet an action on the part of France which, in an effort to prevent war, risked its outbreak?

The reports received in Paris concerning the probable attitudes of the various nations towards reoccupation of the Rhineland were far more ambiguous than were those which had dealt specifically with the imminence of a German coup. However, that ambiguity, indicative of the doubt entertained by the representation abroad, was more alarming to the French Foreign Office than had been the more certain warnings respecting the coup itself. From London, Rome and Brussels came conflicting reports of alarm and assurance. The nature and degree of the fidelity of those capitals to the Locarno agreements seemed wrapped in a cloak of uncertainty. In that uncertainty, the first of the dampening influences became manifest.

Great Britain was a case in point. On 12 February Foreign Secretary Eden declared to the House of Commons that nothing had altered the government's intentions to fulfill her Locarno obligations if the need arose. Yet a day later, ambassador Corbin reminded his superiors that:

For the English, the demilitarized zone, so important to us, has not played, does not play now and will never play anything but a completely secondary role.¹⁴

¹⁴Corbin to Flandin, dispatch of 13 February 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 184, 275.

Assurance was thus mixed with alarm. The British government had reaffirmed Locarno, but in actual crisis would it decide, and would public opinion let it decide, to preserve the demilitarized state of the Rhineland zone?

The reports from Rome were no less disconcerting. Suvich, the permanent head of the Italian Foreign Office, assured ambassador Chambrun that Italy saw no incompatibility between the Franco-Russian pact and Locarno.¹⁵ Mussolini himself informed the ambassador that Italy remained in line with the Stresa front; however, the Duce added, in the event of oil sanctions on Italy his country would leave the League and formally cancel the technical agreements¹⁶ made by the French and Italian General Staffs.¹⁷ Once again, it was both assurance and alarm. From such reports, the conclusion could not be avoided that Italy's adherence to Locarno was indeed tenuous.

The attitude of Belgium was equally ambiguous. The most outspoken advocate of the Locarno pact, Belgium had displayed very little practical determination to preserve the demilitarized zone. There had been very little indication that she would willingly seize the initiative in preserving the status of the Rhenish zone. In fact, Vandervelde's¹⁸ remark that the zone "will be difficult to maintain forever",¹⁹ made it probable that, in the event of Locarno being violated, Belgium would

¹⁵Chambrun to Flandin, telegrams of 22 February 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 211, 310.

¹⁶See Chapter II for the military conventions of June 1935.

¹⁷Chambrun to Flandin, telegrams of 27 February 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 239-337.

¹⁸Minister without Portfolio, but a key man in the Belgian Cabinet.

¹⁹Laroche to Flandin, dispatch of 6 February 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 146, 211.

refrain from any step except recourse to the League. Faced with Belgium's inner resolve to avoid conflict with the Reich, Laroche, the French ambassador to Brussels, concluded that little practical assistance could be expected from this small kingdom.

In addition to France's uncertainty of the support of her Locarno colleagues for the maintenance of a demilitarized Rhineland, came another dampening influence in the form of certain other voices of assurance. There were the continual and insistent pledges of peace made by von Neurath and the Führer, pledges faithfully reported by men whose scepticism of such assurances was made patent by their refusal to ignore indications to the contrary. As previously suggested, there were occasional diplomatic reports that also reflected some doubt as to the imminence of a Rhineland coup. But fundamental to the successful impact of such voices was French willingness to lend credence to them. The alarum had been sounded and heard but with it continued that vain hope that the Reich's professions could be believed.

One of the arguments with which France comforted herself was the reported inadequacy of the German army. François-Poncet's account of the army's high command meeting at Potsdam in mid-January indicated that the army resented Nazi interference in its programmes and declared itself opposed to any form of military intervention.²⁰ Dobler in Cologne also reported military dissent over Nazi foreign policy and quoted a commanding general in Westphalia as having declared that the army could

²⁰ François-Poncet to Laval, telegrams of 15 January 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 59, 85. However he reminded his superiors soon after that the Army remained loyal to the Reich and its ties with Hitler, if not with the Party, had been strengthened, François-Poncet to Flandin, dispatch of 4 February 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 133, 185.

not envisage reoccupation of the zone "at this time".²¹

A dispatch from the French military attaché in Berne, dated 25 February, provided further room for hope. Information received from the French Consulate in Basel, the report stated, suggested that reoccupation was not imminent. Local military officials in the zone recently had received furloughs for 1 April. This along with other indications pointed to the conclusion that the spring and summer would be used to prepare Rhineland fortifications.²²

Periodically, ambassadorial dispatches reflected the same optimistic spirit, even if they seemed to be in direct contradiction to other reports sent from the same embassy. For example, two reports of late February sent from Berlin, served to qualify the alarm sounded from that quarter. In relating the account of a conversation between M. Comnène, the Roumanian ambassador to Berlin, with von Neurath, François-Poncet asserted that the latter had strongly insisted that Germany was not considering a fait accompli in the Rhineland.²³ Moreover in another dispatch of the same date, the French ambassador appeared to have reached a somewhat different conclusion than some of his earlier reports had indicated. He now seemed to feel that Germany "will not openly violate

²¹Dobler to Flandin, dispatch of 14 February 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 189, 282.

²²Military attaché (Berne) to Maurin, dispatch of 25 February, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 228, 324.

²³François-Poncet to Flandin, telegram of 27 February 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 237, 334.

the pact of Locarno"; and that "she will not proceed to a sudden military occupation of the Rhenish zone".²⁴

Finally, there were the many soothing assurances of the Führer himself, assurances which so cunningly complemented his Saturday coups. Following the League's frail rebuke to his foreign policy that had been instigated by the members of the newly constituted Stresa front, Herr Hitler had stood before the Reichstag on 21 May 1935 and made his contribution to world peace. "Germany needs peace and desires peace," the Führer began. He reminded the Deputies of the statement that he had made to France on the previous January, "when I...gave to the world and to my own people the assurance that with the settlement of the Saar question no further territorial demands would be made on France...". He concluded with this categorical promise:

The German Government...will scrupulously maintain every treaty voluntarily signed, even though it was concluded before their accession to power and office. In particular they will uphold and fulfill all obligations arising out of the Locarno Treaty, so long as the other partners are on their side ready to stand by the pact.²⁵

The Imperial Chancellor was an energetic sower and France had only fertile ground for the seed of assurance. Obsessed by the fear of another German invasion, a fear hardly substantiated by the state of the Reichswehr in 1936, concerned lest her friends desert her, and

²⁴ François-Poncet to Flandin, dispatch of 27 February 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 242, 344. However, the ambassador introduced his views with a very important "probablement" which he himself italicised. Clearly he still entertained some doubts.

²⁵ N. H. Baynes, Hitler's Speeches (Toronto, 1942), 1218-1247.

hampered by profound dissension within her own frontiers, France appeared to give equal credence to both the signs of warning and the voices of assurance. It was to be an unwarranted equality. In surveying the reports received by the Quai d'Orsay between 1 January and 1 March 1936, by far the greatest proportion of those pertaining to the Rhineland consisted of warnings, warnings if not always based on concrete evidence, then on rumours, tensions and fears. Because the French documents are selective, it is difficult to determine any clear rhythm in the wave of warnings received in Paris. It would appear that the tempo of these warnings reached a peak in mid-February; but they certainly did not terminate at that time. Illustrative of this are the reports of François-Poncet. In spite of increasing doubts, he clearly did not dismiss the possibility of a pending coup in the Rhineland. On the very eve of the crisis, 6 March, he expressed concern that the sudden anxiety in Berlin might be indicative of immediate reoccupation.²⁶

"We could not have been warned in a clearer and more precise manner."²⁷ Although Reynaud's conclusion is an excessively bald one, it is not without historical value. France was not unaware of probable German intentions; and even if she were surprised by the actual timing of the coup, her failure to take effective action cannot be explained by paralysis due to shock. Obviously, France was not aware of the day set for reoccupation. In fact, knowledge of this had been carefully

²⁶ François-Poncet to Flandin, telegram of 6 March 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 294, 405.

²⁷ Paul Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight 1930-1945 (New York, 1955), 123.

restricted to a very few of Hitler's entourage. But this in no way detracts from the fact that both the French Foreign Office and General Staff had been persistently warned. It is questionable, however, how clear and precise those warnings actually were. The dampening influences had done a good deal to qualify the alarm that had been sounded. Yet if one considers the number of alarming diplomatic reports which originated from both inside and outside the demilitarized zone, the reports of French intelligence and military personnel, the implications of the German press campaigns, and finally the Reich's oft-repeated vow to erase completely the Versailles Diktat, there can be little doubt that the warnings merited more serious consideration. Before the post-war commission of inquiry that was created to analyse the events from 1933 to 1945, François-Poncet and Dobler were highly critical of the Quai d'Orsay's reception of their reports. The former insisted that in none of the great crises of the nineteen-thirties was his opinion consulted. French ambassadors in the inter-war period, he complained, had become mere sources for information and had ceased to be associated in the formulation of foreign policy.²⁸ Dobler was equally bitter. Léger, he said, had surrounded himself with inexperienced amateurs in the field of foreign affairs, amateurs who zealously guarded their intermediary role between the Foreign Minister and the diplomatic personnel.²⁹ In short, what both were saying was that communications between

²⁸ Les Événements Survenus en France de 1933 à 1945, Témoignages et Documents Recueillis par la Commission D'Enquête Parlementaire. Presses Universitaires de France, III, 767. Hereafter referred to as Les Événements.

²⁹ Ibid., II, 500-501.

themselves and the Minister were strangled by the bureaucracy of the Foreign Office. Nonetheless, their warnings and those of their colleagues had reached Paris. The Foreign Office was thoroughly acquainted with the concern expressed by its staff abroad. Moreover, judging by his persistent efforts in the spring of 1936 to sound out the British attitude toward reoccupation, Flandin was not unaware of this concern. He admired Dobler's abilities in particular and claimed that he took the consul-general's reports seriously.³⁰ Obviously not all of the warnings had been filed away in the Foreign Office. The alarm had been sounded. Whether it would be acknowledged remained the future's secret.

³⁰Ibid., IX, 2570. Regarding Dobler, Flandin said, "...je dois vous dire qu'il n'était pas très pris au sérieux par les services du Quai d'Orsay; mais je l'ai pris au sérieux.... J'ai toujours pensé qu'il était un excellent agent qui voyait très clair."

CHAPTER IV

THE EVENT

Having come to power on the wave of anti-appeasement which underlay Laval's resignation, the Sarraut Cabinet, in spite of its character of a care-taker government, found it necessary to proceed with the ratification of the pact with Russia. Since the pact did not involve a treaty of peace, a cession of territory, or a question of State finances, there was no constitutional requirement that it even be ratified. However, since 1919 a precedent of ratifying such pacts had been set, and the attractive possibility of adhering strictly to the constitution remained a dangerous one for a government such as Sarraut's.

On 11 March, the debate on ratification began in the Chamber of Deputies amid a concerted Right wing attempt to postpone the issue. For more than two weeks the debate dragged on with such Right wing deputies as M. de Lasteyrie, M. Fernand-Laurent and M. Jean Montigny raising every conceivable objection to the alliance with the Soviet Union. Of particular interest was the objection raised by M. Joseph Rossé (Alsace). Having explained the German arguments against the pact, arguments which he personally did not accept, M. Rossé nonetheless expressed the fear that ratification would endanger the Rhineland area and make any Franco-German rapprochement even more difficult.¹ The

¹See the debate of 13 February 1936, in Débats, 367.

fact that the Rhenish Deputies by and large voted against ratification of the pact² certainly was indicative of the concern of the Rhenish population for a German reprisal.

Tuesday, 25 February saw the tall and impressive figure of Pierre-Etienne Flandin rise from the government benches. With the exception of a short address on the opening day of the debate, the Foreign Minister had remained aloof from the heated discussion. The House now awaited his views. Opening with a flat denial of the German charge that the pact was incompatible with Locarno, Flandin proceeded to remind the Chamber that neither the other Locarno powers nor France's eastern allies had expressed disapproval of the French decision.³ Moreover, he added, Germany herself had several times refused French invitations to participate in an agreement for the stabilization of eastern Europe. Two further points, he said, had to be recalled. The pact was not "un instrument diplomatique fermé" but rather a flexible arrangement which any power could join; and secondly, neither signatory was obliged to provide assistance unless the other were a victim of unprovoked aggression. Having skilfully explained the legitimacy of the French case, the Foreign Minister then announced the government's new offer to submit, with Germany's consent, the question of the incompatibility of the two pacts to the Permanent Court of International Justice. Then, as if to give further weight to this offer, Flandin left the Deputies with a warning that is interesting in the light of subsequent events:

²Ibid., Annexes Au Procès Verbal, 647.

³Débats, 579. Poland, Flandin said, had remained non-committal.

What no one could accept...would be anything that might produce a unilateral repudiation of a treaty like Locarno whose abrogation has been made the object of very rigid stipulations.⁴

Two days after the Foreign Minister's speech the Chamber of Deputies voted on the ratification of the Franco-Russian pact. Of the total number of voters (517), 353 voted in favour of ratification and 163 voted against, with only forty-five abstentions.⁵ Having received the approval of the lower House the pact was then scheduled to go before the Senate. On 5 March the Foreign Affairs Commission of the Senate approved the pact by a vote of nineteen to four. Actual submission of the pact to the Senate was set for 12 March. By that date, however, so much had transpired that the Senate's final assent was soon lost in the storm created by the F hrer's latest piece of bravado.

At first glance, ratification of the pact had prompted Nazi Germany into breaking her Locarno obligations through a rapid reoccupation of the demilitarized zone. Apparently, she suddenly had decided to liberate herself from a burden she had long professed to find intolerable. Certainly the confusion that immediately arose in the zone upon the entry of more troops and equipment might have indicated a precipitate decision on the part of the Reich planners. But if the precise timing of the event remained uncertain until the last few days before 7 March, the general plan of reoccupation was almost a year old.

⁴Ibid., 578-583.

⁵Ibid., Annexes Au Proc s Verbal, 647.

In his testimony of 14 March 1946, Herman Göring, the former Reich Minister of Air, insisted before the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg that "the occupation of the Rhineland was not, as has been asserted here, a long-prepared affair," but rather that it had been planned "at the most 2 to 3 weeks" in advance.⁶ The Führer's chief lieutenant clearly had chosen to prevaricate, if not precisely in word at least in his general message. The specific event of 7 March certainly had not been planned or prepared much in advance of that date, but the fundamental lines of procedure had, with equal certainty, been drawn up a good deal in advance. A German document dated 2 May 1935 made Göring's distortion patent. The document,⁷ a German directive sent by Blomberg, the Reich Minister of Defence, to his three service chiefs, laid down the code name Schulung (training) for a project which had as its objective the remilitarization of the Rhineland. While the zone was not specifically mentioned, the implication of a "surprise blow at lightening speed" for the purpose of "defence in the West" was not missed by Göring's inquisitors. Moreover, General Jodl, in his own Nuremberg testimony very reluctantly admitted that "the term 'Schulung' meant preparations for the reoccupation of the Rhineland...".⁸

⁶Trial of the Major War Criminals before the International Military Tribunal (Nuremberg, 1947), IX, 285 and 505. Hereafter referred to as I.M.T..

⁷Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, VI (Washington, 1946), Document No. C-139, 951. Hereafter referred to as N.C.A..

⁸I.M.T., XV, 445.

The date of the directive is almost as interesting as its content. The very day on which the Franco-Russian pact was signed, the pact that by German allegation violated Locarno, the Third Reich had on paper a plan which conceived an even more obvious breach of faith.

Although Operation Schulung itself was never translated into action, the general principles contained within it eventually would be incorporated in the key German directives of 2 and 6 March 1936. However, in the ten months that were to follow the directive of May 1935, the Führer, his closest associates and the Wilhelmstrasse occupied themselves with the task of elaborating more specific measures and more weighty justification for their next foreign adventure. In the interim the Third Reich would await the course of international events in the hope that an opportunity for repudiating the Locarno pact would present itself.

The reports made by François-Poncet after the German coup of 7 March 1936 seem to give considerable credit to the motivating influence of discontent within the Third Reich. Dr. Schacht, Hitler's chief economic adviser, was not alone in his fear that the economic unorthodoxy of the Nazi regime would cripple the nation.⁹ Although not for the identical reason, the German people too were disturbed by the government's pledge to sacrifice butter for cannon.¹⁰ The suppression of other

⁹E. M. Robertson, Hitler's Prewar Policy and Military Plans, 1933-1939 (London, 1963), 85-86.

¹⁰François-Poncet to Flandin, dispatch of 9 March 1936, D.D.F. II, 1, No. 351, 467.

political parties and labour organizations, the increasing discrimination against Jews, the frequency of violence and the raucous pressures of Nazi propaganda were all beginning to create clear signs of resentment and dissatisfaction.¹¹ The advantages of a spectacular coup in the Rhineland, a coup that would distract the German populace, was fully obvious to the leaders of the Third Reich.¹²

The state of German public opinion was important in another way. Since the Nazi accession to power in January 1933, Hitler's diplomatic successes had convinced a substantial part of German opinion that the Reich could decide for itself which international agreements were worthy of its fidelity.¹³ The Führer had promised to respect Locarno on the condition that the other signatories did the same. But the Franco-Russian pact, so it was alleged, had liberated the Imperial Chancellor from his promise. The German public, and particularly the German inhabitants in the zone, were primed for the act of reoccupation. Not only would the German public condone the re-establishment of German military sovereignty in the Rhineland, it had been taught to demand it.¹⁴

The international situation early in 1936 was another factor which contributed to the opportunity for which Hitler waited. Not only

¹¹François-Poncet to Flandin, dispatch of 9 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 350, 465.

¹²E. M. Robertson, op. cit., 71.

¹³This conclusion is confirmed by François-Poncet's report of German reaction to the Rhineland coup. François-Poncet to Flandin, dispatch of 11 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 394, 509.

¹⁴François-Poncet to Flandin, dispatch of 12 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 412, 535.

were Britain and France temporarily distracted by the Abyssinian issue, but there appeared to be a sharp disagreement between their respective attitudes toward the Duce. It seemed highly unlikely that France, distracted by problems within and without her frontiers, would reply to a German move into the Rhineland with military reprisals.¹⁵ The possibility of British military intervention seemed equally remote given the cleft in Anglo-French relations and the state of British public opinion.¹⁶ That left the two other Locarno powers, Belgium and Italy. The former was unlikely to act independently against a German reoccupation of the Rhenish zone; and with what was surmised to be the attitude of Britain and France, it seemed implausible that she would be called upon to act at all. In the light of Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia, and the conclusions drawn by the German embassy in Rome, there was no reason to think that he was overly concerned with the fate of the Stresa front.¹⁷ On the other hand it seemed likely that he would welcome any event which would distract his former friends and allow him to complete his sordid enterprise.¹⁸

Finally, it was clear to the Nazi government that reoccupation and remilitarization of the Rhineland were imperative for the pursuit

¹⁵R.I.I.A., Survey, 1936, 259.

¹⁶Ibid., 259.

¹⁷German ambassador to Italy (von Hassell) to the Foreign Ministry, telegram of 12 February 1936, in the Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Series C, IV, (April 1935-March 1936), (Washington, 1962), No. 553, 1121. Hereafter referred to as D.G.F.P., C, IV.

¹⁸Author unknown (Rome embassy), memorandum of 20 February 1936, Ibid., No. 574, 1159-1163.

of more challenging objectives.¹⁹ The achievement of Anschluss, and the final reckoning with Czechoslovakia, Poland and Russia would remain unaccomplished unless the western frontier were secure. With an army that was in 1936 certainly inferior to that of France, the Reich considered essential a fortified western wall which would render any action on her eastern or south-eastern frontiers less hazardous.²⁰

As significant as were the considerations of internal discontent, public pressure, international politics and the imperative nature of remilitarization, they are nonetheless inadequate explanations for the precise timing of the event. Several other considerations, two of which served merely as convenient pretexts, bring the event to its point of departure.

If the prospect of military reprisals on the part of the Locarno powers were considered by the Reich planners to be minimal, the threat of economic sanctions appeared far more real. If France, in concert with her eastern allies, were to reply to reoccupation by means of economic sanctions, the Reich's rearmament program would be severely hit through the lack of raw materials.²¹ However, though a policy of sanctions remained a possibility it did not appear probable, for by the spring of 1936 the Abyssinian crisis was beginning to force that

¹⁹N.C.A., VI, 890.

²⁰R.I.I.A., Survey, 1936, 262.

²¹François-Poncet to Flandin, dispatch of 11 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 394, 512.

policy into disrepute.²² Moreover, the opportune moment seemed to have arrived from two other points of view. The League's Committee of Thirteen had set 2 March as the date to decide whether oil sanctions should be imposed on Italy. If France were successful in her bid to avoid such a course, Italy might soon after be restored to her place in the Stresa front. Locarno would then be refortified by the return of its second guarantor. If, on the other hand, Britain forced the French hand by insisting on oil sanctions, France might secure as a concession a more precise British pledge to maintain the demilitarized zone.²³ In either case, Germany would be the loser. Again, it is significant that the date of the German directive which laid the precise plan of reoccupation was 2 March.

Another chapter in the Reich's preparations for remilitarization of the Rhineland has as its central figure the German ambassador to Rome, von Hassell. On 14 February, the ambassador was requested by the Führer personally to encourage Mussolini into making a joint repudiation of the Locarno pact on the basis of the incompatibility of the Franco-Russian pact with it. Hitler apparently was sceptical of Italy's willingness to accede to such a request for Hassell was instructed to tell the Duce "that in all circumstances we would carry through our move...."²⁴ By 22 February, Hassell's persuasions had begun to be rewarded. Mussolini

²²R.I.I.A., Survey, 1936, 260.

²³Ibid., 260-261.

²⁴E. M. Robertson, op. cit., 72.

informed him on that day that Italy would take no action over the ratification of the Franco-Russian pact. When asked if this meant that Italy would not act in concert with Britain and France if Germany took unilateral action, he replied in the affirmative.²⁵ On 3 March Suvich informed the German ambassador that Mussolini remained determined not to interfere in any repudiation of Locarno.²⁶

Reasonably confident of Mussolini's attitude, Hitler proceeded to his enterprise. Within the space of forty-eight hours, on 27 to 28 February, he was supplied with the excuse needed for putting his plan into action. On 27 February, the French Chamber of Deputies ratified the controversial pact with Russia. Locarno, Hitler insisted, had been violated. Bolshevism had breached the ramparts of western Europe and with it, Germany was freed from Stresemann's burdensome pledge. One day later the French journal Paris-Midi published an article entitled, "Le Chancelier Hitler nous dit". The article, relating an interview between M. Bertrand Jouvenel and the Führer, contained numerous assurances of the Reich's peaceful intentions. But the significance of the article was not to be found so much in its content as in the date of its publication. The interview had taken place on 21 February; its publication had been delayed one week. Although the precise reason for the delay and the source responsible for it²⁷ remains a mystery,

²⁵ Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, report of 22 February 1936, D.G.F.P., C, IV, No. 579, 1172-1177.

²⁶ Hassell to the Foreign Ministry, telegram of 3 March 1936, Ibid., No. 603, 1219.

²⁷ It has been suggested that the press services of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs were responsible for this delay. See J. Bénévoist-Méchin, Histoire de l'Armée Allemande depuis l'Armistice, III (Paris, 1964), 283.

it appeared to have been held up in order not to jeopardize ratification of the pact. To put it more simply, if the German peril no longer seemed pressing, there was less justification for the existence of the pact. At any rate, Hitler capitalized on the puzzle. It was an excellent pretext for the Rhineland venture. Here, he complained, was proof positive of the way German offers of friendship were received by France. Their use for the purposes of political intrigue was an indisputable indication of French ill will.

On 2 March, the day that Flandin and Eden met in Geneva to discuss the possibility of imposing oil sanctions on Italy, a memorandum was sent by Blomberg to the German service chiefs. This communication opened with the following announcement:

The F hrer and Reich Chancellor has made the following decision: By reason of the Franco-Russian alliance, the obligations accepted by Germany in the Locarno Treaty, as far as they apply to articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles which refer to the demilitarized zone, are to be regarded as obsolete.

2. Sections of the Army and Airforce will therefore be transferred simultaneously in a surprise move to garrisons of the demilitarized zone.²⁸

The directive then proceeded to give more detailed instructions as to the local objectives in the zone, the proposed strength of the occupying force, the co-ordination of land and air forces and the undertaking of certain security measures. Only the date of the projected coup remained uncertain. "Z-day", however, seemed imminent. Four days later another directive dated 6 March set the date for the following day,

²⁸ N.C.A., VI, No. C-159, 974. See full text of this document in my Appendix B.

Saturday 7 March.²⁹

The actual operation of remilitarizing the Rhineland presents a two-fold picture. On the one hand, it appears to have been a skilfully planned and well-executed manoeuvre; on the other, one of doubt, confusion and equivocation.

According to the information gathered by François-Poncet, most of the troop transporting had taken place on the night of 6 March so that the first wave of the German force was in position by the dawn 7 March.³⁰ In fact, by the time the Führer made his noon address to the Reichstag announcing the German coup, the Wehrmacht apparently had established itself on the right bank of the Rhine. The Thirty-Ninth Infantry Regiment at that moment was about to enter Cologne. In describing the crossing of the Rhine, Bénédict-Méchin reveals a sense of timing and co-ordination which recalls the disciplined theatrics of a Nazi party rally. At the precise moment that the German force arrived in Cologne:

the first military planes appeared in the sky. Flying at low altitude, in a deafening roar, a fighter squadron described a circle above the spires of the cathedral and disappeared in the west, only to be followed by a second and a third squadron.³¹

Within an hour, the commanding officer, probably von Kluge, crossed the Hohenzollern bridge and was greeted by Mayor Riesen of Cologne.

²⁹Ibid., VI, No. C-194, 1019.

³⁰François-Poncet to Flandin, dispatch of 12 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 412, 535.

³¹J. Bénédict-Méchin, op. cit., 287.

Several hours before this historic meeting on the banks of the Rhine, another meeting, less congenial but no less significant had taken place in Berlin. On the evening of 6 March, von Neurath had invited the representatives of the other four Locarno powers to meet with him at the Wilhelmstrasse on the following morning. Having assembled at the Foreign Office, the bewildered but suspicious ambassadors received the text of a memorandum which explained again the German arguments against the Franco-Russian pact and which proposed certain offers for the pacification of Europe. The modus operandi was hardly unfamiliar but as usual it worked. Hitler had delivered his blow and now was ingratiatingly polite in soothing the injured proprieties of his victims. Germany, Neurath said, would offer a twenty-five year Franco-Belgian-German non-aggression pact with Britain and Italy as guarantors. Moreover, she would agree to an air pact, non-aggression pacts with certain east European states and a German return to the League, if the Covenant were distinguished from the Versailles Diktat and the question of German colonies were more sympathetically reviewed. These were not unattractive proposals. In fact, their value to the Reich depended on their attractiveness. For at least a month, the text of those proposals had been hammered out by the Reich planners. They were as crucial to the success of the whole operation as the military preparations. Hitler himself had been working on them as early as mid-February.³² It was all bait, but clever bait, designed to exploit Anglo-French differences and western pacificism.

³²E. M. Robertson, op. cit., 77.

By the end of that weekend Germany had secured her objective. Within the course of two days most of the major German cities on the Rhine, such as Cologne, Dusseldorf, Coblenz, Mainz and Mannheim, had become billets for the German army. Coblenz, Dobler said, was "black with troops",³³ and Cologne, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt and Mannheim busily entertained the newly arrived Luftwaffe personnel.³⁴ Blomberg informed the French military attaché, General Renondeau, that nineteen infantry battalions and thirteen groups of artillery had provided the core of the German force. Only a few detachments, he insisted, had been sent further west on the left bank of the Rhine to Trèves, Sarrebruck and Aix-la-Chapelle. In effect, the Minister of Defence asserted, it was a nominal force of a truly symbolic nature, a force which did not exceed 30,000 men.³⁵ France, however, was not prepared to ignore the Landespolizei and the other police organizations which had been created in the zone long before reoccupation. By the end of the weekend, French intelligence estimated that the total German force within the zone numbered close to 60,000 and after several days, close to 90,000.³⁶

³³Dobler to Flandin, telegram of 8 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 333, 442.

³⁴François-Poncet to Flandin, telegrams of 9 March 1936, Ibid., No. 338, 450.

³⁵François-Poncet to Flandin, telegram of 8 March 1936, Ibid., No. 318, 429.

³⁶R.I.I.A., Survey, 1936, 266.

Two conclusions however must be drawn. Even at 90,000 men, and French intelligence was prone to over-estimating German strength, the German force, badly organized, inadequately equipped and with incomplete fortifications remained decidedly inferior to the forces France was capable of mustering.³⁷ On the other hand, in view of the infantry, aviation and artillery power that was brought in on 7 March to supplement the forces already in the zone, Neurath's and Blomberg's insistence on the symbolic nature of the German force is surely laid open to question.

If the German soldiers who marched into the zone on 7 March had accomplished their task with great efficiency, their performance was poorly rewarded. Most were to receive the most hastily-improvised quarters. In the 2 March directive, Blomberg had specifically stated that for security reasons responsible officials in the zone were not to be informed before 0800 hours on Z-day about the billeting of Army and Air force men in their area.³⁸ Dobler's comments on the chaos in Cologne are testament to the effectiveness of German security measures. All along the Rhine the major cities were involved in feverish efforts to provide quarters and rations for the newly arrived forces. The gaiety and joy of the Rhenish population only added to the turmoil. Cologne was soon transformed into a sea of flags:

³⁷Flandin's testimony in Les Événements, I, 154.

³⁸N.C.A., VI, No. C-159, 975-976. See my Appendix B.

The crowd frantically greeted the troops who marched through the Post Office square. Young girls threw flowers on the officers and soldiers. The worried tension of the first moments gave way to delirious enthusiasm.³⁹

The soldiers on the whole were equally pleased and proud. However, the Bavarian troops reportedly were disenchanted by both the price and quality of Rhenish beer⁴⁰ and undoubtedly makeshift billets were a source of common complaint. For the more astute, other worries seemed far more pressing. Among this group was Bernhard von Lossberg, a captain of the Operations Divisions and the man responsible for the inspection of reoccupied Treves and Aix-la-Chapelle. In a letter dated 25 February 1952 he expressed the concern that he had felt on 7 March, "There was not a single division, not even a regiment, that would have been ready for battle."⁴¹

The German General Staff was far from being oblivious to the Reich's possible plight. Indeed, a debate which had already continued for some time between Hitler and certain Reichswehr representatives remained unresolved until the early days of the week of 10 to 17 March. The reorganization of the German army, which had been announced on 15 May 1935, was still in a transitional stage and Blomberg had been most reluctant to risk hostilities when the army was exposed more than ever to French military intervention. The Führer, advised by Göring and Neurath⁴² nonetheless had decided to act. Outwardly confident of

³⁹J. Benoist-Méchin, op. cit., 288.

⁴⁰François-Poncet to Flandin, dispatch of 12 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 412, 536.

⁴¹H. Boeninger, "Hitler and the German Generals, 1934-1938," The Journal of Central European Affairs, April 1954, XIV, 19-37.

⁴²Schmidt's testimony in I.M.T., X, 218.

the success of his plan he rebuked his service chiefs for their trepidation.

A reprimand from the Reich Chancellor was hardly sufficient to calm the Reichswehr. Reports from ambassador Hoesch and the military attaché in London, von Schweppenburg, indicated that British intervention was likely.⁴³ On 8 March, Premier Sarraut in a radio speech prepared for him by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, took a firm stand against the German *fait accompli*, turned down any offer of negotiations on Germany's terms, and vowed that France would never allow the German cannon to be trained on Strassburg. Concerned lest Sarraut's address was meant as a prologue to French military reprisals, Blomberg strongly advised the complete and immediate withdrawal of the German forces from the left bank of the Rhine. But the Defence Minister, supported by Generals Keitel⁴⁴ and Jodl,⁴⁵ found the Führer more willing to listen to the assurances of Göring, Neurath and Fritsch.⁴⁶ The latter, having initially opposed the coup, now argued that withdrawal would be far more dangerous than remaining.⁴⁷ Hitler, whose subsequent confession

⁴³G. A. Craig, The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945 (Oxford, 1945), 486.

⁴⁴Chief of the Wehrmachtamt in the Reich War Ministry.

⁴⁵Member of the National Defence Committee.

⁴⁶Commander-in-Chief of the Army.

⁴⁷T. Taylor, The Sword and the Swastika (New York, 1952), 91.

to Dr. Schmidt revealed his own deep concern,⁴⁸ decided to remain. Germany's gamble so far had gone uncontested; there seemed no point in faltering now. The debate was ended. The Führer was proved right, the Generals wrong. From that moment, von Manstein⁴⁹ asserted, arose "the first source in my opinion, for the distrust which subsequently the Führer increasingly felt for the generals."⁵⁰ Moderate elements in Germany had received a striking set-back. They had erred in their judgment and Hitler cared little for the fallible.

⁴⁸Hitler is quoted as saying, "The forty-eight hours after the march into the Rhineland were the most nerve-racking in my life.... If the French had then marched into the Rhineland, we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs, for the military resources at our disposal would have been wholly inadequate for even a moderate resistance." See Paul Schmidt, Hitler's Interpreter (London, 1951), 41.

⁴⁹Chief of Staff at the headquarters of Military Area III (Berlin).

⁵⁰von Manstein's testimony in I.M.T., XX, 603.

CHAPTER V

THE EVENT EXAMINED

The debate which took place in the German government on the weekend of 7 to 8 March was far more intense and less quickly concluded than that which ensued in Paris. While the Reich leaders deliberated the wisdom of complete withdrawal from the left bank of the Rhine, the French Cabinet was puzzling over the course of action it would adopt. But whereas the German decision remained undetermined until several days after the process of reoccupation, the actual French decision had been made some months in advance.

The course of action pursued by France during the Rhineland crisis was not a product of the crisis at all. Rather it was the continuation of a policy which had been adopted after several months of serious deliberation. Obviously, the final decision lay in the hands of the Sarraut Cabinet, but what alternatives lay before it? Locarno provided only two. Article 4, paragraph 1 of the 1925 agreement enabled the victim of a violation to turn to the League of Nations and request that the aggressor nation be found guilty of a breach of obligation. If the League Council declared the violation to have occurred, the other Locarno signatories were automatically pledged to come to the victim's aid, regardless of whether the violation was found to be flagrant or non-flagrant.¹ The second alternative was provided by paragraph 3 of

¹See Appendix B. The Locarno Agreements, October 16, 1925, Annex A. Treaty of Mutual Guarantee between Germany, Belgium, France, Great Britain and Italy. Article 4, paragraphs 1 and 2.

Article 4. It permitted the victim to declare the violation flagrant and then to act immediately in any way she saw fit. The problem in the opinion of French official quarters was that France was not fit to act immediately. By March 1936 a policy of economic sanctions was already in partial disrepute owing to the Abyssinian crisis. Moreover, with France herself in the depths of economic depression and with her military service chiefs lacking any specific plan of military reprisals, the feasibility of any type of sanctions policy was severely limited. In March 1936 the alternatives provided by Locarno had in fact been eliminated.

The French clearly had no intention of taking immediate unilateral action. Nothing is more indicative of this than the failure of the General Staff to produce a plan envisaging such action. The complete lack of enthusiasm on the part of the French military for any policy which contemplated offensive operations, undoubtedly made the decision of the Cabinet that much easier.

A Foreign Office note, pertaining to the eventuality of a German initiative in the zone, examined the alternatives provided by Locarno to the victim. In examining the case concerning a flagrant violation of the Rhenish pact, the memorandum emphasized the obligation of the other Locarno powers to render "immediate assistance",² rather than France's right to act immediately. Another document, addressed to the Foreign Minister, suggested once again that, "except in the event

² Author and destination unknown, note of 14 January 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 53, 79.

of a sudden attack which she should suddenly turn to face, France could not dream of undertaking active operations without having previous assurance that the nature of her decision was understood, at least in London."³ It is important to note that this is circumstantial evidence, for in neither case does one know the author, his position, or even whether his views were considered by his supervisors. Nonetheless these reports are indicative of the refusal on the part of some people in the Foreign Office to consider the prospects of unilateral action.

On 18 February, the Army's Military Staff drew some interesting conclusions concerning the eventuality of a German reoccupation of the zone. Such an operation, it was suggested, might be effected either through a gradual process of infringement or through a sudden coup. But what did the army advise? Anglo-French solidarity! The two nations could coordinate their air forces and reconnaissance services. Britain and France would make a joint contribution to the security of western Europe; however it was the British contribution that the General Staff preferred to emphasize. Britain could send aviation units to the continent so as to intercept German air raids on London. She could dispatch army detachments to French ports and to the German frontier and she could make joint naval demonstrations with France along the German coast.⁴ The possibility of unilateral action clearly had been dismissed from French military thought. France was trying to avoid the most

³ Author unknown to the Foreign Minister, note of 6 February 1936, Ibid., No. 143, 207.

⁴ Note from the Army's Military Staff, of 18 February 1936, Ibid., No. 202, 299-300.

direct course of action: that of acting alone.

The French problem was clear enough. In spite of the hope reflected in the preceding document, France had little reason to expect that Britain would welcome an invitation to oppose militarily a German coup in the Rhineland. On the other hand, she had every reason to expect that a resort to diplomacy would be welcomed by both Locarno guarantors, if for no other reason than that it would at least temporarily liberate them from their pledge of immediate assistance. In short, unless France's eastern allies gave categorical assurance of their support, which she herself did not anticipate, any excessively firm policy in the form of military or economic sanctions might result in her own isolation. Recourse to the League, however, promised her the gratitude and support of all peace loving nations. As ineffective a substitute as gratitude was for the fulfilment of the obligations her Locarno colleagues had assumed in 1925, France convinced herself of the advantages of the second course of action.

By 27 February the Quai d'Orsay had apparently reached its decision. A note from the office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, related the text of Flandin's declaration to M. de Kerchove, the Belgian ambassador to Paris:

- (a) The French government will not proceed with any unilateral action. It will act only in accordance with the other Locarno signatories.
- (b) In the event of a flagrant and incontestable violation of articles 42 and 43, the French government will immediately contact the English, Belgian and Italian governments in view of arriving at a course of common action in the execution of the stipulations provided by the League of Nations and the Locarno accords.

- (c) While waiting for the opinion of the guarantors the French government reserves the right to take any preparatory measures, including military ones, in view of the collective action which might be decided by the League Council and Locarno guarantors.⁵

In the event of reoccupation of the Rhineland, France would turn to the League; she would not attempt unilateral military action. The decision had thus been made little less than two weeks before 7 March. Of course, the responsibility for the final decision lay in the hands of the Cabinet. Whether the Cabinet decision of 8 to 9 March would confirm that of 27 February was to a great extent dependent on the reaction of the other Locarno powers and France's eastern allies. There is, however, one methodological problem. Without Cabinet minutes, it is virtually impossible to tell with certainty whether the immediate reaction of the various nations was even considered by the Ministers on 7 to 9 March. The Foreign Office definitely was familiar with this reaction, as subsequent material will make clear. Consequently, it seems likely that the Cabinet arrived at its decision in the light of what early reports suggested would be the reaction across Europe.

The significance of this reaction was not restricted to the forty-eight hours after the German troops marched into the zone. The French Cabinet had decided by 9 March to turn to the League, but it remained theoretically possible to move French soldiers into the Rhineland on 10 March or any day afterward. Given the state of French military thought,

⁵ Note from the office of the Foreign Minister, of 27 February 1936, Ibid., No. 241, 339.

such a move was inconceivable. But in theory, the treaty of Locarno enabled the victim to declare the violation flagrant and act immediately thereafter. Consequently, the reports of the attitudes of the countries of eastern Europe and of the Locarno powers which were received in Paris after 9 March might have produced a reversal in French policy. In fact, those reports served merely to confirm the course of action formally chosen on that date.

The Soviet Union, Alphand reported, had assured France of complete diplomatic support at Geneva.⁶ The Franco-Russian pact was operative only in the event that one of the signatories was a victim of unprovoked aggression. This was certainly not the case in March 1936. Correspondingly, there was no Russian offer to assist militarily French operations in the zone. Geographically out of touch with western Europe, the Soviet Union, much to its relief, could hardly have expected to gain permission from either Poland or Roumania to cross their territories so as to reach the German frontier. In terms of anything but diplomatic persuasion, Russia's role in the Rhineland crisis would be necessarily limited.

The attitude of the countries of the Little Entente was, on the whole, uncertain with respect to any policy except the one France appeared most likely to adopt. There was the categorical offer of Premier Stoyadinovic of Yugoslavia to unite his forces with those of France;⁷

⁶Alphand to Flandin, telegrams of 8 March 1936, Ibid., No. 329, 439.

⁷Dampierre (Belgrade) to Flandin, telegrams of 10 March 1936, Ibid., No. 360, 476.

but after all, his pledge of 10 March had come two days after Paris had publicly announced its decision to employ the diplomatic channels of the League of Nations. Monicault, the French chargé d'affaires in Prague was authorized by the Czech Foreign Minister Krofta to inform the Quai d'Orsay that Czechoslovakia "would mold precisely her attitude to that adopted by France." At the same time, however, the French representative noted that Czechoslovakia had not tried to influence the French decision and that in spite of a calm facade, official circles in Prague were clearly anxious about Anglo-French reaction.⁸ The Roumanian Foreign Minister Titulescu confided to minister d'Ormesson that he felt economic sanctions would be the best retort to the German coup; but he did not press for such a measure; he did not appear "very worried" by events in the Rhineland; and Roumanian public opinion continued to demonstrate a completely objective attitude toward the crisis.⁹

The attitude of Poland also contributed to France's uncertainty about the reaction of her eastern allies to the Rhineland coup. Beck's pledge of 7 March to Léon Noël was certainly clear enough. He reaffirmed the existence of the Franco-Polish alliance and insisted that Poland would honour her obligations if France were the victim of German aggression. It has occasionally been charged that Beck's pledge was made on

⁸ Monicault to Flandin, telegrams of 7 March 1936, Ibid., No. 307, 419.

⁹ D'Ormesson to Flandin, telegrams of 7 March 1936, Ibid., No. 309, 420-421.

the assumption that France would not resort to military reprisals against Germany. Léon Noël to some extent vindicates Beck in this respect by expressing the opinion that the Polish statesman still believed on 7 March that France would adopt a more rigorous course of action.¹⁰ But the attitude of the Foreign Minister nonetheless remained doubtful both to the ambassador personally and to the Quai d'Orsay. His rapprochement with Nazi Germany had discomforted France and his personal protestations seem to have remained suspect. Five days after the Saturday violation, the official press agency Iskra provided the Polish press with a detailed explanation of the German objections to the Franco-Russian pact. Beck's own role in this apparent attempt to justify the German coup was distinctly compromising.¹¹ France might well question the sincerity of such a man.

If the reports from the Soviet Union, the countries of the Little Entente and Poland were not free of disconcerting elements, those from Italy, Belgium and Britain, countries specifically pledged to preserve the demilitarized state of the Rhineland, were even less assuring. The equivocal position adopted by Italy during the negotiations between the Locarno powers was foreshadowed by one of the few documents which was sent from Rome during the early days of the crisis. Ambassador Chambrun reported that, whereas official circles in Italy looked with unconcealed

¹⁰ Léon Noël, L'Agression Contre la Pologne (Paris, 1946), 129.

¹¹ Ibid., 136. The former ambassador suggested that Beck was personally responsible for this indiscretion.

optimism on what the German coup could mean to the League's policy of sanctions, they were irritated by the violation of a treaty of which Italy herself was a guarantor and had not forgotten how important Franco-Italian solidarity was to the preservation of Austrian independence.¹² Nonetheless, there is no evidence in the documents or in the accounts of the discussions held later in Paris and London to suggest that Italy was eager to participate in any course of action more rigorous than recourse to the League. It was ironical to see Italy unrepentantly trek back to the font of international justice.

The ambiguity about the Belgian attitude toward the coup had as its origin French uncertainty as to the policy that Great Britain would adopt. Belgian policy had been elaborated on the assumption that Britain and France would concert in the event of a violation of Locarno. Confident of Anglo-French solidarity, Belgium had made her decision far in advance of the crisis. In a secret telegram of 1 February, Laroche reported that Vandervelde believed that in the event of reoccupation Belgium would be prudent and let Britain and France handle the affair.¹³ Little more than a month later, on 7 March, the day of the crisis, Laroche sent Flandin a similar report. M. Van Zeeland, the Belgian Prime Minister, had informed the French embassy that Belgium "would adopt in the face of the new German infraction, the same attitude

¹² Chambrun to Flandin, dispatch of 10 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 378, 490-491.

¹³ Laroche to Flandin, telegram of 1 February 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 123, 173.

as that of France and England."¹⁴ Unquestionably, it was a categorical assurance, but an assurance based on one false premise, that of "la même attitude" of Britain and France. As events were to reveal, the initial attitudes of Britain and France were not precisely the same; and rather than being able to enjoy Anglo-French unity, Belgium was faced with the task of restoring it. To be sure, the Belgian predicament did not in the least enhance the arguments of those few in France who advocated combined Franco-Belgian efforts to force Germany from the Rhineland.

The question of the British attitude toward the fait accompli of 7 March must be approached from two directions. It is important to recognize the conclusions reached by France with respect to the British reaction to the crisis. Secondly, it is necessary to understand the British assumptions concerning France's most probable course of action in the face of the German coup. In short, for each nation, the assumptions it had made respecting the other's reaction to reoccupation, would be fundamental to the formulation of its own policy.

In a speech to the House of Commons on 12 February, Foreign Secretary Eden reaffirmed his country's pledge to honour the obligations assumed at Locarno. However, France was not content to accept such a general statement as an adequate assurance of British adherence to the 1925 agreement. Eden recalls that on 3 March at Geneva, Flandin made an official request that Britain confirm her fidelity to Locarno by promising

¹⁴ Laroche to Flandin, telegrams of 7 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 302, 414.

to assist France, "if necessary alone."¹⁵ What Eden neglects to say is whether Britain replied to that request. Flandin insists that he did not receive any response to his inquiry.¹⁶ If one can rely on Flandin's memory, a reliance his memoirs do not always deserve, the failure of Britain to reply is another reasonably clear indication that France remained uncertain of the attitude Britain would take in the face of reoccupation.

The reports of ambassador Corbin during the initial days of the crisis substantiated his earlier conclusions about British indifference to the fate of the demilitarized zone. On the very day of the German action, Eden continued to refrain from expressing his personal views concerning the violation of Locarno. In fact, Corbin remarked, "his attitude was that of a man who wondered what advantages could be drawn from a new situation and not what obstacles should be erected against the menace."¹⁷ In Paris a related conclusion had been reached independently. Flandin complained to Corbin on 8 March that the British ambassador, Sir George Clerk, had left him with "the feeling that his government was not fully aware of the seriousness of the situation created by the German initiative...."¹⁸

¹⁵The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 329.

¹⁶P. E. Flandin, op. cit., 197.

¹⁷Corbin to Flandin, telegrams of 7 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 316, 426-427.

¹⁸Flandin to Corbin, telegrams of 8 March 1936, Ibid., No. 317, 427.

In another of Corbin's telegrams of 7 March, a particularly significant communication was sent to the French Foreign Office. In relating the substance of a conversation with Eden, Corbin quoted the Foreign Secretary as saying:

It would be desirable that no irreparable action should be undertaken before the interested governments and particularly those of France and Great Britain had been able to hold discussions.¹⁹

At first glance, Eden's remark was merely confirmation of Britain's refusal to commit herself. What could be more vague than "irreparable action?" In fact, this intentional ambiguity concealed a warning that was crystal clear. In spite of Paul-Boncour's contention that France read far too much into the British suggestion,²⁰ there can be little doubt that the interpretation given to it by the Sarraut Cabinet was correct both in letter and spirit. Military or economic sanctions might well have constituted an irreparable act, particularly if they had met with German resistance. In spite of the fact that such measures were not seriously contemplated during the Cabinet meetings of 7 to 8 March, there can be no question that the British attitude strengthened the French in their resolve not to act precipitately.

While the Quai d'Orsay was busily attempting to determine the probable attitude of Britain toward a German remilitarization of the

¹⁹Corbin to Flandin, telegrams of 7 March 1936, Ibid., No. 301, 413.

²⁰J. Paul-Boncour, Entre Deux Guerres, III, (Paris, 1945-1946), 36-37.

Rhineland, the British Foreign Office was occupying itself with a similar task. An important determinant of the policy the British government would pursue in the event of reoccupation would be British anticipations of the French reaction. The crucial question for Britain was not, would Germany violate Locarno, but rather what demands for retaliation would France make on the Locarno guarantors?

The British and French efforts to ascertain each other's fidelity to the Rhinish statute of Locarno began in earnest at the state funeral for King George V. On 27 January, following the formal ceremonies, Eden arranged for an interview with the French Foreign Minister. When asked by Eden how important France considered the zone to be and how dearly she was willing to pay in order to maintain it, Flandin replied that these were the sort of questions the two governments had to discuss. Struck by the evasiveness of that reply, Eden concluded, "this was hardly the attitude or language of a man determined to fight in the Rhineland."²¹

During their talks at Geneva in early March, the two statesmen continued their efforts to find out each other's views on a possible remilitarization of the Rhineland. In addition to Flandin's official questionnaire,²² Eden returned to London with more concrete knowledge of the French attitude. If Locarno were violated the most likely course of action, Flandin had said, was immediately to inform the League Council, to consult with Britain, Belgium and Italy with a view to taking

²¹The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 333.

²²See Chapter V, 94, for Flandin's questionnaire of 3 March.

common action, and to reserve for France any preparatory measures, including military ones.²³ Eden had won the first round of his diplomatic battle with Flandin. He had learned much more than he had revealed. Flandin's questionnaire went off to London and to oblivion. The Geneva meeting provided Eden with the information he needed to meet the news which greeted him on the morning of 7 March. He expressed a momentary fear that France might have decided to mobilize and invade the zone. But, since Flandin had never given such an indication, the Foreign Secretary concluded that it was "more probable" that France would appeal to the League and summon the other Locarno powers to a conference.²⁴

This is not to suggest that Great Britain was neither surprised nor shocked by Germany's unilateral repudiation of the Locarno agreement. Only two days before Eden had made a new diplomatic attempt to bring France, Germany and Britain to the conference table. Significantly, this attempt envisaged the use of the demilitarized zone as a bargaining instrument for a German acceptance of the proposed Anglo-French Air Pact of February 1935. Clearly, Britain was not too alarmed at the prospect of the zone's disappearance, as long as it was accomplished in a peaceful fashion and brought mutual benefits to all parties. On 6 March, Eden conversed with ambassador von Hoesch and urged him to encourage Hitler to open serious negotiations on the Air Pact. The German diplomat requested another interview for the following day, ostensibly to give the

²³The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 337. It is interesting to note how closely this communication corresponds to the note from the office of the Foreign Minister of 27 February 1936, in D.D.F., II, 1, No. 241, 339. See Chapter V, Footnote 5.

²⁴The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 343.

German reply to Eden's request.²⁵

The following morning von Hoesch returned to the Foreign Office. After a few casual remarks concerning a further Anglo-German Naval agreement, he announced the German entry into the Rhineland and presented the memorandum containing the German peace proposals. Having expressed his deepest concern for the German violation, but at the same time having promised to consider the Reich's proposals, Eden saw Corbin.²⁶ Then, after brief interviews with the Italian ambassador Grandi, and the Belgian chargé d'affaires, Eden departed for Chequers to see the Prime Minister. There in the quiet atmosphere of the country estate Eden informed his superior of the recent events on the Rhine.

Baldwin said little, as was his wont in foreign affairs. Though personally friendly to France, he was clear in his mind that there would be no support in Britain for any military action by the French. I could only agree. I told him of the earnestness with which Hitler had spoken to me of Locarno. I could not believe him any more. Baldwin did not dissent and accepted that we must now await the French reaction, calling the Cabinet for Monday morning.²⁷

For the remainder of the day Eden prepared a report outlining his views for his Cabinet colleagues. Having reviewed the situation created by the Nazi coup, he reminded them that they must now "be

²⁵I. Colvin, Vansittart in Office (London, 1965), 95-97. Colvin suggests that von Hoesch knew that he would be informing Eden on 7 March of the German reoccupation.

²⁶The text of this interview has been quoted in part from D.D.F. II, 1, No. 301, 413. See Chapter V, Footnote 19.

²⁷The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 343-344.

prepared for him [Hitler] to repudiate any treaty even if freely negotiated (a) when it becomes inconvenient and (b) when Germany is sufficiently strong and the circumstances are otherwise favourable for doing so."²⁸ As far as measures to be taken were concerned, he suggested that France should be discouraged from taking any direct military action against Germany but that it might be possible to invite Hitler to evacuate the zone. However, such an invitation was not likely to be well received in the Reich and, therefore should not be made unless the powers were ready to enforce it by military action. Any procedure which did not involve unilateral action, such as an appeal to the League, should be given British support.

As to tactics, I thought we must agree to a formal condemnation of Germany's action by the League, but resist any attempt to apply financial and economic sanctions.... I proposed that I should make a statement in Parliament at once about our intention to fulfil our Locarno obligation, despite the German abrogation of the Treaty.²⁹

The British Cabinet met on the morning of 9 March and gave its approval to the policy suggested by the Foreign Secretary. Having received permission to have Lord Halifax, the Lord Privy Seal, accompany him to Paris for a meeting of the Locarno powers, Eden prepared his afternoon address to the House of Commons. In that speech,³⁰ two

²⁸Ibid., 345.

²⁹Ibid., 345-346.

³⁰Eden's speech of 9 March 1936, in Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons Official Report, vol. 310, 1935-1936 (London, 1936), 1808-1813. Hereafter referred to as H. of C. Parl. Deb.

particularly significant remarks were made. By his insistence that there was "no reason to suppose that the present German action implies a threat of hostilities," Eden clearly indicated that the violation had not been flagrant and, therefore, that France had acted in complete accord with the Locarno stipulations. Secondly, by pledging the British government's immediate assistance if there were perpetrated "during the period which will be necessary for the consideration of the new situation which has arisen, any actual attack upon France or Belgium," Eden gave further encouragement to the two countries to proceed in their chosen course. With the approbation of Cabinet and Parliament behind them, Eden and Halifax left for Paris, confident that their assurances had created there an atmosphere of calm deliberation.

If the British representatives were surprised by the anxiety and concern exhibited by Flandin on 10 March, three days after remilitarization of the zone, they would have been the more startled by the tremor that had run through the French government on 7 to 8 March. That shock is even more surprising if one is reminded of the warnings previously received in Paris and the tentative decisions already made by the Foreign Office. These facts notwithstanding, the Saturday and Sunday of 7 to 8 March were not void of a great deal of soul searching.

At 10 a.m. on 7 March the chief Cabinet ministers³¹ met to discuss the implications of the German coup. Of this group, which included

³¹Piéttri (Navy) and Déat (Air) were away from Paris at the time of this meeting.

Premier Sarraut, Generals Gamelin, Maurin and Colson,³² Flandin, Mandel³³ and Paul-Boncour,³⁴ only the latter two, according to Gamelin's account, advocated strong measures against Germany. Foreign Minister Flandin, who was there only momentarily, and Sarraut have usually been credited with supporting a firm policy; however, Gamelin neglects to mention them in connection with this specific meeting. Paul-Boncour does include them in the group who supported reprisals but his avoidance of actual dates makes uncertain the meetings to which he refers. Flandin's own memoirs rather naturally attribute a policy of resistance to both himself and Sarraut, but again the imprecise use of dates leaves his account unfortunately vague. The outcome of this meeting was disappointingly meagre. Gamelin dismissed the minority appeal for military sanctions as mere "généralités".³⁵ Instead it was decided that the Locarno powers and France's eastern allies should be consulted and that certain military measures should be taken, such as the recall of all leaves, the deployment of covering troops, and the alerting of railways in the 'protective' zone.

That evening the Cabinet met for another session. In addition to the members who had attended the first meeting there were now present

³²Chief of the Army Staff.

³³Minister of Postal Affairs.

³⁴Minister of State.

³⁵M. G. Gamelin, op. cit., 201.

Piétri, Déat, Admiral Durand-Viel,³⁶ General Pujo³⁷ and Léger. Once again, the information concerning this meeting is very sketchy. Gamelin alone refers to it specifically:

There was another theoretical discussion, but we did not seem to be able to make any progress, certainly at the moment, towards reaching any definite decisions. I took the opportunity...of getting a decision on a new series of measures for the purpose of progressively completing our security requirements. But, for the moment, no decision was taken as to the calling up of reservists.³⁸

With the exception of Gamelin's defensive precautions only one other decision seems to have been taken at this second meeting, a decision which in effect had been made by the Foreign Office two weeks in advance.

Upon conclusion of the session Flandin issued a press communiqué which announced the French decision to raise the question of the Rhineland before the League of Nations.³⁹

On the following day, the Cabinet met once again for the last discussion devoted exclusively to the German coup. Flandin began with an outline of the alternatives which lay before his colleagues. He recommended nothing. "More precisely," said Jean Zay,⁴⁰ "he enumerated all the possibilities from the most energetic to the most theoretical, from mobilization and penetration of the Rhineland to a simple diplomatic

³⁶Chief of Naval Staff.

³⁷Chief of Air Staff.

³⁸M. G. Gamelin, op. cit., 202.

³⁹P. Reynaud, op. cit., 127.

⁴⁰Under-Secretary to Premier Sarraut.

protest."⁴¹ The Foreign Minister, like the Commander-in-Chief had abdicated responsibility. Neither would advocate a particular course of action. If initially he had opted for a policy of resistance, all of the evidence, except his own memoirs, suggests he had abandoned it as well. Others remained more faithful to the spirit of resistance. People like Mandel, Paul-Boncour, Sarraut, Guernut,⁴² Stern⁴³ and Delbos⁴⁴ still insisted that France should adopt a policy of military reprisals but the non-bellicose Minister of War tacitly refused. With the composure of a sorcerer General Maurin waved the white flag of general mobilization before his colleagues eyes. The spirit of resistance suddenly vanished.

Precisely what Maurin said to his Cabinet colleagues has long been an issue of controversy. Paul-Boncour summarized Maurin's arguments in the following manner, "in order to act the white poster for mobilization was necessary, that is to say, total mobilization."⁴⁵ Flandin says that Maurin had told him, "in order to intervene militarily in the Rhineland, the General Staff demands general mobilization."⁴⁶ On the other hand, Jean Zay's account of the third Cabinet meeting includes no

⁴¹Jean Zay, Souvenirs et Solitude (Paris, 1945), 66.

⁴²Minister of National Education.

⁴³Minister of Colonies.

⁴⁴Keeper of the Seals.

⁴⁵J. Paul-Boncour, op. cit., 33.

⁴⁶P. E. Flandin, op. cit., 199.

suggestion that the Minister of War used the actual term of 'general mobilization'. General Gamelin, who was not at this meeting, but who, as Commander-in-Chief must bear the responsibility for the advice upon which Maurin was acting, denied ever having asked for complete mobilization and insists that Maurin never took such a position in front of him.⁴⁷ However, Maurin's own testimony before the post-war commission of inquiry gives more weight to the contentions of his critics than to those of his defenders. While still avoiding the admission that he had insisted on general mobilization before France could take military action, Maurin testified that, "I said that it was necessary to prepare for complete mobilization because we were putting a finger into the works and that I did not know if it would take the whole arm."⁴⁸ The distinction between general mobilization and preparing for it was a fine one indeed. The Sarraut Cabinet was not one to split hairs.

Certainly Gamelin consistently denied having asked for general mobilization in 1936. Essentially what he did say, he insists, was that the French army could undertake an operation of reprisals in the zone but that if German forces displayed a stubborn resistance and full scale conflict seemed imminent, then general mobilization would be imperative. However, so as to insure an efficient mobilization of all French forces Gamelin asked for the recall of three classes of reservists to hold the frontier, before offensive operations were undertaken.⁴⁹

⁴⁷M. G. Gamelin, op. cit., 203.

⁴⁸Les Événements, IV, 908.

⁴⁹M. G. Gamelin, op. cit., 389.

But to recall the reservists and station them on the frontier would require seven days.⁵⁰ Consequently, immediate action was virtually impossible. From what is known of the strengths of the French and German armies in 1936, there seems little doubt that France was capable of repelling the German forces from the zone without recalling the reservists and without general mobilization. This fact, coupled with present knowledge that Hitler, in the face of Reichswehr pressure, had agreed to withdraw German forces from the zone on the first sign of French resistance, made the need for general mobilization most remote. Unfortunately for France, her military intelligence was prone to the wildest exaggeration of German forces. Gamelin himself reportedly believed that Germany had almost 300,000 men under arms in the Rhineland.⁵¹ In the light of such statistics it is not difficult to see why France, with approximately ten divisions on her north-eastern frontier, comprised of 150,000 men, believed that military reprisals would be a prologue to general mobilization. Regardless of the precise wording of the advice given by Maurin and Gamelin to the government, the Cabinet by and large was unwilling to risk the prospect of complete mobilization. Indeed, Flandin reports, "general mobilization...was not even discussed."⁵²

Another of the more detailed accounts of the Cabinet meeting of 8 March is to be found in an interview accorded to the journalist Pierre

⁵⁰W. F. Knapp, "The Rhineland Crisis of 1936," The Decline of the Third Republic (London, 1959), 75.

⁵¹M. Baumont, La Faillite de la Paix, II, De 1929 A 1945. (Paris, 1958), 701.

⁵²P. E. Flandin, op. cit., 199.

Lazareff by Premier Sarraut. Although this report is not free of certain ambiguities,⁵³ the information contained appears to be generally reliable.

Mandel, Sarraut confirmed, demanded immediate action, arguing that passive acceptance of the coup would both encourage Hitler and render the French alliances in eastern Europe ineffective. Maurin, however, countered with the old threat and in a manner which indicts Gamelin even more: "his opinion is clear,...if you want to oppose the fait accompli you must decide today on general mobilization." Piétri argued that the Cabinet would not be able to explain why it had involved the country in a war when France had not been directly attacked. Marcel Déat, "who carried the decision," quickly agreed and protested against the measures suggested by Mandel:

Hitler's decision was inevitable. If we decree general mobilization this evening, two months before the elections, we will be swept out of Parliament tomorrow, if not before, by a popular revolt.⁵⁴

The will to resist had been shattered. Flandin, with his arm in a sling leaned painfully towards Sarraut, "Mister President, I see we must not insist." This was the story of the Foreign Minister, the Cabinet and France.

On the evening of 8 March Flandin sent a telegram to the Secretary General of the League in which he officially notified that body of Germany's violation of the zone:

⁵³For example, the account of the meeting of 8 March includes remarks by Gamelin who was not in attendance at this meeting.

⁵⁴P. Lazareff, Dernière Édition (Montreal,), 302-306.

The German government has thus expressly contravened article 43 of the Treaty of Versailles and the first article of the Treaty of Locarno. Consequently, and in accordance with article 4 of the latter Treaty, the government of the Republic has the honor to inform the Council of the League of the contravention thus committed.⁵⁵

⁵⁵Flandin to Avenol, telegram of 8 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 321, 430-431.

CHAPTER VI

THE EVENT ACCEPTED

On the morning of Tuesday 10 March, Eden, Halifax and Ralph Wigram¹ met in Paris with the French, Belgian and Italian representatives of the Locarno nations.² Amid the comfortable surroundings of the Salon de l'Horloge the Conference began, as the British had expected. There was no tension, no categorical demands, and no bitter invective. Having explained that the purpose of calling the other Locarno powers to this meeting was merely to provide an opportunity for an exchange of views, Flandin revealed the attitude of his government. In the light of the recent violation the French government, he asserted, would request a formal condemnation of the coup by the League of Nations, after which France "would put at the Council's disposal all her moral and material resources, including military, naval and air forces, in order to repress what she regarded as an attempt upon international peace."³ This was not to be taken as a refusal to negotiate with Germany, but rather as an insistence that no negotiations be held until, in Eden's words, "international law had been re-established in its full value."⁴ Although this

¹The head of the Central Department in the British Foreign Office.

²Owing to Germany's unilateral abrogation of the Locarno agreement, the term 'Locarno nations' (powers, etc.), hereafter refers to Britain, France, Belgium and Italy.

³The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 348.

⁴Ibid., 348.

phrase is disconcertingly vague, it is clear that what Flandin had in mind was a total withdrawal of German forces from the zone and a return to the status quo ante before negotiations with Germany were begun.⁵

Eden's reply consisted of inquiries into the French attitude and pressed Flandin to elucidate his intentions somewhat more fully. However, either Flandin's answers, or possibly the incompleteness of Eden's account, reveal the French Foreign Minister as a skilled politician in the art of evading questions. Eden's first queries were, (a) if France were demanding complete evacuation, how could this be achieved and, (b) since France offered to place all of her resources at the League's disposal, did she have a specific plan of action in mind? To these questions Flandin replied that complete evacuation "ought to be demanded and obtained, if necessary by a successive series of sanctions, economic, financial and military."⁶ In short, France hoped that evacuation could be arranged but she did not have a specific plan of action. Finally, when asked if France actually contemplated the possibility of the Locarno powers undertaking military action by themselves, Flandin replied in the affirmative.

Having by this time concluded that the attitude of the French government was far more firm than had been expected, Eden proposed a tête à tête discussion among the four principal representatives at the meeting, himself, Flandin, Van Zeeland and Cerruti.⁷ In the course of

⁵R.I.I.A. Survey, 1936, 283.

⁶The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 349.

⁷Van Zeeland was the Belgian Premier, and Cerruti, the Italian ambassador to Paris.

this discussion Eden and Halifax expressed their gravest doubts as to the efficacy of economic and financial sanctions, doubts which had already appeared in Eden's note of 9 March to the British Cabinet. Van Zeeland, in an effort which was characteristic of his role in the subsequent negotiations, attempted to find common ground for the British and French positions. While agreeing with Flandin that sanctions would likely result in a German retreat, the Belgian Premier did not think that complete evacuation of the zone was imperative for the opening of negotiations. As far as the measures to be taken in the interim were concerned, he said, Belgium would take any action in which Britain and France participated.⁸ With the reservation and restraint that were to foreshadow the Italian attitude Cerruti refrained from committing his country to any specific course of action while League sanctions continued to be applied on Italy.

Upon conclusion of the discussion à quatre, Eden and Van Zeeland began a particularly crucial conversation. In a suggestion which undoubtedly was the origin of the later proposals of 19 March, the Belgian delegate inquired into the possibility of Britain making her Locarno obligations much more precise. For instance, he asked Eden, "could it not be said categorically that the intrusion of German troops upon French or Belgian soil would automatically involve a counter-action by British forces?"⁹ Van Zeeland's second suggestion - of less apparent importance

⁸The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 350.

⁹Ibid., 351. Although Van Zeeland made the suggestion, Eden's speech to the House of Commons on 9 March had raised the idea initially. See H. of C. Parl. Deb., vol. 309, 1812 and my Chapter V, 100, Footnote 30.

but not void of practical implication - was that London would be the most suitable place for the continuation of the Locarno powers' talks and also for the convening of the League Council. Having checked with Baldwin by telephone, Eden returned to the meeting and revealed Van Zeeland's suggestion to Flandin. After some discussion, it was decided that talks would recommence in London on 12 March.

Eden and Halifax had gone to Paris, confident that their plan of resorting to the League while, at the same time, opening negotiations with Germany, would be accepted by the other Locarno powers. They returned home, convinced that a new course of action would have to be approved by the Cabinet. That same evening, 11 March, the Cabinet met and authorized the Foreign Secretary to request the Reich to withdraw all but a truly symbolic force from the zone, to agree not to increase that force subsequently, and to promise not to erect new fortifications in the Rhineland at least while negotiations were in progress.¹⁰ It was not precisely what Flandin had demanded in Paris but it had a far better chance of being accepted. Indeed, the F hrer's recent boastful speeches would have made it difficult for the Nazi regime to accept even a partial back-down. The reply communicated by ambassador Hoesch on 12 March remained a farther cry from the French demand. Germany would promise only to refrain for the time being from reinforcing her troops in the zone.

Germany had rejected the principle of evacuation and would not withdraw any of her troops from the zone. The stage was set for Flandin's initial address to the powers assembled in London. The Locarno delegates

¹⁰The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 354-355.

anxiously awaited the French reaction to German intransigence. To the relief of all, Flandin's remarks were surprisingly conciliatory. The German offer remained unacceptable, but, he implied, if the Germans withdrew and negotiations began at once, there was no doubt that the re-establishment of German military sovereignty in the Rhineland would ultimately be recognized.¹¹ Moreover, he asked only that the German force, the nineteen battalions, the artillery and mechanized troops, that is the force that actually entered the zone on 7 March, be withdrawn. The paramilitary and police organizations formerly in the zone would be allowed to remain.

Aware that Flandin's new offer was made on the assumption that the guarantor powers would agree to more automatic obligations in a new Locarno treaty, Eden was prepared, nonetheless, to use it to clear the air. On his suggestion, Prime Minister Van Zeeland formulated a resolution whereby the German violation was condemned but in such a way as to insure that negotiations would not be impeded. At the same time, the resolution made clear that Hitler's action necessitated closer Anglo-French cooperation, including Staff talks.

On the following day, the arrival in London of M. Joseph Paul-Boncour, dashed the cautious optimism to the ground. Strongly opposed to Flandin's most recent offer, the French delegate to the League insisted on maintaining the original demand for complete evacuation. The recognition of German military sovereignty in the zone, he added, was out of the

¹¹Ibid., 356.

question. Flandin, bolstered by the firmness of his colleague, resumed talk about the possibility of economic and financial sanctions. But the Foreign Minister had not been endowed with the attributes of either consistency or determination. Reminded by Eden that Britain was unlikely to contemplate any type of sanctions policy. Flandin scurried back to his demand of 12 March for increased guarantees of future French security.

On the evening of 14 March, Flandin dejectedly told Eden that in spite of his personal willingness, the French Cabinet had refused to accept the Van Zeeland memorandum. Flandin further told the British Foreign Secretary that he intended to return to Paris so as to convince his compatriots that their demands were unattainable. Eden later expressed the belief that the contacts the French representatives had made during the League Council meetings had shown them that support for a policy of sanctions would not be forthcoming.¹²

By 17 March, Flandin, with the approval of the French Cabinet, consented to the proposals made by Eden to Hoesch on 11 March for partial evacuation and non-fortification of the zone. In addition, he added the demand that Germany submit the question of the incompatibility of Locarno and the Franco-Russian pact to the Hague. However, if France had at last brought her policy into line with that of Britain, the latter had taken another step in the direction of conciliating Germany. To Eden it seemed unlikely that Germany would receive more favourably the substance of an

¹²Ibid., 358. Flandin corroborated this conclusion in Le Procès Flandin Devant La Haute Cour de Justice, 23-26 juillet 1946. (Paris, 1947), 75-76. Hereafter referred to as Le Procès Flandin.

offer she had rejected five days earlier. Consequently, with hesitant French approval, the Foreign Secretary made a new proposal to Germany which suggested, instead of evacuation, the creation of a neutral zone on the German side of the frontier policed by an international force during the period of negotiations. Although there is little evidence to suggest that Britain or France seriously expected Germany to consider this new proposition, Flandin accepted it as a convenient exit from what appeared to be an Anglo-French impasse.

In return for modifying his original attitude, Flandin received from Britain a more precise guarantee of assistance in the event of a German attack. The British government, in accordance with the proposal originally suggested by Eden to the House of Commons on 9 March and subsequently developed in the Locarno powers' negotiations, agreed to General Staff talks with Belgium and France. Britain in turn received from those countries a reciprocal guarantee of assistance if she were subjected to German aggression. The guarantees provided by the final agreement were to be effective during the period preceding negotiations with Germany and in the event of a complete breakdown of those negotiations.¹³

After eight days of almost continuous negotiation the representatives of the Locarno powers adopted for submission to their respective governments¹⁴ a text of proposals dated 19 March. The first two articles

¹³R.I.I.A., Survey, 290. In the first case, before negotiations were begun, the guarantees were not reciprocal. Belgium and France were the only beneficiaries.

¹⁴The Italian government alone refused to give official approval to these proposals.

of this text were of general nature; the third and fourth dealt with the arrangement for Staff talks and the legal dispute over the compatibility of the Locarno pact with the Franco-Soviet Alliance which was destined for the Hague. Article V proposed certain conditions which both Germany and the Locarno powers would maintain in the Rhineland. No additional troops or war materials were to be sent into either the formerly demilitarized zone or, in the case of France and Belgium, into the zones adjoining the frontiers between their countries and Germany. In those areas no new fortifications, groundworks or landing fields were to be constructed, equipped or improved upon. In order to insure the prohibitive regulations of Article V, the subsequent article proposed the creation of an international force to be stationed in a zone "contained between the Belgian-German and Franco-German frontiers on one side, and on the other, a line situated to the East of the said frontiers and following them at a distance of approximately twenty kilometers." Supervision of this force, Article VI continued, was to be in the hands of an international commission especially created for this purpose. Articles VII and VIII laid down certain general proposals for the eventual negotiation of a new Rhineland Pact and for an international conference that would discuss a general European settlement. Article IX, the final article, simply announced the decision of the Locarno powers to notify the League of Germany's recent violation of the demilitarized zone.¹⁵

In the light of the almost complete failure of the March 19 proposals, the real significance of the Locarno powers' deliberations lay in

¹⁵The complete text of these proposals will be found in Annex 1591, 348-351 of the League of Nations: Official Journal, April 1936 (Part 1).

one of the two annexes appended to the general text. In that annex, Britain and Italy¹⁶ promised France and Belgium that, in the event conciliation failed, they:

1. (a) Will at once consider, in consultation with your Government and the French/Belgian Government, the steps to be taken to meet the new situation thus created;
- (b) Will immediately come to the assistance of your Government, in accordance with the Treaty of Locarno, in respect of any measures which shall be jointly decided upon;
- (c) Will, in return for reciprocal assurances from your Government, take, in consultation with your Government, all practical measures available to His Majesty's Government for the purpose of ensuring the security of your country against unprovoked aggression;
- (d) Will, for this purpose, establish or continue the contact between the General Staffs of our countries contemplated in paragraph III (2) of the said arrangement;....¹⁷

In spite of his earlier attitude it was surely for just such an assurance that Flandin had come to London. His position is as yet unclear, but on the whole there can be little doubt about the character of the Foreign Minister. In spite of his self-professed stand for resistance on March 7 to 8, his bearing in the French Cabinet had hardly been that of "a man determined to fight for the Rhineland". His legal training may have been partially responsible for his conduct in the Cabinet, for law had taught him to explain and expose but seldom to judge. Jean Zay's account seems to corroborate this view.¹⁸ The Foreign Minister, Zay

¹⁶Because Italy failed to approve officially these proposals, the pledge remained in effect for Britain alone.

¹⁷League of Nations: Official Journal, 351.

¹⁸Jean Zay, op. cit., 66.

reported, simply explained all the alternatives without judging any one to be the most satisfactory. And then, upon hearing the Cabinet's opinion, there was that remark of his, so filled with pathos and despair, "I see, Mister President, we must not insist."

This remark most clearly captures the character of Pierre-Etienne Flandin. Whether it was the influence of his legal training, or the spirit of compromise which he had learned to groom while working with colleagues of both the Left and the Right or the fear of further endangering the bonds with Britain, or his personal dislike for any altercation, Flandin was not the man to force the British into line. On 10 March, Flandin faced his English counterpart with a demand for total evacuation of German troops from the Rhineland and, at the same time, was contemplating the possibilities of economic, financial and military sanctions. In less than ten days the most extreme course of action had been completely dismissed and his firm demand had been whittled down from total to partial evacuation and finally to Eden's proposal of the neutral zone.

Faced with Flandin's remarkable quality of adaptation, it is difficult to determine the frame of mind in which he arrived in London. Sir Winston Churchill reported that Flandin had come to London in order to demand "the simultaneous mobilization of the land, sea and air forces of both countries."¹⁹ However, there is absolutely no evidence to substantiate this view. Flandin himself claims that in his conversation with Mr. Baldwin on 19 March, he proposed a "simple police operation"

¹⁹W. S. Churchill, The Gathering Storm (New York, 1961), 175.

to be undertaken by France alone and with only a promise of a free hand from Britain.²⁰ Such a statement was even more astounding. Nineteen March was the day on which the Locarno powers' proposals were announced, proposals which were an implicit repudiation of any policy of reprisals, much less reprisals undertaken by a single country. Moreover, when one recalls General Maurin's reported remark that any action meant the white posters, and the Cabinet's reaction to that remark, one can draw but three possible conclusions. Either Flandin's statement is utterly false and a pathetic attempt to place responsibility on Britain, or the proposal was a mere flurry of empty bravado; or else if the proposal was made in sincerity, it was a flagrant violation of Flandin's constitutional responsibility to represent the views of the majority in the Cabinet.

The contention that Flandin did not really expect, or perhaps even want, his original demands of 10 March to be met, is supported not only by his record in London but also by the mood in which he arrived in Paris. Did he return to Paris disconsolate? Not at all. His return was triumphant, not unlike Chamberlain's return from Munich. In a type of 'peace in our time' speech to the Chamber of Deputies on 20 March he proudly announced "Gentlemen, the Government brings you...the consolidation of peace." Anglo-French relations, he asserted, had reached a new and significant milestone. The crisis "means for us the materialization of a persevering effort and of a conception of total solidarity...."²¹

²⁰P. E. Flandin, op. cit., 208.

²¹Flandin's speech of 20 March, 1936, Débats, 1063-1064.

If Flandin was not pleased by the result of the London negotiations, he was a superb actor. His may be the remarks of a man striving to convince himself and his colleagues of the success of his efforts; but even if this were true, there was surely more to his words than that. Regardless of the fact that the British guarantee to France and Belgium was a reassertion of an old and understood commitment, it was a far more precise reassertion, strengthened by the provision for General Staff talks. Moreover, in the strictly diplomatic sense, the Rhineland crisis served to restore a certain amount of solidarity to the Anglo-French entente. It is significant that, whereas Eden had described Anglo-French relations on the eve of 1936 as never having "been worse since the Entente of thirty years before,"²² after March of that year he speaks of the "alliance...on a treaty basis reinforced by Staff talks and in fair confidence and intimacy...."²³

The sessions of the League Council which were held from 14 to 24 March, almost simultaneously with the Locarno powers' negotiations, were, not surprisingly, overshadowed by the discussions between the four powers. After all, these were the powers most closely affected by the German violation and who had been responsible for the appeal to the League. Moreover, since the League remained in practice, if not in principle, another facet of the Anglo-French entente, how detached could its attitude be from the course of action decided on by the Locarno powers? Since 1934 Russia had become the third great power in the League's roster

²²The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 316.

²³Ibid., 362.

but what degree of influence could she be expected to exert on a question which, in its direct implications, involved only western Europe?

The first meeting of the League Council was convened on the morning of 14 March. The Council immediately went into private session to examine the "suggestion made...out of courtesy rather than an invitation"²⁴ that the German Government attend these meetings and take part in the examination of her alleged violation. The opposition of Litvinov²⁵ and Titulescu notwithstanding, the suggestion, or invitation as it soon came to be called, was adopted and a telegram sent to the German government. The gist of this "suggestion" was that the Reich assist in the examination of her recent act and, ostensibly, did not constitute an offer to open negotiations on the German proposals of 7 March.²⁶ Indeed, only two days before, Flandin was still insisting to the Locarno powers that total evacuation was an essential prerequisite for negotiating with Germany.

With its first course of action determined the Council went into public session. Having read the text of the French and Belgian appeals to the League and given Mr. Eden the opportunity for a short introductory speech, the President of the Council gave the floor to Flandin. On the basis of the reports contained in the official journal of the League one

²⁴League of Nations, Official Journal, 314.

²⁵Litvinov, Maxim, People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs of the Soviet Union and Representative to the League of Nations.

²⁶The Reich, however, saw it as just such an offer. François-Poncet reported that, "the invitation...has been interpreted here as being indicative of a desire to negotiate." François-Poncet to Flandin telegrams of 14 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 429, 555.

can determine with certainty the position the Foreign Minister took before the League. Did he request the League members to contribute military assistance for punitive measures against Germany? Did he suggest a police operation? Did he demand sanctions of any kind? In short, did he recommend to the League any specific plan of action? He did not. Instead, he confined himself to such vague phrases as 'obligations of assistance'.

I ask the council to pronounce that a breach of Article 43 of the Treaty of Versailles has been committed by Germany, and to request the Secretary-General to notify the Powers signatories of the Locarno Treaty in accordance with Article 4 of that Treaty. This notification will enable the guarantor Governments to discharge their obligations of assistance. For its part, the Council will have to consider how it can support that action by recommendations addressed to the Members of the League of Nations.²⁷

Van Zeeland spoke in a similar vein.²⁸ Calm, unruffled and moderate, the Belgian Premier left his audience with the comfortable impression that really nothing much was going to happen. On that note the meeting adjourned. From this moment there was little doubt of the insignificant role the League had been requested to play. It had been asked to do two things. It had been requested to consider how it might support the course of action that the Locarno powers would adopt; and it had been asked to pronounce Germany guilty of violating Locarno, thereby enabling the Locarno powers to pursue their chosen course. However, there had been no suggestion of what sort of action the Locarno powers were most likely to pursue, and neither the existing international situation nor the French or Belgian addresses had given any indication

²⁷League of Nations, Official Journal, 314.

that action was even probable. The guarantor powers had as yet proved reluctant to attempt a restoration of the former status quo. Italy's position had remained most obscure but it was clear that she was not prepared to engage in a policy of sanctions, whatever their nature. With this position, Britain had shown herself in complete harmony.

In spite of ten days of discussions could there have been any doubt that the League would find Germany guilty of non-flagrant aggression? The Locarno Treaty had distinguished between two types of violations and had provided two alternate courses of action for the victim. If the victim determined that a violation of Article 2 of Locarno or a breach of Articles 42 or 43 of Versailles had occurred, it would turn to the League and request that the violation be recognized. If the League determined that this violation had occurred, it was to notify the Locarno powers who in turn were obligated to come to the victim's aid. However, if the victim saw the violation as a prelude to total invasion or outbreak of large scale hostilities, she was entitled to declare the act flagrant and to undertake a counter-thrust immediately, even before she turned to the League. But by implication, unless the victim acted unilaterally against the aggressor before resorting to the League, the violation inevitably would be seen as non-flagrant. Consequently, when the League Council was convened on 14 March, its members were convinced that it had been called to examine an act of non-flagrant aggression. Had France or Belgium wished to dispel this belief they might have stated specifically in which of the two categories the violation belonged. Their failure to do so was an implicit but clear request that Germany be found guilty of a non-flagrant violation. Given the fact that the Locarno powers had

already agreed on German guilt, there was no doubt that the illegality of the March 7 coup would be pronounced by the Council. Given the nature of the French and Belgian appeals to the League, it was clear that the violation would be examined as non-flagrant.

In fact, after 14 March the only issue that remained doubtful to the League delegates was the attendance of Germany. On 15 March, von Neurath notified the Secretary-General of the League that Germany was tempted to accept the offer of attendance but only if her representatives were treated with perfect equality and if the League would discuss, in addition to the act of reoccupation, the F hrer's proposals of 7 March.²⁹ Flandin, understandably annoyed by German presumption, reportedly threatened that France might withdraw from the League and perhaps even order general mobilization.³⁰ Fortunately, however, for the Foreign Minister of a country which was most unlikely to do either, a device was found to save the situation. The German reply had stipulated that negotiations on the basis of the 7 March proposals would have to be commenced alsbald, forthwith; however, upon hearing of Flandin's reaction, the Reich quickly indicated that in this case alsbald really meant, 'in due course'. Upon receipt of this conciliatory reply the League Council continued its endeavours to bring German representatives to London. On 17 March, the F hrer, pleased by a British guarantee that his proposals would be discussed "at the proper time,"³¹ agreed to send a representation from the Reich.

²⁹See Chapter IV, 79.

³⁰R.I.I.A., Survey, 1936, 298.

³¹Ibid., 298.

The Council meeting of 17 March was important only in that it provided a promise, false though it proved to be, that Germany might encounter stiff resistance to her Rhineland coup. The Russian delegate, Litvinov, reminded his League colleagues of the error they seemed determined to commit:

We cannot preserve the League of Nations, founded on the sanctity of international treaties [including the Covenant of the League itself] if we turn a blind eye to breaches of those treaties, or confine ourselves to verbal protests, and take no more effective measures in defence of international undertakings.³²

The bitterness of Litvinov was soon replaced by a tone of moderation and pathetic optimism. The speeches of Eden and the Italian ambassador, Grandi, during the fourth Council session on 18 March, were far more suitable preludes to the arrival of the German delegates. Both assured their audience that the German violation had not threatened further hostilities and that the two victims had been correct in their judgment that immediate action had not been necessary. Remarks about the "restoration of international confidence" and "the work of reconstruction" made it patent that the Reich representatives were unlikely to meet with a sharp rebuff.

The fifth and sixth meetings of the League Council were held on 19 March. The first was dominated by Ribbentrop's lengthy speech, the second by the Council's formal vote. With the exception of Litvinov who, Ribbentrop reported, "had hidden his face ostentatiously behind a big newspaper...",³³ the Council members listened attentively to the German

³²League of Nations, Official Journal, 320.

³³J. Ribbentrop, The Ribbentrop Memoirs (London, 1954), 54-55.

delegate's address. Although the Council refrained from making an official reply to the thesis outlined by Ribbentrop, the German diplomat was not at all dissatisfied with the course of events, "for no one had replied in a manner calling for a sharp rejoinder. Britain, France and Belgium, the countries most clearly affected, said nothing at all."³⁴

There is no evidence to suggest that Ribbentrop was either deeply surprised or perturbed by the vote taken by the Council in the afternoon of 19 March. The Franco-Belgian resolution was read aloud by the President, Mr. Bruce.

The Council of the League of Nations,
On the application of Belgium and France made to it on
March 8th, 1936:

Finds that the German Government has committed a breach of Article 43 of the Treaty of Versailles by causing, on March 7th, 1936, military forces to enter and establish themselves in the demilitarized zone referred to in Article 44 and the following articles of that Treaty, and in the Treaty of Locarno;

Instructs the Secretary-General, in application of Article 4, paragraph 2, of the Treaty of Locarno, to notify this finding of the Council without delay to the Powers signatories of that Treaty.³⁵

With the exception of Chile's abstention and Germany's opposing vote, the Council members voted unanimously in favour of the resolution. No sooner had the German violation been officially declared than Ribbentrop entered a formal protest. In a statement that captures nicely the theatrics of both National Socialism and Ribbentrop himself, he announced:

³⁴Ibid., 55.

³⁵League of Nations; Official Journal, 340.

The German Government and the whole German nation are convinced that the resolution which the Council has adopted will not be ratified by history.³⁶

The final meetings of the League Council were even more anti-climactic than its earlier sessions had been. On 20 March, the Council was made familiar with the Locarno powers' draft proposals. They had been submitted merely for the purpose of keeping that body advised; no approval or rejection had been invited. Since none of the delegates were prepared to discuss in detail proposals so recently submitted, the Council adjourned. On 24 March, at the eighth and final meeting in London, the Council adopted a resolution which acknowledged the receipt of the 19 March proposals and which informed the Locarno powers that:

The Council...considering that any further action on its part should remain in abeyance for the present, in view of the conversations which are being carried on:
Invites the said Governments to keep it advised of the progress of these conversations and
Decides to meet again as soon as the circumstances render further consideration of the question desirable.³⁷

In theory the session was not closed but merely adjourned. In practice the crisis and the League's role in it had come to an end. The President made it clear that the League would meet, "at the earliest possible date, as soon as there was any useful part it could play in the solution of the difficulties with which the world was confronted."³⁸
In the light of its failure to take any role in the subsequent negotiations

³⁶Ibid., 340.

³⁷Ibid., 347.

³⁸Ibid., 346.

with Germany, it was clear that the League's usefulness had expired. After all, it had been expected to do nothing more than it had done.

The final chapter of the Rhineland crisis was written during the spring and summer of 1936. No sooner had relations between Britain and France been improved by the reciprocal guarantee of assistance, than a source of strain appeared unexpectedly from another direction. Flandin departed for Paris on 19 March, confident that the London negotiations had proved the reality of Anglo-French solidarity. That same day however, Eden assured Ribbentrop that the 19 March proposals were not an ultimatum but a flexible arrangement in which, he told the Commons later, "the German Government should assist...by making some constructive contribution...."³⁹ Subsequently on 24 March, four days after Flandin told the Chamber of Deputies that Germany would have to accept "all the preliminary conditions"⁴⁰ of the Locarno powers' proposals before negotiations could commence, Britain agreed to examine new German proposals at the end of the month.

After being informed directly by Ribbentrop of the Reich's intentions, Eden held a series of conversations with him. At the end of these discussions, no doubt remained in the Foreign Secretary's mind about Hitler's ultimate reception of the Locarno proposals. The Führer was most unlikely to accept the suggestion for an international force in the Rhineland, arbitration by the Permanent Court of International Justice, or a prohibition on new fortifications in the formerly demilitarized zone.

³⁹Reply to a question on 23 March 1936, in H. of C. Parl. Deb., vol. 310, 859.

⁴⁰R.I.I.A., Documents, 1936, 141.

The German counter-proposals of 31 March contained little that was unexpected. Ribbentrop's earlier indications proved to be substantially accurate. Germany reaffirmed her position of 24 March that the Locarno powers' proposals contained "not one of the necessary conditions for the successful organization of a real lasting peace."⁴¹ Modelled upon the original German memorandum of 7 March, these counter-proposals included none of the provisions considered imperative by Britain and France. In fact, although by no means all of the German suggestions were held to be acceptable, only one provision was needed for the commencement of negotiations: the unqualified pledge not to erect new fortifications in the zone. To this demand, Ribbentrop would only reply that the construction of fortifications might be temporarily delayed if the western powers agreed to cancel their proposed General Staff talks. Quite the contrary, Eden retorted, the Nazi attitude merely invited the commencement of those talks.⁴² A day later, on 2 April, the British Foreign Secretary set in motion the plans for opening the joint military conversations.

Although it may have appeared that Eden had been provoked into dealing the Reich a sharp rebuff, the German government was never allowed to think that the door to negotiations was closed. Nor was France, dissatisfied as she was with the German counter-proposals, prepared to slam that door. At last assured of the imminence of Anglo-French staff talks and unwilling to assume responsibility for the prevention of the desired

⁴¹R.I.I.A., Survey, 1936, 313.

⁴²Ibid., 326.

negotiations with the Reich, France herself joined in that innocuous diplomatic game of formulating peace plans.

On 6 April, the French Cabinet approved the text of two memoranda produced by the Quai d'Orsay.⁴³ The first consisted of a detailed point by point reply to the latest Nazi proposals; the second, in the other extreme, contained very vague and general proposals for the pacification of the whole of Europe. The continent, these memoranda insisted, was an integral unit. The peace of Europe could not be divided into east and west. On 8 April at Geneva, Flandin and Paul-Boncour explained to the representatives of the other Locarno powers the merits of the French memoranda. Their colleagues were unimpressed. Satisfied that they at least had made a worthy effort, the French delegates again returned to that familiar demand for non-fortification of the zone as a prerequisite for negotiations. However, still unwilling to appear intransigent, Flandin suggested that the British resume the initiative and attempt to derive a more precise understanding of the German proposals. Pleased that she had got into the game, France returned to the sidelines confident that the regulars could do the job.

The British questionnaire⁴⁴ of 7 May, which was sent to Berlin for the purpose of gaining more specific information about the German counter-proposals of 31 March, simultaneously betrayed and rewarded that confidence. By completely ignoring the question of Rhineland fortifications, the British government dismissed the French demand as a dead issue.

⁴³Ibid., 328-329.

⁴⁴The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 371-373.

The Reich apparently had won another diplomatic victory. She would no longer be asked to make reparations for 7 March by means of a promise not to construct new fortifications in the zone. On the other hand, by emphasising the desirability of the non-aggression pacts which Germany had offered to make with her eastern neighbours, Britain clearly had accepted the French thesis of the indivisibility of European peace. The divergence of views between the French and British Foreign Offices was obviously not as profound as Germany wished to believe.

Perhaps it was in realization of this fact, supplemented by the knowledge of the commencement of Anglo-French Staff talks, that Germany concluded that a new Locarno would be more perilous than the old. After all, her proposals for a new Locarno had been largely a ruse, an effort to convince the west that no active resistance, either by military or economic sanctions, was necessary. Since the danger period had been successfully traversed, what could be the value of new binding commitments? The British questionnaire, therefore, went unanswered. In spite of several reminders, Germany conveniently dismissed the British questionnaire and her own original proposals as having outlasted their usefulness.

With that dismissal, the problem of the Rhineland was finally solved. For sixteen years it had been a major bone of contention. Created by many powers, it had been solved by one. No basis for successful negotiations had ever been reached. Regardless, Britain and France continued to hope for a new Locarno conference which might arrive at some form of European settlement. On 23 July representatives from France, Belgium

and Britain met in London to discuss plans for the convening of an international conference.⁴⁵ Gone were the demands for German reparation; gone were the demands for a Nazi pledge to respect future agreements; gone were any conditions for Germany to meet before assembling for negotiation. Yet nothing came of these last despairing attempts.

The state of Anglo-French relations remained the sole setback to Nazi aspirations. The inter-war period had been harsh on those relations. They had become strained whenever the desires of one had not been sufficiently appreciated by the other. Regardless of whether it was Simon's independence in negotiating the Naval Treaty with Germany, or Laval's in making the Rome Agreement with Italy, whenever the fundamental interdependence of England and France was overlooked, the relationship between the two countries became brittle. The moment it became clear to the British that Flandin was incapable of maintaining Lavaliste independence and to the French that Eden was working for an improvement in Anglo-French relations, the tension between the countries was gradually reduced. The Abyssinian issue continued to be a troublesome sore between Britain and France but Hitler's hope of splitting the entente remained unrealized. The German problem continued to be the central theme of the Anglo-French dialogue, a dialogue which the Rhineland crisis had made more straightforward and intimate.

⁴⁵R.I.I.A., Survey, 1936, 348-350.

CHAPTER VII

BRITAIN MALIGNED

The foreign policy pursued by the Baldwin Government in March 1936 has been subjected to serious criticism. Some have confined themselves to demonstrations of how misconceived were the basic principles upon which that policy was based. Others have been less restrained. Flandin, in relating how Baldwin refused to allow France to undertake a unilateral police operation,¹ attempted to place responsibility for inaction on Britain. There is, however, a very great difference between condemning British policy in March 1936, and making it largely responsible for the success of the German coup. Not until one is familiar with the environment in which that policy was conceived can the criticism be evaluated.

Perhaps the most important single factor in the British reaction to the Rhineland crisis was the background provided by the Abyssinian problem. If Mussolini's attack on the Negus proved anything besides the superiority of machine guns over spears, it was the effectiveness of a mobilized public opinion. Shocked by Italy's act of unconcealed aggression the British public reached a fever pitch of righteous indignation. Italy, in an irritating display of arrogance and bravado had openly repudiated every principle of international and moral law, a repudiation which her League membership made the more intolerable. The prospect of

¹P. E. Flandin, op. cit., 208.

cooperating with Mussolini in order to defend other international agreements, such as Locarno, was hardly intelligible to the British public early in 1936. Indeed, it was Sir Samuel Hoare's attempt to keep Italy within the confines of international respectability that had so incensed British public opinion.

On the other hand, British opinion was far too eager to bestow on Nazi Germany the respectability it had denied Fascist Italy. In spite of the reports which leaked from Germany concerning the nature of Hitler's internal regime and in spite of the periodic audacity of Nazi foreign policy, popular sentiment in Britain preserved the hope that the Führer's frequent speeches of assurance were the true indications of German intentions. In fact, that hope had its roots in two more basic factors. The legacy of Versailles exerted an influence on British policy from the moment that treaty had been signed. However, not until the Nazi regime undertook an aggressive policy of revision was the profundity of Britain's guilt complex revealed. Germany, it was widely felt, had been unjustly treated at Versailles and many of her complaints were justifiable. The demilitarized zone was a case in point. Although Germany's sovereignty over the zone had been recognized, she had been prohibited from adequately fortifying it. The remark of Eden's cab-driver that, "I suppose Jerry can do what he likes in his own back garden....,"² is illustrative of the British view of the injustice of the zone.

Of subordinate importance was the contrast between the effect of the Abyssinian crisis on Anglo-Italian relations and that of the Naval

²The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 346.

Treaty on Anglo-German relations. To British public opinion the fact was clear that, whereas Italy by March 1936 was under British sanctions, Germany had reconciled herself with His Majesty's government at least in the field of naval rearmament. Not as apparent but equally true was the fact that the renewal of the Naval treaty was being considered.³ In addition, Eden tried to arrange, on 5 to 6 March, Anglo-German aeronautical cooperation through the famous Air Pact proposals of February 1935.

British opinion, popular and to some extent official, believed that it had learned other lessons from Abyssinia. For instance, Italy had not been alone in provoking England's wrath. The lingering and persistent suspicion for France again flourished in Britain. Laval had befriended the Bolsheviks; he had excused Italian aggression; and he had duped a British Foreign Secretary. Hoare had been condemned for his efforts to rescue Mussolini but none suggested that anyone but the cunning Pierre Laval had been responsible for such a scheme. In fact, it was feared that the French Premier had promised the Duce a free hand in Africa. Laval's attempts to pursue a policy as independent as possible from Britain without alienating her altogether, created in London a deep distrust of French intentions. If the Locarno agreement were ever threatened under these circumstances it would be interesting to see how sympathetic British opinion would be to French cries of distress.

The Abyssinian crisis drew another black and white picture in the British mind. If Mussolini were carried away on his own arrogance there was a possibility that a state of actual hostilities between Britain and

³Ibid., 338.

Italy might develop in the Mediterranean. Clearly, Britain could not afford to have her vital link with the Far East, itself a potential trouble-spot, severed by Italian naval and air forces. Given the comparative strengths of the two powers, this possibility was highly remote. But the Naval Staff was worried both by the prospect of the emergence of a hostile power in the Mediterranean⁴ and by the extreme reluctance of France to cooperate with Britain against the Duce. If the Reich chose this moment to act, her move would have to be at least as threatening to British security as the Mediterranean situation, before Britain would feel it imperative to act decisively. It seemed highly undesirable to become involved in a simultaneous conflict with two powers.

It is both easy and dangerous to attribute to any public opinion a coherence which it never possessed. Popular sentiment in Britain was no more perceptive and perhaps even a little more confused than one might have expected. The Peace Ballot was characterized by uncertainty, not lucidity. Yet through the mist which envelops most electorates several general outlines were distinguished. Italy was an aggressor and should be punished. France hoped to postpone that punishment and was, therefore, herself suspect. Germany had been restrained for better than a year. Perhaps now she could be relied upon.

To the British Foreign Office and the Quai d'Orsay the German problem remained foremost. In the minds of people like Sir Robert Vansittart, the Italian problem had to be settled as expeditiously as possible and, hopefully, in a manner which would restore Italy to the

⁴Lord Chatfield, The Navy and Defence, II (London, 1947), 89.

Stresa Front. In this sense, official and public opinion in Britain were to some extent at odds;⁵ however, there is no evidence to suggest that there was any divergence of opinion with regard to the fate of the demilitarized zone in the Rhineland. It is clear that the Foreign Secretary had concluded some time in advance of 7 March, that Britain would not undertake any form of sanctions to preserve the status of that zone. Although the role of the Permanent Head of the Foreign Office is not clear in the formulation of the policy pursued in March 1936, it is inconceivable that his opinion was ignored. It is clear, however, that in spite of his Germanophobia, Vansittart did approve of the policy adopted in the crisis. Indeed, in a letter to Eden of 22 March, he commended the wisdom and discretion displayed by the Foreign Secretary and added, "You and your colleagues indeed deserve praise."⁶ The Foreign Office was quite clearly of the opinion that the Rhineland was not worth the risk of war.

The decision of the diplomats was determined in part by the information provided by the British Chiefs of Staff. Sometime in early February, Eden had requested reports from the General and Air Staffs concerning their views on the relative importance of the demilitarized zone to Britain, France and Belgium. Precisely what was contained in these reports is difficult to ascertain. According to E. M. Robertson,

⁵ However, reaction of British public opinion to the British White Paper on Defence of 1 March 1935, made it clear that the German problem had not been entirely overlooked.

⁶ I. Colvin, op. cit., 102.

the reports declared that no "vital British interest" was at stake.⁷ Eden says even less; however he does include in his memoirs a passage consisting of the conclusions he drew from the advice rendered him. Accordingly, he decided, "Taking one thing with another, it seems undesirable to adopt an attitude where we would...have to fight for the zone...."⁸ Undoubtedly, the British services had concluded that the zone was not worth the risk of hostilities with Germany. Exactly on what grounds this conclusion had been reached remains somewhat obscure. Certainly, the stage of British rearmament in March 1936 was not conducive to risking hostilities with anyone. Britain had only begun rearming herself a year ago. It was obvious that the progress of rearmament had not yet made an appreciable change in British strength. What role could Britain play if military sanctions were to be applied against Germany? Her Naval Staff was distracted by the Mediterranean situation and it seemed unlikely that her air force could be used without running the risk of escalating a conflict. To all intents and purposes, that left the Army, an army whose regular field units comprised a mere 115,000 men.⁹ To dispatch a force to the continent for the sake of assisting an army infinitely larger, seemed ludicrous. Whatever their reasons, the service chiefs clearly opposed the idea of preserving at all costs the demilitarized zone. The decision of the British Government, like that of the French, was made in accordance with the advice rendered to them by their diplomatic and military personnel.

⁷E. M. Robertson, op. cit., 69.

⁸The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 335.

⁹R.I.I.A. Survey, 1936, 131.

In addition to the distorted but vociferous demands of public opinion and the more precise views of the Foreign Office and Military Staff, the British Cabinet was exposed to the influences of three other sources of opinion. Although nominally a National Government, the British Government in 1936 was almost thoroughly Conservative, with a Conservative Prime Minister and a Cabinet whose key positions were filled by Conservative Party members. As a result, its rapport with The Times was extremely close. Less for political reasons and more for social ones, the Cabinet was particularly susceptible to the sentiments of the famed 'Cliveden Set'. Many of those who frequented Cliveden were in constant social contact with members of the Cabinet. They were friends. They relaxed together. What was more natural than to exchange views on politics, both domestic and foreign? Equally familiar to the Baldwin Government were the views of the political Left. Though unable to win the government's ear with the same congeniality as The Times and the 'Cliveden Set', the role of the Labour Party as the Official Opposition in the House of Commons made it a factor that could hardly be ignored.

Throughout the nineteen-thirties, The Times under the hand of its editor Mr. Geoffrey Dawson seems to have enjoyed a considerable degree of influence over the direction of British foreign policy. For not only did it reflect the personal views of Cabinet ministers, but it played a significant role in the formulation of those views.¹⁰ Dawson was a power in his own right. Capable and determined, because of his

¹⁰ A. L. Rowse, All Souls and Appeasement (London, 1961), 29.

social connections and views on foreign affairs he stood close to those Englishmen who entertained a certain sympathy for the grievances of the Third Reich. The disrepute into which professional diplomacy continued to fall provided a useful breach for the misguided if sincere editor. Both Hoare and Eden resisted, with some success, Dawson's intrusions into the realms of international diplomacy;¹¹ but it was impossible to isolate him from the Cabinet members. He was on particularly intimate terms with Simon, Chamberlain, Halifax and Baldwin and never ceased to remind them of the folly of Vansittart's Germanophobia. As the decade drew to a close and amateur diplomacy reached an unprecedented peak in the Chamberlain government, the influence of Geoffrey Dawson increased in inverse proportion to the waning of Vansittart's.

Particularly unfortunate for British foreign policy and the reputation of The Times was the fact that Dawson, with the aid of his assistant-editor, Barrington-Ward, had assumed the responsibilities of foreign editor.¹² Consequently, Dawson's views on Europe were precisely those of The Times. So clear were his views and so obviously preconceived, that his foreign correspondents were chastized for reporting anything that contradicted them. Germany, in Dawson's opinion, had been unjustly treated at Versailles and not until that injustice was redressed could Germany be expected to become a responsible guardian of European peace. The unattractive aspects of the Third Reich had done

¹¹ John Connell, The Office: A Study of British Foreign Policy and Its Makers, 1919-1951 (London, 1958), 234.

¹² The History of 'The Times', Part II, 1921-1948, IV, (London, 1952), 816.

nothing to undermine the legitimacy of her grievances; rather, they made revision the more imperative. Consequently, "The policy of making not merely as many concessions to Nazi Germany as to Weimar-Germany, but even more, was adopted as a basic principle of foreign policy."¹³ With that principle The Times was in complete agreement. The optimism with which it greeted the reoccupation of the Rhineland was in contrast to the general British attitude of indifference. In its leader of 9 March, entitled 'A Chance to Rebuild', The Times suggested that the re-establishment of German military sovereignty in the zone provided a foundation for a new and more stable basis for European peace.¹⁴ The former status of the zone had prevented a détente between the Reich and western Europe. That obstacle was now eliminated, and the threat of a new war was more remote.

Dawson's influence within the inner circle of the Baldwin Cabinet was enhanced, not only by his personal contacts, but also by the fact that he was supported by many who frequented the country estate of Lord and Lady Astor at Cliveden. The term 'Cliveden Set' is somewhat misleading for it implies a unity of views which simply did not exist.¹⁵ It was not, as has been frequently alleged, a haven for Conservative pacifists, nor was it even strictly a focus for pro-German sympathizers. Prominent Labourites and Liberals also gathered at the estate on the Thames to debate the wisdom and folly of British foreign policy. However, in spite

¹³ Ibid., 882-883.

¹⁴ Ibid., 889.

¹⁵ J. R. M. Butler, Lord Lothian, 1882-1940 (London, 1960), 250-251.

of the differences of opinion which emerged at Cliveden, there appears to have been among the most frequent of visitors a common belief in the validity of German complaints. The Astors themselves, J. L. Garvin, editor of the Observer, Lord Lothian, Thomas Jones and Geoffrey Dawson formed a nucleus which, by and large, insisted on increased efforts to improve Britain's relations with the Third Reich.

Cliveden was certainly more than a debating forum. Although its influence on Cabinet opinion can be exaggerated, it is clear that there was constant association between key Cabinet Ministers and the Cliveden nucleus. This was hardly surprising. They were all good friends. Dawson and Jones were particularly close to Baldwin as was Lothian to Lord Halifax. Many were former schoolmates. There was a rapport among them, a rapport based on social position, pacificism, and a desire to believe the assurances of the Third Reich.¹⁶ Because of the nature of this rapport, it is difficult to ascertain how influential were the opinions of those in regular attendance at Cliveden. They were after all, free lancers in diplomacy but through Dawson's Times, Garvin's Observer and Lothian's Round Table, they were certainly capable of exerting pressure on any British Cabinet.

With respect to British policy in the Rhineland crisis it would be foolhardy to suggest that Cliveden influence was decisive. That influence seems to have confirmed the Cabinet decision of March 1936;¹⁷

¹⁶For an illuminating description of this rapport, see A. L. Rowse, op. cit..

¹⁷Thomas Jones, A Diary with Letters, 1931-1950 (London, 1954), 178-181.

it did not determine it. In a telephone conversation of 8 March, Thomas Jones informed Prime Minister Baldwin of the conclusions reached by certain prominent visitors¹⁸ at Lothian's Blickling estate. The German peace proposals, "the last bus", should be caught without further delay. The coup itself should be condemned although it should be made clear that "Versailles is now a corpse and should be buried." The violation was clearly not an act of aggression; however the British rearmament program should be continued and a conference should be summoned to examine the German offers.¹⁹ The serene atmosphere of Blickling clearly had not modified the thought of Cliveden. Germany had redressed another of her Versailles grievances. Her tactics had been regrettable but after all was not one entitled to be straightforward in one's own backyard?

Faced with the conclusions drawn for it by the British public, the Foreign Office, the Chiefs of Staff, The Times and the Cliveden regulars, the Cabinet had but one other source of domestic opinion with which to contend, the Labour Opposition. To this task the Baldwin Government proved equal, owing to the Labour Party's evident confusion in terms of foreign affairs.

Since the Versailles settlement, the Labour Party had been caught in the conflict between two ideals, collective security through the League and world disarmament. In order to function effectively, the

¹⁸Those visitors included, the Astors, Mr. and Mrs. Norman Davis, Mr. and Mrs. Vincent Massey, Sir Thomas and Lady Inskip, Sir Walter and Lady Layton, Arnold Toynbee, Lothian and Jones.

¹⁹Thomas Jones, op. cit., 178-181.

League needed authority. This authority, although Labour refused to recognize it, would ultimately rest on the military potential of the members of the League. But where did that leave disarmament? The difficulty in which Labour found itself in the inter-war period in respect to foreign policy, was derived from its failure to solve this dilemma.²⁰ The failure of the Disarmament Conference in October 1933 made little perceptible change in Labour policy, for instead of stressing the reduction of armaments it merely began opposing their increase. The Abyssinian conflict drove Labour's perplexity to a new height. Should the risk of war be run in an effort to prevent war? Was the League intended to prevent war or simply to preserve peace? To the pacifists like George Lansbury the issue, in this case was clear. When his party endorsed the League's policy of sanctions against Italy, he promptly resigned his position of House leader.²¹ Here was an ardent proponent of collective security and international morality completely entangled in his own web. Aggression must be punished, but how? Lansbury never decided.

The new leader of the Opposition, Clement Attlee, knew that something more than hope was needed to preserve the peace of Europe. He rallied behind his advocacy of all measures against Italy provided by the League Covenant, the support of the Labour Party Conference, and the

²⁰P. A. Reynolds, British Foreign Policy in the Inter-War Years (London, 1954), 112.

²¹W. S. Churchill, op. cit., 157.

Trades Union Congress.²² Yet, there is no evidence to suggest that the party as a whole was any more willing to run the risk of full scale war than the disillusioned Lansbury had been. However, if Labour was uncertain of the full price of peace, it knew exactly what downpayments it was willing to make. Neither Abyssinia nor the Rhineland was worth a war between the great powers of Europe. As a result, Labour acquiesced in the policy adopted by the Baldwin Government in March 1936. Mr. Dalton explained his party's position to the House of Commons on 26 March:

It is only right to say bluntly and flatly that public opinion in this country would not support and certainly the Labour Party would not support the taking of military sanctions or even economic sanctions against Germany at this time in order to put German troops out of the German Rhineland.²³

The final decision as to the course of action that Britain would pursue in the face of a Rhineland coup lay in the hands of the Cabinet. Before it lay a Foreign Office report based on Military advice, which suggested that hostilities should not be risked for the sake of the demilitarized zone. Within it, sat men like Baldwin, Neville Chamberlain, Simon, Halifax and MacDonald, none of whom had remained unmoved by the persuasions of people like Lord Lothian, Geoffrey Dawson and Thomas Jones. Outside it, remained the expectations of the British public. To Baldwin, nothing was more important than the voice of the electorate.

²²A. F. Havighurst, op. cit., 247.

²³Speech of 26 March 1936, H. of C. Parl. Deb., vol. 310, 1454.

He had risked its displeasure twice in previous years and he had lost an important by-election²⁴ and a Foreign Secretary. Under no circumstances was he willing to run the risk again.

There appears to have been little Cabinet dissent with the policy as proposed by Eden in his original note of 9 March and in the note which followed on 11 March. The Prime Minister, disinterested in foreign affairs and not completely aware of the implications of the whole issue, raised no objection to a policy with which popular sentiment agreed. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Chamberlain, concerned as he was with financing the rearmament program, apparently expressed no disapproval of the Foreign Secretary's proposals. Certainly, he was strongly opposed to any form of sanctions against Germany.²⁵ Mr. MacDonald, the Lord President, also seems to have complied with the opinion of his colleagues. At any rate, he was a tired and infirm man by 1936 and in no position to make his views prevail. Lord Halifax as Lord Privy Seal, was also in agreement with the recommendations of Eden. He acted in concert with the Foreign Secretary throughout the crisis and so it seems safe to suggest his concurrence with the course taken. The views of Sir Eyres-Monsell, First Lord of the Admiralty, remain obscure; however, if one recalls the February report of the service chiefs to Eden it is unlikely that he represented a voice of dissent. Moreover, Lord Chatfield, Chief of Naval Staff in 1936, makes it clear that the Admiralty was primarily concerned with the Mediterranean situation.²⁶ If the paucity of comment

²⁴East Fulham, 25 October 1933.

²⁵K. Feiling, The Life of Neville Chamberlain (London, 1946), 279.

²⁶Lord Chatfield, op. cit., 87-92.

in their memoirs is any indication, neither Sir John Simon at the Home Office nor Mr. Duff Cooper at the War Office appear to have taken much interest in the March crisis.²⁷ Both were involved in the developing rearmament program and the latter was particularly bothered by the difficulties of recruiting.²⁸ In fact this paucity of comment, which is characteristic of both the memoir and biographical material, is perhaps the most striking feature of the British reaction to the Rhineland crisis. Apparently the advice rendered to it had exactly echoed the sentiments of the Cabinet. The Rhineland was simply not a major British interest.

Writing with the benefit of hindsight, it is not difficult to find fault with the policy adopted by Britain in March 1936. It is clear from the evidence revealed at Nuremberg²⁹ and elsewhere³⁰ that any indication of Anglo-French resistance would likely have been met by a complete withdrawal of German forces from the left bank of the Rhine. Although more doubtful, it seems possible that, had the March coup been met with force, the Nazi method of the *fait accompli* would have fallen into disrepute. In short, it is justifiable to state that a more resolute stand on the part of the western powers would at the very least have

²⁷It is possible of course that neither Simon nor Duff Cooper were consulted in March 1936.

²⁸A. Duff Cooper, Old Men Forget (London, 1954), 195.

²⁹I.M.T., III, 57.

³⁰Dr. Paul Schmidt, Hitler's Interpreter (London, 1951), 41.

reconfirmed the Reich's respect for the Anglo-French entente.

The assets of hindsight, however, are mingled with its perils. Unable to foresee the events which were to grip Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland, the British Government in 1936 could only operate on its own and its advisory bodies' assumptions. Of the assumptions dealing with the Rhineland, two stood out in relief. First, the Rhineland was not worth a war or even hostilities with the Third Reich. Secondly, British public opinion would consider the re-establishment of German military sovereignty in the zone a justifiable redress of a legitimate grievance. It is then unworthy to attack a policy which was entirely faithful to the precepts upon which it was supposed to be based.

The conclusion cannot be avoided, that the views and wishes of the British government merely confirmed a decision already taken by France. Locarno had provided the initiative to the victim, not the guarantor. Had France declared the Rhineland violation flagrant and acted immediately, the guarantors were obligated to follow whatever course of action she chose. After the League Council had found the Reich guilty of the violation, France again had the right to call on Britain and Italy. The following remark of Eden corroborates this view, "Through all these days, France was entitled at any time to say 'We March' and call upon us to follow."³¹ The initiative lay with France and with that initiative the responsibility for the success or failure of the German fait accompli.

³¹The Earl of Avon, op. cit., 353.

CHAPTER VIII

FRENCH MALAISE

A brief explanation for French inaction in March 1936 might be found in the word malaise. France in the nineteen-thirties suffered from a disease which sapped her will to resist. Since the conclusion of the first war, she had been obsessed with the problem of sécurité. But in 1936, an incomplete and inadequately fortified wall contributed to her conviction that the presence of German troops on her frontier would not make her more vulnerable. The Maginot line had been constructed in part to enable a gradual and efficient mobilization of French forces. But in 1936, the presence of both Nazi and Bolshevik problems confused French vision and made it difficult to determine which of the two was the more serious. Confusion, heightened by the fear of domestic upheaval and external peril, threw France into a deepseated shock. She remained indifferent to the warnings of those few who remained untouched by this intellectual and spiritual paralysis; for they were but a few. The paralysis spread widely and penetrated deeply. Throughout the government and the nation, in the Foreign Office, in the army, in the economy, and in politics that malaise was present, ugly and alarming.

The decision of the Quai d'Orsay to forfeit France's right to a unilateral act of resistance and particularly the debate over the legal interpretation of the Locarno pact were clear indications of

French ills. The main issue in this debate was not whether France should act immediately, but whether Locarno provided her with the right to act. The author of a Foreign Office Note of 14 January examined the possibility of a violation of the Rhenish statute of Locarno.¹ His analysis of the provision of the Locarno pact for flagrant aggression is most illuminating. In the event of flagrant aggression, the author concluded, the guarantors were obligated to provide immediate assistance to the victim. This was perfectly true. However, what the note fails to mention is that this assistance was to come only after the victim "has been able to satisfy itself that this violation constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and that...immediate action is necessary."² The responsibility for deciding upon the nature of the violation unquestionably lay with the victim. The refusal on the part of some people in the Foreign Office to recognize this fact indicated to some extent the weakening of France's will to resist.

M. Flandin appears to have been no more confident of France's right to act immediately. He testified in 1946 that the Locarno agreement had stipulated that the League had to declare "that the Locarno pact had been violated and that there had been a breach of the treaties, before the signatories of the Locarno pact of mutual assistance could intervene militarily."³ Unfortunately, no indication has been given as

¹ Author and destination unknown, note of 14 January 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 53, 79.

² The Locarno Agreements and the League of Nations, in The Monthly Summary of the League of Nations, December 1925, 4. See my Appendix A.

³ Le Procès Flandin, 73.

to which type of violation he was referring. If he meant precisely what he said, he had apparently overlooked the distinction between flagrant and non-flagrant violations drawn by Locarno itself. Either Flandin was unaware of the special provision for flagrant violation, an unlikely possibility, or he had personally dismissed any thought of resistance before the League was consulted. His memoirs are merely confirmation of his confusion over this most pressing problem. In another statement even more indicative of his doubt, he has written:

...the text of the Treaty of Locarno, which expressly provided for the case of an infraction in the demilitarized state of the Rhineland, gave us the right to act after the breach had been announced, and perhaps [author's italics] even before, although this point was contested by Great Britain.⁴

There is still no distinction between a flagrant and a non-flagrant violation. The result of Flandin's preceding remark has been more confusion. For if the violation were non-flagrant, the victim simply did not have the right to act before it received the League's decision. If the violation were flagrant, it certainly did have the right to act before consulting the League. The Locarno Pact was not free from ambiguity, but that ambiguity should not have misled the Quai d'Orsay, unless it preferred to be misled.⁵

⁴P. E. Flandin, op. cit., 204.

⁵Note: In his trial, Flandin said that France could not act before the League's decision. In his memoirs, he said perhaps France could have acted before. In Les Événements, he said that he agreed "personnellement" with the view that "nous avions le droit, en vertu du traité de Locarno, de réagir immédiatement," I, 149.

What is known of the attitude of M. Alexis Léger makes this whole question more baffling. General Gamelin reported that the Secretary-General of the Foreign Office believed that Britain would follow France if the latter acted immediately.⁶ The evidence provided by the post-war commission of inquiry confirms the view that Léger felt France had the right to act before consulting Geneva.⁷ One must remember too that his close association with Briand, one of the authors of the Locarno Pact, made Léger's views particularly authoritative. Nonetheless, in contrast to the opinions of the Secretary-General, the Foreign Office and the Foreign Minister remained uncertain of the French right to act.

If Flandin and Léger were to some extent at odds over the legal interpretation of Locarno, their views coincided with respect to the price France would pay in order to exercise the initiative. Neither was willing to run the risk of alienating Great Britain. According to Elizabeth Cameron, Léger's view was that:

No new ally was worth the price of estrangement from Britain. Her position must be reckoned with, her confidence maintained against all odds, even if necessary at the high cost of sacrificing the initiative for France.⁸

Although the 'initiative' mentioned here was not specifically that involved in the Locarno issue, it certainly indicated Léger's feelings in 1936. He himself did not believe that immediate action on the part of France

⁶M. G. Gamelin, op. cit., 202.

⁷Les Événements, III, 574.

⁸G. A. Craig and F. Gibert, The Diplomats, 1919-1939, II, 383.

would sever the ties with England, but he was in no position to ignore the feelings of the Foreign Minister. Flandin, having been informed by ambassador Corbin that, "the British Government has let us know that it wishes France would take no measure which involves the future without first consulting her,"⁹ was simply not prepared to run the risk of alienating Britain. The bonds between Britain and France were reconfirmed by France's decision in 1936. But what had been intended as a bond of strength had become a justification for weakness.

One of the more interesting features of inter-war diplomacy was the role adopted by the military service chiefs. Rather than representing the voice of militancy, the General Staffs in Britain, France and Germany proved to be a voice of moderation and restraint. The chief representatives of the Reichswehr warned the Führer of the army's inability to support the aggressive foreign policy of the Third Reich.¹⁰ In 1935 it was the British Admiralty that protested against the folly of British policy in the Mediterranean. The Navy, it argued, was unable to support that policy without reducing its commitments in other parts of the globe.¹¹ In France, the General Staff complained of the obligations which foreign policy imposed upon it, obligations it felt were too rigorous for the

⁹Le Procès Flandin, 74.

¹⁰See E. M. Robertson, op. cit., 56, I.M.T., X, 218, and François-Poncet to Flandin, telegrams of 15 January 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 59, 85-86.

¹¹Lord Chatfield, op. cit., 89.

strength of French forces.¹² The Reichswehr, however, still took the risk of sending its troops into the demilitarized zone, and the British navy collected and reinforced its Mediterranean Fleet at Alexandria. Their will to resist had not disappeared.

If German and British military thought was conservative, French military thought suffered from malaise. What spirit of resistance was exhibited in the French Cabinet during 7 to 8 March came not from the military, Maurin, Piétri or Déat but from the civilian ministers such as Sarraut, Delbos, Paul-Boncour and Mandel. Gamelin, the Commander-in-Chief, insisted that the Cabinet must decide not only on France's right to act but also whether the nation was capable of acting. The government was involved in a crisis and yet neither the Foreign Minister nor the War Minister would dare make specific recommendations about the action to be taken. This abdication of responsibility which characterized France in the nineteen-thirties is perhaps the clearest sign of the sickness to which she had succumbed.

If the General Staff refused to advocate any one course of action, what information did it provide for the Cabinet to decide upon? What sort of military plans did it present? Finally, what sort of role did it envisage for itself in the defence of French security?

Because of the absence of Cabinet minutes, it is impossible to know with certainty the estimates presented of the comparative strengths

¹²Paradoxically, the army supported the pact with Russia and the military convention with Italy in the hope that new commitments would help solve the problem of meeting old obligations in eastern Europe. See Paul-Marie De la Gorce, The French Army, A Military-Political History (New York, 1963), 256.

of the French and German armies. The French diplomatic documents, however, have included certain estimates which the Military High Committee consulted in January 1936. One note in particular has special significance for it referred to "the imbalance between our military forces and those of our principal adversary."¹³ The note began with an evaluation of what the Abyssinian conflict had meant to the security of the French north-eastern frontier. Since Mussolini's drift from Stresa, French forces previously removed from the south-eastern borders had to be returned. Consequently, the French force in the north-east was necessarily reduced to a little more than ten divisions. On the other hand, the note stated that Germany had a regular army comprising twenty-nine divisions. The total strength of German effectives, including military police and auxiliary forces, was estimated at 790,000 men. Moreover, the report added, by 1937 that total would have reached one million. At the meeting of the Military High Committee in which these estimates were discussed, Fabry, the Minister of War, acknowledged their accuracy:

To the million men Germany could have under arms in peace time as early as 1936, France will oppose certainly important effectives but such as will find themselves still more inferior numerically if no new measure is undertaken.¹⁴

Furthermore, on the basis of the information provided about the modernization of German artillery and the development of mechanized divisions,

¹³Note from the Army Staff to the Military High Committee, of 18 January 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 82, 116.

¹⁴Account of a meeting of the Military High Committee, of 18 January 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 83, 122.

Fabry concluded: "From the point of view of matériel, Germany is about to exceed us decisively."¹⁵

It seems reasonable to assume that, with certain minor statistical modifications, this was the nature of the estimates presented to the Cabinet on 7 to 8 March. As exaggerated as the figures on German forces were, and as disorganized and ill-equipped as the German army was in early 1936, the pessimism of these reports was generally accepted as a reliable estimate of the military situation. These reports were optimistic only in respect to the impregnable eastern frontier. As long as French troops refused to be enticed beyond the Maginot line, French sécurité would remain uncompromised.

If the Army's evaluation of the military situation was bleak, the plan of action which it presented to the Cabinet insured the fact that no offensive operations would be seriously contemplated. In fact, no offensive plans were recommended or even presented to the Cabinet. Two examples of General Maurin's views are perhaps the most indicative of the thorough disrepute into which the policy of intervention had fallen since Poincaré's action of 1923. In March 1935, Deputy Maurin asked the Chamber:

How can one think that we still dream of the offensive when we have spent millions to establish a fortified barrier? Would we be mad enough to advance in front of this wall into some escapade?¹⁶

One year later, as Minister of War, Maurin informed Flandin of the plans

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Maurin's speech of 15 March 1935, Débats, 1045.

prepared to counteract an open violation of the Rhenish statute. Outside the normal diplomatic actions, there were, Maurin concluded, certain military steps that could be taken; however, without exception the proposed steps were defensive in nature. Measures ranging from reconnaissance operations on the frontiers to the reinforcement of fortress troops¹⁷ indicated that France was merely capable of containing the German peril, not removing it. Any idea of proceeding into the zone was firmly dismissed either because France would appear to be the aggressor or because Britain would not approve of it. In the light of the General Staff's tacit refusal to become involved in any action which did not directly threaten French security, or in short, which was not an attack on French soil, it is imperative to see the role it envisaged for itself.

If there was one lesson France felt she had learned from the first war, it was that about the importance of war matériel. A clear reflection of the impact of this lesson was French insistence at the Disarmament Conference of 1932 to 1933 that a nation's war potential be considered in determining the level to which it was asked to disarm. Throughout the nineteen-twenties, legislation was approved whereby France could be more easily turned into a nation at arms, a nation capable of providing the vital war matériel. Proceeding from the concept of stockpiling matériel it was logical to conceive an army 'stockpiled' as it were, within the frontiers, close to its supplies, easily transported and under the eyes of its central command. The emphasis, was placed

¹⁷Maurin to Flandin, dispatch of 17 February 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 196, 291.

on, "the ability of current matériel to obstruct offensive operations, prevent a war of movement and bestow tactical advantages upon the military force entrenched in fixed defensive positions."¹⁸ From such views André Maginot conceived his famous fortifications.

Another lesson learned from the first war that was an integral part of this defensive thinking, was the value of reserve troops. Owing to their generally commendable performance against the Kaiser's forces, there developed in the inter-war period a confidence in the ability of the reservists to defend French security. But, again the emphasis was on defence, for reservists lacked the training and discipline to undertake extensive offensive operations. Moreover, owing to its fear of standing armies and professional soldiers, the Left in France strongly preferred the reserve.

Hence, Maginot's scheme of an elaborate and supposedly impregnable barrier on the eastern frontier drew support from all sides. Not only did it satisfy the Left but it pleased those who championed the causes of patriotism and national security. Such a barrier would ensure the possibility of a gradual and efficient mobilization of all French forces. At the same time, it would offer protection to France's important industrial and mineral resources so close to the Rhine. Finally, it would provide the best defence during the perilous "lean years". Since the birth-rate had been abnormally low between 1914 to 1918, there would be far fewer youths coming of military age between 1935 to 1939. The Maginot line would require far less troops than had the open trenches of

¹⁸R. D. Challener, op. cit., 217.

the great war.¹⁹

The Maginot line seemed to be a panacea for France's most agonizing problem, the problem of sécurité. Another aim was to stimulate France's morale. Instead it proved to be a narcotic which deadened her will to resist, for the need to resist had been removed. The French military was no less influenced by it than the French public. The General Staff could not contemplate offensive operations in 1936 because they were incompatible with the Line's very existence. It could not even become too perturbed by the implications of the German *fait accompli* which had not threatened the Maginot Line. France had retreated from the Rhine long before March 1936. The 1919 view of the Rhineland as a buffer zone between Germany and France had been abandoned. No longer was the Rhenish area held to be of primary strategic value for the Third Republic. The reoccupation of the zone simply meant that the 'no man's land' had been reclaimed. Pétain had triumphed over Foch.

The malaise which affected French military thought in the nineteen-thirties also extended to the French economy. France's emergence from the previous decade as the strongest military power in Europe was matched by the growth of her economic vitality. But the 'thirties brought more complex problems which increasingly confounded both military and economic planning. For the tacticians, twentieth century technological advances were of dubious value. The importance of the mobility and firepower of armoured divisions was sadly underrated. For the economists the 1929

¹⁹Ibid., 221.

slump and the depression that followed produced a situation which they too seemed incapable of handling.

In comparison to what was happening elsewhere in the world, France in the early nineteen-thirties seemed to have been miraculously spared. Her exports had suffered a slight decline and her imports had correspondingly increased, but her industrial production remained fairly stable. It was the depreciation of the pound sterling in 1931 that hurt France. With her prices considerably higher than those of her competitors, France experienced the first pangs of the depression to which she would succumb. Two alternatives lay before her. She could follow the British and American example of devaluing the currency in order to bring her prices into line, or she could adopt deflationary measures. Owing to the French public's association of devaluation with the inflation it had endured in the nineteen-twenties, only one course was feasible. France resorted to deflationary tactics and tighter systems of import controls.

As was expected prices did fall but not uniformly. Retail prices dropped easily but costs did not. The remedy for reduced profits seemed to be the decrease in the number of employees and a reduction of wages of those who remained. Consequently, as the index of industrial production dipped from one hundred in 1929 to seventy-three in 1935, unemployment soared from 273,000 in 1932 to 432,000 in 1936.²⁰ For those still employed, wage reductions eliminated the advantage of the

²⁰W. A. Lewis, Economic Survey, 1919-1939 (London, 1953), 99.

decrease in retail prices. More severely hit were agricultural producers, for farm prices fell more than industrial prices. Since the number of workers engaged in agricultural production was considerably larger than that of those in industrial production, their discontent was of greater importance to French politicians.

Naturally, government finances were equally hard hit. A decline in prices meant a decline in revenue which in turn necessitated a reduction in expenditures. The salaries of government employees were drastically cut. But a reduction in expenditures was virtually impossible with the increased payments of unemployment benefits. The net result of this conundrum was a budget deficit which had as its core an increase in the public debt between 1931 to 1935 of fifty-eight million francs.²¹

Laval's frantic efforts to save the franc and balance the budget set the stage for the Sarraut Government. Taxation was increased and expenditures were more severely cut but the budget remained unbalanced. In an effort to pacify and assist the primary producers, agriculture was subsidized and farm prices increased. This in turn increased the cost of living and, as a result, the discontent within the towns. Neither the Government nor the populace had the fortitude to face devaluation of the franc. Here was malaise in another guise, but with the same results: discontent, fear and despair.

By the time Sarraut came to office, the economic situation had reached an impasse. The farmers were irritated by the adverse terms of trade, the industrialists by decreased profits, the workers by unemployment, the civil service by wage reductions and the financiers by the

²¹ Ibid.

uncertain fate of the franc. The approaching general election remained the sole hope. Owing to the Popular Front's pledge to end deflation, the election would have more than political significance. In effect, it would be a judgment on economic policy. The fate of deflation as opposed to devaluation hung in the balance.

It is only in the light of this economic predicament that one can appreciate the atmosphere in which the Sarraut Cabinet met the Rhineland crisis. In March 1936, France was paralysed by domestic problems, the solutions of which seemed to rest on the outcome of the pending election. This event thoroughly distracted both the government and the people. The crisis in foreign affairs was not viewed as the most serious. Moreover, only by recognizing the state of the national economy can one understand French reactions to the prospect of military reprisals. Regardless of whether Maurin said general mobilization was imperative for any operations, or whether he said that it could be necessary, it is clear that the threat of full scale preparations for war was in the minds of all Frenchmen. What might this have meant to the French economy? It might have meant an expenditure of several billion francs; and this in turn might have meant devaluation, as Sarraut was warned by his Finance Minister, M. Regnier and the Governor of the Bank of France, M. Tannery.²² Sarraut was not the man to argue with the experts, as his performance in the Cabinet over the Rhineland crisis showed. Deflation without devaluation was clearly more desirable to the French than devaluation with inflation.

²²F. L. Schuman, op. cit., 216.

The country could not afford general mobilization and it was not willing to exchange the evils of deflation for those of inflation. What it would be willing to accept remained the secret of the forthcoming election.

The state of the French economy in the nineteen-thirties was rivalled only by that of French parliamentary democracy. While the depression damaged the national economy, parliament fell under the taint of complicity in financial scandal. The February 1934 riots demonstrated on how frail a foundation republican democracy rested. Visibly shaken by the turbulence and violence of the Paris street demonstrations, Daladier resigned his newly acquired office, in spite of the votes of confidence given his government by the Chamber of Deputies. By so doing, the National Assembly threatened to buckle under the weight of popular discontent. Although the riots reflected this profound national unrest, the bloodshed and violence were but a reflection of the feelings of a small minority which had as its nucleus the unemployed Parisian worker. Nonetheless the intellectual guidance provided to the mob by extremists of the Left and Right was basically anti-democratic, anti-parliamentary and anti-republican. Authoritarianism, whether of Communist or Fascist persuasion, appeared to be in the ascendant.

Since liberal democracy had suffered setbacks in the form of a world depression and a bloody Paris riot, it is not surprising that the French electorate would contemplate the introduction of a more efficient form of government. However, in order to assess the relative advantages of Communist and Fascist anti-republicanism, the voter also had to decide which ideology posed the greatest danger to French security. The attitudes adopted by the political parties with regard to foreign affairs would

be an important factor in his decision.

The signature of the Franco-Russian Pact of Mutual Assistance was acclaimed almost unanimously by the French parties. The cause of sécurité had won another victory over the German menace. Ideological differences between France and the Soviet Union were of secondary importance. But within weeks of that signature in, May 1935, those differences increasingly came to play a more prominent role in the thinking of the French Right. On 15 May, Stalin, in accordance with the spirit of the newly signed pact, publicly urged French Communists to support their nation's national defence programmes and to work for the maintenance of French security.²³ From then on, the French Left developed a more patriotic and militaristic attitude toward the problems of foreign affairs.²⁴

What transpired within France during the Abyssinian conflict must have been rather baffling to the French electorate. Formerly the extreme Right wing had made much of its pledges to foster congenial Anglo-French relations and to support unconditionally the League of Nations. Yet in 1935 to 1936, it proved willing to risk a deterioration, though not a severance, of relations with England and did its utmost to undermine League resistance to Mussolini's reckless adventure. The Stresa front remained, in its opinion, the best guarantee against Nazi aggression. The pact with Russia was of subordinate importance. As

²³P. J. Larmour, The French Radical Party in the 1930's (Stanford, 1964), 165-167.

²⁴C. A. Micaud, The French Right and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939 (Durham, N.C., 1943), 48-49.

the Abyssinian conflict went on unabated and the Popular Front found increasing support, the far Right further modified its traditional policy. By the spring of 1936, it was even less sure of whether Bolshevism or National Socialism was the greatest evil. The cry of "Better Hitler than Blum," seemed to indicate a departure from its customary Germanophobia.

In contrast to the abandonment of the League of Nations by the extreme Right, the Communist element in France became a most vociferous champion of that body. Only an advocate of collective security since its intellectual mentor had become a League member in 1934, the far Left in France proved eager to cooperate with British Conservatives in order to make League authority more effective. The Left's new willingness to use the League to contain Fascism came hard upon the heels of the far Right's refusal to further alienate the Duce.

The great chasm between the French political extremes, so strikingly revealed by the Abyssinian crisis, served to obscure the issue for those Deputies who found themselves somewhere between the two points of view. They remained uncertain, the Socialists unwilling to pay homage to Communism, the conservatives reluctant to embrace Fascism. The bitter debate which took place over the ratification of the pact with Russia confirmed the certainty of the extremists and the doubt of the others. France remained incapable of distinguishing which of the new ideologies contained the greater peril.

The events of 7 March confirmed this tragic incapacity. When Premier Sarraut addressed the Chamber of Deputies on 10 March his speech met with no criticism. He was cheered from all benches. No questions

were asked.²⁵ The French press was equally sympathetic to the government's plight. From what one can gather from recent studies and French memoir material,²⁶ neither the Rightist nor the Leftist press demanded anything more than the policy chosen by the government. In fact, little concern was expressed in press or parliament for the implications of the Rhineland coup. Undoubtedly, this complacency was in part attributable to the reputation of the Maginot line and to the great fear for the franc. However, the inability of many in France to determine who was the greatest foe must be held equally responsible for this absence of alarm. To risk war willingly with the Reich in March 1936 was a serious enough gamble. To risk war with a power who was a potential ally against bolshevism seemed folly.

The malaise which gripped France drove her inevitably to the line of least resistance. The frame of mind which induced the Quai d'Orsay to forfeit French initiative, the General Staff to ignore the possibility of unilateral action, the government to avoid devaluation and the politicians to postpone the decision of which ideological threat was the greater, was characteristic of French thought in the nineteen-thirties. The post-war generation was now at the polls, unwilling to forgive any party which threatened the return of the deprivation and misery of war-time. For them, war had no glamour, only a promise to make present problems infinitesimal in comparison. They knew little of the Locarno

²⁵Sarraut's speech of 10 March 1936, Débats, 854-856.

²⁶See P. J. Larmour, op. cit., 198. Pierre Renouvin, Les Crises du XX^e Siècle, II, De 1929 À 1945 (Paris, 1958), 97. C. A. Micaud, op. cit., 89. P. E. Flandin, op. cit., 199.

provisions, other than the fact that Germany was prohibited from entering the demilitarized zone. They were unfamiliar with the technical backwardness of their military planners. They understood little of what a war economy might do, or might not do for their franc; and they were only partially acquainted with the political implications of bolshevism and fascism. But they knew beyond certainty that unilateral action on the part of France could result in the loss of friends and allies, that the Maginot line was impenetrable, that mobilization was expensive and tax consuming, and that, barring an attack on French soil, the Third Reich might be useful in barring the gates to Russian bolshevism.

Politis, the Greek ambassador to Paris, reported that the diplomatic circle in the French capital was "struck by the type of pacifist depression which appears in many quarters. They seem to want to preserve the peace at any price, to hide behind what they call 'the Maginot wall' and let events pass outside as they may."²⁷ This was the depression in France, economic, political, military, social and psychological; a deep and diffusive malaise which robbed her of all but hope.

²⁷Laroche to Flandin, telegram of 2 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 270, 379.

CHAPTER IX

THE EPILOGUE

Jean Zay described the Rhineland crisis of March 1936 as "le relais ou les destins changèrent de chevaux."¹ Used with discretion, comments such as this can be of some value. The March crisis certainly had an impact on many Foreign Offices in Europe but whether it produced sharp reversals in foreign policy remains a subject for examination. Germany had moved into the demilitarized zone and her bluff had not been called. Hitler's success could have far-reaching implications not only for his own regime but also for the Locarno powers and the countries of the eastern Europe. In the years following the crisis, the continent's gaze ranged back and forth between Nazi Germany and the Anglo-French entente. The peace of Europe seemed to depend on the triangle between Berlin, Paris, and London.

In spite of their own responsibility for the outcome of the crisis, Belgium and Italy were clearly impressed by Anglo-French apathy. It took Belgium only seven months to extricate herself from her Locarno obligations and to return to her traditionally neutralist policy. Commitments which could involve her in hostilities with the Reich seemed a poor exchange for guarantees which the Rhineland crisis had proved worthless.² The guarantor was as disillusioned as the guaranteed.

¹Jean Zay, op. cit., 65.

²R.I.I.A., Survey, 1936, 351.

Although Mussolini had little intention of becoming involved in hostilities with Germany for the sake of Locarno, he was disturbed by the hollowness of the Anglo-French entente.³ Britain and France continued to apply sanctions against Italy, yet they had only resorted to words with the Führer. Italian contempt for western hypocrisy, already nurtured by the Austrian putsch of 1934, was strengthened by the events of March 1936. Italy still did not repudiate the now defunct Stresa front and Italo-German relations did not immediately improve. However, the nature of the Anglo-French reaction to the remilitarization of the Rhineland no doubt encouraged the Duce to intervene in the Spanish Civil War. The Italian predicament created by intervention in Spain would necessitate the future rapprochement with the Reich.

The Spanish crisis was important for its effects not only on French-Italian relations but also on the ties between the Third Republic and the Soviet Union. Irritated by the refusal of Britain and France to give heed to Litvinov's demands to the League Council in March 1936, Stalin was not prepared to watch another sell-out to Fascism.⁴ Initially encouraged by the presence of a Left wing Popular Front government in France, the Soviets intervened in Spain more subtly but less effectively than Italy. The foreign policy of the Blum government, however, confirmed the suspicions harboured by Russia since the Rhineland crisis.⁵

³E. M. Robertson, op. cit., 93.

⁴Max Beloff, The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1929-1941, II, 1936-1941 (London, 1949), 50.

⁵G. F. Kennan, Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin (Boston, 1961), 304.

Essentially owing to domestic pressures, France adopted a policy of non-intervention toward the events in Spain. The West, the Soviets concluded, had opted in favour of Fascism. It seemed doubtful that Britain and France could be relied upon to contain the German peril. Instead a more effective solution might have to be found.⁶ The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact of 1939 in part was the culmination of Russian suspicions of the western democracies, suspicions that the events of March 1936 had done a good deal to foster. The Spanish Civil War and the Munich Conference would bring that concern to maturity.

French inaction in 1936 also impressed the Polish Foreign Office. The Poles were relieved because their alliance with France had not drawn them into a conflict in western Europe but were disturbed by the blow France's reputation had suffered in the east.⁷ The independence of Polish policy partly rested on that reputation which served as an insurance against both Bolshevik and Nazi aggression. After the remilitarization of the Rhineland, Beck seems to have questioned the value of that insurance. Closer ties were made between Poland and her Baltic and Scandinavian neighbors. After August 1936, Polish-Roumanian relations were made more cordial owing to the cooperation Beck received from the new Roumanian Foreign Minister, Victor Antonescu. Moreover, after Beck's trip to Belgrade in May 1936 an entente was arrived at with Yugoslavia. In short, after March 1936 Poland had found it necessary

⁶Ibid., 305.

⁷Roman Debicki, Foreign Policy of Poland, 1919-1939 (New York, 1962), 104-105.

to conclude new pacts of friendship. Whether this surge of activity was prompted by the Rhineland crisis remains a subject for speculation. However, it is clear that the March crisis had not severed Polish relations with France. If anything it had improved them.⁸ In the spring of that year a new French loan to Poland was floated and in the summer, joint military talks were held for the purpose of exchanging information. The events of March 1936 may have forced Poland to re-examine her bonds with France but certainly had not led her to discard them.

As in the case of Poland, Roumania seems to have reassessed her foreign policy in the light of the remilitarization of the Rhineland. France's failure to resist Germany in western Europe surely must have raised doubts as to her fidelity to the alliances with the countries of eastern Europe. Only four months after the March crisis, King Carol dismissed his Francophile Foreign Minister Titulescu. Although that dismissal seems to have been prompted by domestic issues, the implications of that act seemed an ill omen for French-Roumanian relations. From the spring of 1936, Roumania drifted between the desires of Czechoslovakia who wanted a Roumanian reconciliation with Russia and those of Yugoslavia who was gravitating toward a rapprochement with the Reich.⁹ Roumania refused to make a choice. She remained suspicious of Stalin's Russia and took special pains to give no offence to Berlin. Yet she was equally fearful of Germany's championship of Magyar

⁸Ibid., 108.

⁹R. W. Seton-Watson, Eastern Europe Between the Wars, 1918-1941 (Hamden Conn., 1962), 391.

revisionism. By authorizing the construction of the Bukovina-Transylvania railway which might carry Russian troops to the Czech frontier, King Carol made it clear that he still valued the French eastern alliance system. The Rhineland crisis may have compelled Roumania to re-evaluate the bonds with France. If so, they were found still to be in Roumania's best interests.

In spite of the deep-seated antipathy of the Yugoslav people for Nazi Germany, the regime of Regent Prince Paul and Dr. Milan Stoyadinovic proved more susceptible to the Reich's persuasions. The death of King Alexander in Marseilles two years before had marked the beginning of a deterioration of French-Yugoslav relations. Paul, regardless of his affection for England, was far less attached to the French satellite system;¹⁰ and his premier obstinately refused to be a tool for any nation. Stoyadinovic's distrust of France and Britain came to overshadow his fear of Nazi or Fascist aggression. He believed that the western powers would abandon their eastern friends in the event of a new crisis, and that Yugoslavia's financial loss in the sanctions against Italy could be compensated by new commercial agreements with the Reich. Yugoslav-Italian relations also improved. The political and economic pact that Yugoslavia made with Italy in March 1937 was another indication of the weakening of French-Yugoslav ties.¹¹ But it is imperative to recognize that this reorientation of Yugoslav foreign policy had begun long before 1936. The Rhineland crisis had not produced it. It

¹⁰Ibid., 389.

¹¹F. L. Schuman, op. cit., 248.

appears to have confirmed and abetted it.

On the surface, Czechoslovakia remained the one French satellite in eastern Europe to accept without question France's policy in March 1936.¹² In fact she too undertook a re-examination of her foreign policy. Through the fall of 1936, secret negotiations were carried on, negotiations which were characterized by Premier Benes's insistence on closer cooperation and trade ties with the Reich.¹³ There is little doubt that had the Führer been willing to pay the Czech price an amelioration of relations between the two countries would have been achieved. The Czechs asked for a nonaggression pact. The Führer refused. The Czechs then suggested a renewal of their arbitration treaty of 1925. Again Hitler refused. The Hossbach memorandum of 5 November 1937 has shown the reason for Hitler's reluctance. Czechoslovakia was to be destroyed. Nonaggression pacts or arbitration treaties would be unnecessary impediments.¹⁴ Quite clearly, the Rhineland crisis had alarmed Czechoslovakia. She too had made an attempt to solve the German problem independently of France. The attempt failed, however, and the bonds with France and Russia were reconfirmed. The events of March 1936 had made no effective change in the Franco-Czech alliance.

¹²R. W. Seton-Watson, op. cit., 248.

¹³G. L. Weinberg, "Secret Hitler-Benes Negotiations in 1936-1937," The Journal of Central European Affairs, XIX, January 1960, 366-374.

¹⁴Ibid.

Perhaps no nation was more affected by the Rhineland crisis, or with greater significance, than the Third Reich. By 9 March the tension and anxiety had lifted in Berlin. The initial joy returned; and everywhere one could see written, Der Führer hat Recht.¹⁵ The Führer was right; the extremists and the daring were right. The voices of caution were wrong. The reoccupation of the Rhineland had been Hitler's greatest gamble to date. Had he lost, the essentially conservative voice of the Reichswehr would have won a moral victory, which in time may have been translated into more practical results. But extremism had been vindicated; henceforth it would remain fundamental to German foreign policy. As well as having political significance, the Rhineland coup meant a strategic victory for the Reich.¹⁶ Construction began almost immediately, if cautiously, on the German Siegfried Line. Although this barrier remained inadequate until the eve of war, it confirmed French belief that offensive operations against Germany would be outrageous folly. Only theoretically in terms of German fortifications, but practically in terms of French military thought, Germany's western frontier was secured. Her intentions in eastern and south-eastern Europe were much closer to being realized.

The Anglo-French entente also could not avoid the impact of the Rhineland crisis; however, the impact in this case can be exaggerated. For instance, other than recognizing the fact that Hitler had shown greater daring than previously, neither Britain nor France appears to

¹⁵ French consulate in Hamburg to Flandin, dispatch of 19 March 1936, D.D.F., II, 1, No. 467, 615.

¹⁶ A. Bullock, op. cit., 346.

have detected a perceptible change in the intensity of the German problem. On the whole, though repelled by Nazi methods, Britain approved the return of German military sovereignty to the Rhineland; and for all her cries of despair, France was sure that the Maginot Line had prevented the coup from being a threat to French security.

Moreover, it would be an exaggeration to suggest that France surrendered her diplomatic independence in March 1936. In fact, that independence had been forfeit from the moment France recognized Anglo-French solidarity as the answer to the German problem. In short, that independence was abandoned the moment Clemenceau placed the entente with Britain and America above his desire for harsher terms against Germany. On the other hand, in the area that remained for manoeuvre in Anglo-French relations, there can be no doubt that the rift that had occurred over Abyssinia was partially healed by the Rhineland crisis. After March 1936 Anglo-French relations became more intimate. France finally had realized that the German problem would have to be solved on Britain's terms.

Clearly, those terms did not include any new commitments on the continent for Britain. In fact, the events of March 1936 partially freed Britain from her only written commitment to western Europe. The demilitarized zone was gone. No longer could it entangle Britain in a Franco-German dispute. To Britain the proposals of 19 March meant not a new obligation but a restatement of an old. In effect, the proposals of 19 March were another guarantee of the inviolability of the French and Belgian eastern frontiers. The provision for Staff talks had added

new vigour to this pledge but in principle it was the traditional understanding that Britain would fight in defence of Belgian or French soil. The Rhineland crisis had produced no substantial modification of British commitments either east or west of the Rhine.

Neither is there reason to believe that the German fait accompli ended the period of drift in Anglo-French foreign policy. Hitler paid for his Saturday coup only with peaceful assurances. Even before Mussolini defeated the Abyssinian Emperor, sanctions were withdrawn. They had been applied and enforced without enthusiasm. Partly as a result of the lessons they had learned from the Abyssinian crisis, Britain and France drifted around Spain instead of into it. It made little difference. Still another potentially hostile power was established on still another French frontier.

No matter how sympathetic one tries to be to British foreign policy during the Baldwin age, one cannot avoid the conclusion that neither Simon, Hoare nor Eden arrived at a policy that was based on definite principles. Ironically, when Eden repudiated Mr. Chamberlain's policy of rapprochement with Italy in 1938, he confused the former policy of meaningless concessions with a positive policy designed to prevent a Nazi-Fascist coalition. Eden's error is still perpetuated, for Chamberlain's positive, if misguided, policy of appeasement is still confused with the drift of his predecessors. Chamberlain believed that when the legitimate grievances of the revisionist powers were rectified, Europe would be stabilized under the authority of a European quadrangle. The four diplomatic capitals, London, Berlin, Paris, and Rome would work together in a spirit of mutual trust and cooperation. The Sudetenland

was to be the last stage of reconciliation with the Reich. Munich, like the Hoare-Laval plan, though morally reprehensible, was undertaken in what was felt to be by Chamberlain a new atmosphere of realism. But like Locarno, it contained "l'équivoque". For Chamberlain it was the last concession, for the Führer, the first step to expansion in eastern Europe.

Virtually thirty years removed from the Rhineland crisis of 1936, and assisted by the official documents and memoir material, it is possible to assess the crisis from a new perspective. No longer can there be any doubt that the French Foreign Office and General Staff were persistently warned of the imminence of a coup in the Rhineland. Nor can it be questioned that, except for final consent from their respective Cabinets, Britain and France had in the face of those warnings decided, prior to the crisis, not to risk military intervention in the demilitarized zone. Moreover, in the light of French military thinking, it is clear that the events of March 1936 had little practical effect on French commitments to her eastern allies. The gateway to Germany and eastern Europe had not been closed by the Reich. It had been closed by the Maginot Line and the spirit out of which it was conceived. Equally important is the recognition that France was not unduly alarmed by the remilitarization of the Rhineland. The Chamber of Deputies and the French press condemned the German coup as an example of insolent bravado and a betrayal of the sanctity of treaties, not as a threat to French sécurité. If anything, the failure of Germany to test the Maginot Line seemed confirmation of its effectiveness.

The Rhineland crisis revealed the paradox that underlay the Anglo-French dialogue on the German problem. The inter-war period began and ended with French concern for sécurité. Similarly, it began and ended with the French conviction that sécurité could best be achieved by means of Anglo-French joint strength and deterrent potential over Germany. The maintenance of the entente with Britain consequently became the second of France's problems. However, this problem occupied so much of French attention that the fundamental question of sécurité tended to be obscured. After the Ruhr intervention of 1923, the problem of securing British assistance had to be negotiated by France whenever the German peril was intensified. The entente with Britain had entangled the Third Republic yet France lacked the will to extricate herself. The entente had become a convenience for inaction. France's second problem had become a justification for ignoring the first.

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APPENDIX A

ANNEX A. TREATY OF MUTUAL GUARANTEE BETWEEN GERMANY, BELGIUM, FRANCE, GREAT BRITAIN AND ITALY.*

(Translation.)

The President of the German Reich, His Majesty the King of the Belgians, the President of the French Republic, and His Majesty the King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, Emperor of India, His Majesty the King of Italy;

Anxious to satisfy the desire for security and protection which animates the peoples upon whom fell the scourge of the war of 1914-1918;

Taking note of the abrogation of the treaties for the neutralisation of Belgium, and conscious of the necessity of ensuring peace in the area which has so frequently been the scene of European conflicts;

Animated also with the sincere desire of giving to all the signatory Powers concerned supplementary guarantees within the framework of the Covenant of the League of Nations and the treaties in force between them;

Have determined to conclude a treaty with these objects, and have appointed as their plenipotentiaries:

The President of the German Reich:

Dr. Hans Luther, Chancellor of the Reich;
Dr. Gustav Stresemann, Minister of Foreign Affairs;

His Majesty the King of the Belgians:

M. Emile Vandervelde, Minister of Foreign Affairs.

The President of the French Republic:

M. Aristide Briand, Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs.

* The Monthly Summary of the League of Nations, December 1925,
The Locarno Agreements and the League of Nations, 3-5

His Majesty the King of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland and of the British Dominions beyond the Seas, Emperor of India:

The Right Honourable Stanley Baldwin, M.P., First Lord of the Treasury and Prime Minister;

The Right Honourable Joseph Austen Chamberlain, M.P., Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs.

His Majesty the King of Italy:

The Honourable Vittorio Scialoja, Senator of the Kingdom;

Who, having communicated their full powers, found in good and due form, have agreed as follows:

Article 1.

The high contracting parties collectively and severally guarantee, in the manner provided in the following articles, the maintenance of the territorial status quo resulting from the frontiers between Germany and Belgium and between Germany and France and the inviolability of the said frontiers as fixed by or in pursuance of the Treaty of Peace signed at Versailles on the 28th June, 1919, and also the observance of the stipulations of articles 42 and 43 of the said treaty concerning the demilitarised zone.

Article 2.

Germany and Belgium, and also Germany and France, mutually undertake that they will in no case attack or invade each other or resort to war against each other.

This stipulation shall not, however, apply in the case of -

1. The exercise of the right of legitimate defence, that is to say, resistance to a violation of the undertaking contained in the previous paragraph or to a flagrant breach of articles 42 or 43 of the said Treaty of Versailles, if such breach constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and by reason of the assembly of armed forces in the demilitarised zone immediate action is necessary.

2. Action in pursuance of article 16 of the Covenant of the League of Nations.

3. Action as the result of a decision taken by the Assembly or by the Council of the League of Nations or in pursuance of article 15, paragraph 7, of the Covenant of the League of Nations, provided that in this last event the action is directed against a State which was the first to attack.

Article 3.

In view of the undertakings entered into in article 2 of the present treaty, Germany and Belgium and Germany and France undertake to settle by peaceful means and in the manner laid down herein all questions of every kind which may arise between them and which it may not be possible to settle by the normal methods of diplomacy:

Any question with regard to which the parties are in conflict as to their respective rights shall be submitted to judicial decision, and the parties undertake to comply with such decision.

All other questions shall be submitted to a conciliation commission. If the proposals of this commission are not accepted by the two parties, the question shall be brought before the Council of the League of Nations, which will deal with it in accordance with article 15 of the Covenant of the League.

The detailed arrangements for effecting such peaceful settlement are the subject of special agreements signed this day.

Article 4.

1. If one of the high contracting parties alleges that a violation of article 2 of the present treaty or a breach of articles 42 or 43 of the Treaty of Versailles has been or is being committed; it shall bring the question at once before the Council of the League of Nations.

2. As soon as the Council of the League of Nations is satisfied that such violation or breach has been committed, it will notify its finding without delay to the Powers signatory of the present treaty, who severally agree that in such case they will each of them come immediately to the assistance of the Power against whom the act complained of is directed.

3. In case of a flagrant violation of article 2 of the present treaty or of a flagrant breach of articles 42 or 43 of the Treaty of Versailles by one of the high contracting parties, each of the other contracting parties hereby undertakes immediately to come to the help of the party against whom such a violation or breach has been directed as soon as the said Power has been able to satisfy itself that the violation constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and that by reason either of the crossing of the frontier or of the outbreak of hostilities or of the assembly of armed forces in the demilitarised zone immediate action is necessary. Nevertheless, the Council of the League of Nations, which will be seized of the question in accordance with the first paragraph of this article, will issue its findings, and the high contracting parties undertake to act in accordance with the recommendations of the Council provided that they are concurred in by all the members other than the representatives of the parties which have engaged in hostilities.

Article 5.

The provisions of article 3 of the present treaty are placed under the guarantee of the high contracting parties as provided by the following stipulations:

If one of the Powers referred to in article 3 refuses to submit a dispute to peaceful settlement or to comply with an arbitral or judicial decision and commits a violation of article 2 of the present treaty or a breach of articles 42 or 43 of the Treaty of Versailles, the provisions of article 4 shall apply.

Where one of the Powers referred to in article 3 without committing a violation of article 2 of the present treaty or a breach of articles 42 or 43 of the Treaty of Versailles, refuses to submit a dispute to peaceful settlement or to comply with an arbitral or judicial decision, the other party shall bring the matter before the Council of the League of Nations, and the Council shall propose what steps shall be taken; the high contracting parties shall comply with these proposals.

Article 6.

The provisions of the present treaty do not affect the rights and obligations of the high contracting parties under the Treaty of Versailles or under arrangements supplementary thereto, including the agreements signed in London on the 30th August, 1924.

Article 7.

The present treaty, which is designed to ensure the maintenance of peace, and is in conformity with the Covenant of the League of Nations, shall not be interpreted as restricting the duty of the League to take whatever action may be deemed wise and effectual to safeguard the peace of the world.

Article 8.

The present treaty shall be registered at the League of Nations in accordance with the Covenant of the League. It shall remain in force until the Council, acting on a request of one or other of the high contracting parties notified to the other signatory Powers three months in advance, and voting at least by a two-thirds' majority, decides that the League of Nations ensures sufficient protection to the high contracting parties; the treaty shall cease to have effect on the expiration of a period of one year from such decision.

Article 9.

The present treaty shall impose no obligation upon any of the British dominions; or upon India, unless the Government of such dominion, or of India, signifies its acceptance thereof.

Article 10.

The present treaty shall be ratified and the ratifications shall be deposited at Geneva in the archives of the League of Nations as soon as possible.

It shall enter into force as soon as all the ratifications have been deposited and Germany has become a member of the League of Nations.

The present treaty, done in a single copy, will be deposited in the archives of the League of Nations, and the Secretary-General will be requested to transmit certified copies to each of the high contracting parties.

In faith whereof the above-mentioned plenipotentiaries have signed the present treaty

Done at Locarno, the 16th October, 1925.

LUTHER.
STRESEMANN.
EMILE VANDERVELDE.
A. BRIAND.
AUSTEN CHAMBERLAIN.
BENITO MUSSOLINI.

APPENDIX B

REICH WAR MINISTER, BLOMBERG TO THE THREE SERVICE CHIEFS.*

Directive of 2 March, 1936

(Nuremberg Document C-159)

1. The Fuehrer and Reich Chancellor has made the following decision: By reason of the Franco-Russian alliance, the obligations accepted by Germany in the Locarno Treaty, as far as they apply to articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles which refer to the demilitarized zone, are to be regarded as obsolete.

2. Sections of the Army and Air Force will therefore be transferred simultaneously in a surprise move to garrisons of the demilitarized zone. In this connection I issue the following orders:

3. (a) Re-forming his divisional staffs, the C-in-C of the Army is to move forward sections consisting mainly of the VI, IX and V Army Corps into the demilitarized zone in such a way that they will be transferred to permanent garrisons on the Rhine and east of it. Apart from that, one Infantry Battalion shall be transferred to Aachen, one to Trier and one to Saarbruecken. The Regional Police Inspectors West, South West, and South will come entirely under the orders of the C-in-C of the Army for the purpose of incorporating them into the army.

(b) The Reich Air Minister and C-in-C of the Air Force will transfer one fighter squadron each to the area around Cologne and Coblenz, and sections of the AAA into or near such towns on the Lower and Middle Rhine where the most important Rhine bridges are.

4. The movements are to be prepared and synchronized in such a way by the C-in-C of the Army and the C-in-C of the Air Force that the first Staffel, including the battalions assigned to Aachen, Trier and Saarbruecken, and the AAA guns arrive in the Rhine Valley at 1200 hours on Z-day and the first fighter squadron land at the same time.

A second Staffel, comprising all the remaining sections of the Army assigned to the demilitarized zone will follow within 24 hours.

* Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Vol. 6, Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1946, 974-976.

Orders for Z-day will be given at the appropriate time.

5. Marching orders for the troops which are to be transferred, are to be given as late as possible. Every precaution must be taken to shorten the period between the commencement of practical preparations for the actual move and the entry into the demilitarized zone.

The C-in-C of the Army will see to it that the responsible departments of the general and interior administration, of the Police Force, of the municipalities, and of the Party are not informed before 0800 hours on Z-Day about the billeting of Army and Air Force men in their area.

6. To preserve the peaceful character of the operation, military security or advance measures are not to be taken without my express orders.

On Z-Day, from 0800 hours until further notice, however it must be ensured that the command posts of the three services can commence work day and night at short notice. Persons on leave are not to be recalled.

7. If the other powers who have signed the Locarno Treaty reply to the transfer of German troops into the demilitarized zone with military preparations, I reserve the right to decide on any military counter-measures.

In the event of enemy frontier violations with offensive intent, action must be taken in accordance with instructions for taking up position and battle orders.

8. I request: (a) timely information on instructions given in accordance with 3a and 3b.

(b) to be informed continuously on the progress of the transfer of garrisons, starting on Z-Day at 1300 hours (W A. Abteilung L). Counter espionage is being given special instructions.

(c) That suggestions be made to me as soon as possible, as to what advance measures should be put into operation during the first critical stages, in case military preparations by neighbouring states become evident.