THE REMILITARIZATION OF THE RHINELAND

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THE REMILITARIZATION OF THE RHINELAND

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On March 7, 1936, German troops reoccupied the Rhineland, an area which had been demilitarized by the Treaty of Versailles. The reoccupation was carefully planned and carried out by the German Chancellor, Adolph Hitler, against the advice of his General Staff. Hitler had evaluated the international situation and timed his Rhineland move precisely. The reactions of Great Britain and France to his rearmament program, the reintroduction of conscription, and Germany's departure from the League of Nations had convinced Hitler that his revisionist goals could be accomplished with a minimum of opposition from the western democracies. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement indicated tacit British approval of Germany's rearmament, in spite of the Versailles armaments limitations. The Abyssinian crisis had seriously weakened Anglo-French solidarity, and Hitler took advantage of the disunity of the opposition to further his own designs.

This paper deals with the weakening of the European structure which had been created by the Versailles treaty and reaffirmed by the Locarno pact of 1925. Hitler publicly denounced the "chains of Versailles" and used the remilitarization of the Rhineland to break those chains. Only a firm reaction by Great Britain and France could have saved the structure. Why they failed to respond to this challenge is the theme of this paper. France, even though her own frontier was involved, was so paralyzed by domestic unrest, political paltering, diplomatic impotence and military ineffectiveness that she could not respond. England preferred to negotiate and appease rather than adopt a resolute stance, and France followed the British lead. Both countries had been forewarned, but neither was prepared when the crisis came.

The remilitarization of the Rhineland was the first major indication of Hitler's revisionist plans, and had he been met with resolution and force by the western democracies, perhaps the tragedy of Munich and possibly even of Poland and World War II could have been averted. Hitler's early successes confirmed him in his belief that the western democracies could

be bluffed and blackmailed into capitulation and led him to make increasingly harsh demands at the expense of Eastern Europe. The precedent for appeasement was set in 1936 when Great Britain agreed to German sovereignty in the Rhineland, abandoned the Eastern European nations and thereby sealed the fate of Czechoslovakia.

Using The Times (London), the New York Times, and several news journals, I was able to reconstruct some of the events of 1935 and early 1936. The memoirs of Anthony Eden, Paul Reynaud and Albert Speer provided some insight into the varying national points of view regarding the Rhineland occupation and German aggression. An invaluable source was found in a Ph.D. dissertation by Aaron Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," which provides a blow-by-blow account of the events surrounding the crisis.

Once I had obtained the facts and delineated the events, I sought further interpretation as to the impact of remilitarization upon Europe. Although I used a variety of sources, the most helpful was General (U.S. Army, retired) Telford Taylor's monumental study, Munich, the Price of Peace.

I believe the remilitarization of the Rhineland clearly illustrates two historical lessons: that alliances are totally ineffective unless they are backed by a willingness to act and that appeasement of aggression can only lead to further capitulation.

Accepted by:

Edmund Hicks Chairman,

Charles Holt

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

On Saturday, March 7, 1936, Adolph Hitler sent German troops into the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland. By resuming the watch on the Rhine, he repudiated the Treaty of Versailles and the Pact of Locarno, exposed the weaknesses of the European alliance system and undermined the fragile peace of Europe. His actions precipitated the worst crisis Great Britain and France had faced since World War I, and in effect, challenged them to another war. Why this challenge went unanswered is the theme of this paper.

The uncertainty and hesitation displayed by France in the face of the Rhineland crisis reflected the true state of the French nation. On the surface, France was a vigorous and strong democracy, safe behind an invincible fortified line, and defended by a powerful military force. An intricate system of alliances made France the partner of the largest nation in Europe and the protector of a group of lesser European powers. Yet beneath the surface lay the reality of French political life. In France the fear of Communism was just as pervasive as the fear of Fascism, and in many ways, more damaging. Domestic distrust

of the Russians made the Franco-Soviet Pact unpopular in France and caused a decisive split in public opinion. This wasteful and sometimes violent cleavage between the right and left sapped the nation of its vitality and left it open to disorder. Largely because of internalproblems, the French government was stymied in its efforts to formulate a cohesive foreign policy, and continually demonstrated its inability to maintain a position of leadership in international affairs.

The remilitarization of the Rhineland revealed similar circumstances in Great Britain and exposed the paradox inherent in British policy regarding Western Europe. For the sake of her own security, Britain could not allow an invasion of either France or Belgium. But for the sake of peace, Great Britain, supported by public opinion, could no longer guarantee the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland. Whether by intuition, blind luck or diplomatic acumen, Hitler was able to capitalize on these weaknesses and further his own designs.

Many historians have argued that the Munich conference of 1938 was the critical episode or turning point of the inter-war years. They maintain that the policy of appeasement followed by Great Britain and

France at that critical juncture resulted in World War II. The purpose of this paper is to show that the pivotal point was earlier, in March of 1936, and that if Hitler was to have been stopped, the attempt should have been made then.

The remilitarization of the Rhineland and the British and French reaction to it clearly illustrate the appeasement, wishful thinking and self-delusion of the inter-war years. These attitudes contributed to a decline of the chances for peace in Europe and simultaneously created a situation which made war more likely. The Rhineland crisis occurred early enough in Hitler's career that a firm reaction to his aggression might have placed an obstacle in his path, and by impeding his initial success, perhaps have led to an entirely different kind of Europe than that which existed from 1939-1945.

The failure of the Western powers to oppose Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland confirmed him in his belief that France and Britain could be bluffed and blackmailed into further acquiescence by the threat of war, provided that the threat remained no empty gesture. Britain and France each looked to the other for reinforcement of weakness rather than confirmation of

strong resolve, and what they would not do from a position of strength in 1936, they would subsequently attempt to do from a position of weakness at Munich in 1938.

CHAPTER I

VERSAILLES, LOCARNO AND THE DEMILITARIZED ZONE

Although the Allies were victorious in World War I, they had suffered heavily, and perhaps no country had suffered more than France. In addition to the devastation of her territory, she had lost 1,393,388 men, a figure which represented 3.5 percent of her total population and 39 percent of all Allied war deaths.[1]

The victory, although purchased at great cost, did not mean security for the French nation. What would happen when the German phoenix arose from the ashes? The French representatives at the peace conference in 1919 were determined to gain French security at whatever cost to Germany. Their demands included German disarmament, the return of Alsace-Lorraine and the complete separation from Germany of her provinces west of the Rhine.[2]

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[1] James Thomas Emmerson, The Rhineland Crisis 7 March 1936: A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977), p. 19.

[2] Arnold Wolfers, Britain and France Between Two Wars (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1940), pp. 11-23.

Although they secured the first two demands, the third clashed with Woodrow Wilson's principles of national sovereignty and offended the British sense of pragmatism. A compromise among the powers resulted in the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland. It was agreed at Versailles that German military forces would never again be allowed west of a line drawn fifty kilometers (thirty miles) east of, and parallel to, the Rhine. (See Appendix A for a map of the zone) In addition, fortifications were permanently prohibited within the zone. Any violation of these articles, 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles, would be regarded, said Article 44, as a "hostile act . . . calculated to disturb the peace of the world." (The relevant clauses of the Treaty of Versailles are given in Appendix B) The treaty did not, however, oblige any country to aid France in preventing German remilitarization of the Rhineland.[3]

Having failed to gain the Rhineland either as a protectorate or as a buffer state, France sought assurance from her allies that they would come to her aid in the event of unprovoked German aggression. In addition,

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[3]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 20.

she sought some sort of guarantee of the demilitarized zone. An Anglo-American security guarantee was signed on 28 June 1919, which promised aid to France, but fell short of guaranteeing the demilitarized zone. The agreement stipulated that British aid was contingent upon approval by the United States. The subsequent failure of the American Senate to ratify the Treaty of Versailles doomed the Anglo-American security guarantee and in effect, left France to her own devices. France regarded this as a betrayal by her allies. She then concluded a series of alliances with the lesser European nations who considered themselves threatened by the possibility of a resurrected Germany. In September 1920, a military arrangement was concluded between France and Belgium. In February 1921, a defensive alliance was made with Poland, and others were signed with Czechoslovakia in January 1924; Hungary in June 1926, and with Yugoslavia and Rumania in November 1927. This alliance system, known as the "Little Entente," was based on the idea of "collective security." The premise that the union of European states would act as a deterrent to German aggression, merely by the fact of its existence, characterized

French diplomatic efforts during the inter-war years. In 1933 France signed a non-aggression pact with Russia which would lead in 1936 to a treaty of mutual assistance.[4]

This obsession with security intensified French determination to enforce strict adherence to the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, an attitude clearly illustrated during the Ruhr crisis. French troops, assisted by a small contingent of Belgian Regulars, occupied the Ruhr Valley, a major German industrial area, in January 1923, because Germany was behind in the delivery of timber and coal. These deliveries were part of a scheme of reparations payments which the German government had declared itself incapable of making. France sought the assistance of Great Britain, but when this was not forthcoming she decided to occupy the area, take over the mines and factories, and force the reparations payments. The French occupation of the Ruhr furthered in Germany the already simmering desire for revenge against France. The episode increased the already rampant hostility toward the Treaty of Versailles, and in addition, created in Germany a feeling of isolation from the rest of Europe.[5]

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[4]Ibid., pp. 20, 21.

[5]Wolfers, Britain and France, p. 56.

By 1924, however, a general change in European attitudes had begun. Hostilities diminished, prosperity began to return, and the European nations began to move toward multilateral agreements that would guarantee peace in Western Europe. Whether this change came about because of general weariness of hostility or because of the easing of the reparations problem, the result was the Treaty of Locarno. The treaty was negotiated by Gustav Stresemann, Austen Chamberlain, Aristide Briand, and belatedly, Benito Mussolini. The Locarno pact included non-aggression agreements between Belgium, France and Germany. Italy and Great Britain both pledged to come to the aid of any country which was the victim of unprovoked aggression by another treaty partner. In addition, at Stresemann's suggestion, the German government voluntarily reaffirmed its obligations under Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles. Britain and Italy promised to guarantee the continued existence of the demilitarized zone, militarily if necessary. However, immediate military action was promised only if Germany massed troops inside the zone as an obvious forerunner to invasion.[6]

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[6]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, pp. 22, 23

The Treaty of Locarno was in essence a pledge to respect European national frontiers. Each of the five nations involved, Great Britain, Italy, France, Belgium, and Germany, was constrained from committing aggression against another treaty signatory. Great Britain and Italy promised to come to the aid of any country which was the victim of unprovoked aggression from any of the five nations. Means for actual enforcement of treaty obligations were vague. The Council of the League of Nations, on which Great Britain had a permanent seat, was given the responsibility of deciding whether or not an obligation to intervene had arisen. There were, however, two exceptions. Great Britain and Italy, as guarantors, pledged themselves to immediate action in the case of a "flagrant" violation of any partner's territory, provided that the guarantors themselves recognized the violation as flagrant. In addition, immediate action was warranted in the event of a flagrant breach by Germany of the Rhineland clauses of the Treaty of Versailles, provided that the guarantors had satisfied themselves that this aggression was unprovoked.[7] (The relevant clauses and articles of the Treaty of Locarno are given in Appendix C)

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[7]A. L. Kennedy, Britain Faces Germany (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 46.

Although Great Britain agreed at Locarno to guarantee the western borders of Germany, she refused to extend such a pledge to the eastern nations of Czechoslovakia and Poland. The British government regarded Eastern Europe as outside the boundaries of her own national interests. These nations continued to depend upon France for their security and territorial integrity, since Germany would not renounce her claims to frontier changes in the east.[8]

The Locarno Pact was vague and its machinery cumbersome. In fact, it was never intended to actually function. Its very existence was seen as adequate to preserve peace in Western Europe. The "spirit of Locarno" was hailed as a great step toward peace, yet it did not erase the distrust felt in France toward Germany. Locarno did not eliminate the French obsession with security, and from 1925 on, the French nation, relying increasingly on defensive fortifications became more and more introspective and French public opinion became increasingly pacific.[9]

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[8]Aaron L. Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland: Britain, France and the Rhineland Crisis of 1936" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 1967, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Michigan), p. 6.

[9]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, pp. 24, 25.

It was obvious to the French at this time that although guarantees had been made regarding European peace in general, those made with regard to the Rhineland were not very binding, and in fact no other Locarno signatory, including Belgium, whose borders were contiguous with the Rhineland, considered the continuation of the demilitarized zone critical to peace in Europe.

To both the Sarraut and Blum governments, the Rhineland was essential to French security and to the security of French allies. The Rhineland is the key German industrial area and includes the cities of Cologne, Coblenz, Krefeld, Aachen and Mainz, all in an area of about 9500 square miles.[10] As long as Germany was kept from remilitarizing and fortifying the area, the French Army was in an excellent position for a quick blow against the industrial heartland of Germany. Prior to rearmament, it would have been easy for the French to send their armies into the Rhineland, as they had done during the Ruhr occupation of 1923. If this threat to Germany's industrial

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[10] New York Times, March 18, 1936.

life did not succeed in keeping the Germans from following a policy of force in Eastern Europe, the resulting war would at least be fought on German soil. German fortification of the Rhineland would considerably impair France's effectiveness in aiding her allies in Central and Eastern Europe in the event of German aggression. Therefore, the remilitarization of the Rhineland was not only a threat to France's own security, it was an even greater menace to the security of French allies in Central and Eastern Europe. To the French, remilitarization would mean the beginning of the end for their postwar policy of balancing German power by a system of collective security.[11]

Conversely, the Rhineland was of great importance to Germany, and became even more so when Adolph Hitler rose to power. When Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in January 1933, he brought with him an intense hatred for what he called the "chains of Versailles," and was determined to pursue a revisionist policy which would alter existing international agreements

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[11]Charles A. Micaud, The French Right and Nazi Germany 1933-1939: A Study of Public Opinion (New York: Octagon Books, Inc., 1964), pp. 77,78.

and accommodate Germany's new status in the world. Because of its industrial capacity, the Rhineland was inextricably linked with rearmament, and the rearmament of Germany was of primary importance to Hitler. As long as the zone remained vulnerable to French invasion, it was not possible for Germany to take full advantage of the Rhineland's capabilities and resources. With the removal of the threat of invasion, however, Hitler would be free to fully convert the resources of the Rhineland to the rearmament industry. For Germany, therefore, remilitarization of the Rhineland was a necessary step toward a forced revision of the territorial clauses of the Treaty of Versailles, and the logical result of Hitler's clandestine rearmament program.[12]

Although the "spirit of Locarno" prevailed in Europe for a decade, by 1935 it was diminishing and in 1936 it became extinct. German rearmament, the collapse of the World Disarmament Conference, Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations, Mussolini's imperialist move against Ethiopia, and the subsequent realignment of the European powers all contributed to the death of Locarno and the crisis in the Rhineland.

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[12]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 239.

CHAPTER II

GERMANY PREPARES

The Treaty of Versailles severely limited the size of Germany's armed forces. It permitted a small professional army of 100,000 men to preserve order at home but forbade the manufacture of tanks, gas, military aircraft, and submarines. Consequently, when Hitler came to power, the Reichswehr consisted of only ten divisions, seven of infantry and three of cavalry. These were supplemented by the illegal Grenzschutzverbande, bands of volunteers numbering about 45,000. Despite some secret rearmament dating from the 1920's, Germany's military position in 1932 was still weak. At that time, the troop office, the forerunner of the Army General Staff, believed that effective resistance to an invading force would not be possible before 1944. Some progress had been made toward the creation of an air force, but even so, in 1933, Germany possessed only about eighty aircraft and 450 flying personnel. The Navy had not even attained the levels permitted by the treaty and most of the existing craft were pre-war vintage.[1]

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[1]William Carr, Arms, Autarky and Aggression (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1972), pp. 26, 27.

Although violations of the arms limitation clauses of the Treaty of Versailles had taken place under the Weimar Republic, they were of little consequence when compared with the military activity which took place when Adolph Hitler came to power. When he became Chancellor of the Third Reich, Hitler followed the precedents set by the Weimar governments but gave top priority to the task of rearmament, sensing the popularity of such a program. One of the first acts of his government was to create the Reich Defense Council, an organization charged with the coordination and direction of the secret rearmament of Germany. Under the Führer's direction, the outlawed German Officers Corps was resurrected and the Generals were instructed to carry out a three-fold expansion of the Army, and to form several armored units.[2]

In spite of the Rhineland provisions of the Versailles treaty and the vulnerability they implied, there was substantial clandestine activity in the Ruhr and Rhineland armament works, especially those of Krupp

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[2]John W. Wheeler-Bennett, The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics 1918-1945 (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1954), p. 308.

and I. G. Farben. Krupp had been forbidden by the Allies to continue in the armament business after 1919, but the company had nevertheless not been idle. I. G. Farben, under a similar ban, had by 1933 discovered how to make synthetic rubber from coal. By the beginning of 1934, plans were approved by Hitler's Reich Defense Council for the mobilization of these and some 240,000 other plants for war orders. By the end of that year, rearmament, in all its phases, had become so massive that it could no longer be effectively concealed.[3] Initially, it appears that Hitler's caution was motivated by fear of a hostile French reaction, but as it became obvious that this was not to be forthcoming, the pace of rearmament quickened.[4]

Increased rearmament along with consolidation of his domestic powers led Hitler to consider leaving the League of Nations. The opportunity to do so presented itself in the fall of 1933 when the League's disarmament talks at Geneva stalled. Through his diplomats, Hitler

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[3]William L. Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1960), p. 282.

[4]Telford Taylor, Munich: The Price of Peace (New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1979), p. 97.

asserted Germany's total willingness to disarm, but not in the face of overwhelming evidence that the other nations of Europe were unwilling to do so. Hitler withdrew from the League and caused the collapse of the disarmament Conference. Hitler's move had great popular support from his countrymen, who indicated their approval in a plebiscite held on November 12. German withdrawal from the League angered Great Britain and Italy, but the French government was less upset. It had little confidence that the Germans would in fact observe any disarmament agreement they might sign and was therefore not as disturbed as others by the rupture in the disarmament negotiations.[5]

Apparent British willingness to accept German rearmament and treaty violations was responsible for encouraging Hitler to carry out further transgressions. On 16 March 1935, in the first of his "Saturday Surprises," Hitler reintroduced conscription and announced that the German Army would be increased to thirty six

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[5]Gerhard L. Weinberg, The Foreign Policy of Hitler's Germany: Diplomatic Revolution in Europe 1933-36 (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp. 166, 167.

divisions. He outlined plans for an army made up of 500,000 regulars, a move which was clearly in contravention to the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno pact. As justification for his plans, the Führer claimed that the German people had laid down arms in 1918 in full confidence that President Wilson's Fourteen Points would stabilize and equalize the European nations as well as the world. He asserted that the German people had placed high hope in the League of Nations, convinced that "by fulfilling the disarmament conditions of the Treaty of Versailles they would make possible a general international disarmament." The victor states had, he said, unilaterally released themselves from their obligations, and armaments had increased everywhere. He charged that none of the victors were interested in fulfillment of the Versailles disarmament provisions and therefore the German people had to assume responsibility for their own defense.[6] For this Germany was reproached by the so-called "Stresa Powers," France, Italy and Britain, who met in April in Italy, but agreed on nothing besides condemnation of Hitler's announcement.[7]

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[6]R. B. Mowat, Europe in Crisis: Political Drama in Western Europe (Bristol, England: J. W. Arrowsmith, LTD., 1936), p. 36.

[7]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 15.

The lack of concerted action by the Locarno powers was in large measure due to Hitler's diplomatic maneuverings, calculated offers of enticing agreements, and to his caution. Although much of Hitler's rearmament activity was confirmed by British and French intelligence, Berlin could often explain it away in very plausible terms. Early rearmament efforts were cautious, and insofar as possible, Hitler attempted to make them appear innocuous, or at worst, merely defensive.[8] Whether this was simply rhetoric for masking his aggressive designs or whether it indicates legitimate concern for the defensive capabilities of his nation, Hitler continually offered disclaimers of responsibility. He sought to legitimize German rearmament in the eyes of the world by shifting the blame either to other European nations in general or to France in particular. By blaming the French for their pact with the Soviet Union, Hitler played the trump card offered him by the French right in their opposition to that agreement.[9] It has also been suggested that a major purpose in shifting the blame was for domestic propaganda purposes.[10]

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[8]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 29.

[9]Micaud, French Right, pp. 85-105.

[10]Weinberg, Foreign Policy, p. 241.

Nowhere was Hitler's caution and strategy more evident than in the Rhineland. Hitler discouraged overt activity in the area, especially during the year preceding the coup. The Reichswehr wanted to make advance preparations in the zone, but Hitler permitted them to make only those essential defensive preparations which could be concealed altogether or disguised with a cloak of legitimacy. Into the former category fell such activities as stock-piling uniforms, rifles, grenades and heavy machine guns. Artillery, tanks, and planes were strictly forbidden. Obstruction and resistance zones were set up and preparations made for establishing as well as destroying communications and transport networks. Rifle ranges were hidden in nature preserves and materiél which could not be concealed was cleverly disguised. Observation and machine guns posts were erected as customs or fire watch towers, and the construction of subterranean depots for materiél and munitions was disguised as mining activity. Civilians occupied barracks, thereby justifying maintenance. Glider and air sport clubs abounded, as a front for the construction of air bases. In addition to the maintenance of a 31,500 man police force which the Versailles treaty authorized in the zone, approximately 14,000 para-military Landespolizei were being trained in the area.[11]

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[11]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 28.

Significant progress was also being made in German naval development. Hitler's goal in this area was to develop the kind of navy that would protect Germany's access to Swedish iron ore, safeguard communications with East Prussia, insure control of the Baltic against the Soviet Union, and give her the ability to threaten the oceanic supply routes of France. While he was determined to build up German naval strength, Hitler preferred not to offend the British. Diplomatic approaches were made toward Great Britain in early 1935, indicating Germany's willingness to negotiate an agreement limiting Germany's naval strength to 35 percent of that of Great Britain. In June 1935, the British government, much to the chagrin of the French, signed the Anglo-German Naval Agreement which accomplished this. As far as naval construction was concerned, the agreement had no particular significance. Germany could and did develop its navy as it wished, but Hitler had scored a major diplomatic triumph at no cost to Germany, and had succeeded in driving a wedge between France and Great Britain.[12]

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[12]Weinberg, Foreign Policy, p. 211.

The Anglo-German Naval Agreement seriously undermined Franco-British solidarity, and in effect recognized Germany's right to rearm. Such an agreement implied tacit acceptance of German rearmament and indicated British willingness to overlook the fact that such rearmament was forbidden by the Versailles treaty.

The Anglo-German Naval Agreement destroyed the so-called "Stresa-Front" and illustrated the differences in diplomatic attitude between the British and French Foreign Ministries. Both British and French intelligence were aware of Hitler's rearmament of Germany. France had more than once considered filing a complaint with the League which would have enabled the Locarno powers to oblige Germany to return to the status quo. While France was inclined not to negotiate the issue, Great Britain believed that since Germany was going to rearm anyway, it was in the British interest to secure in bilateral agreements whatever limitations she could. Even at this early date, Hitler's record of keeping his promises was not spotless, and although British diplomats recognized the fact that agreements with him were not infallible, they were considered better than none at all.[13]

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[13]Ibid., pp. 210-214; and Shirer, Rise and Fall, pp. 281-283.

Throughout 1935 rearmament continued, but Hitler and his generals agreed that the Locarno treaty afforded them valuable protection against a French offensive in the Rhineland and therefore did not want to endanger that protection by overtly bellicose activity. Germany during this time used the Locarno agreement as a shield behind which to rearm, and then discarded it when it was believed no longer useful.[14]

During the winter of 1935-36, the French and British both apparently harbored a considerably exaggerated view of German military strength, but the evidence indicates that this was the impression Hitler wished to convey. Certain records suggest that the Germans deliberately ordered their few fighter squadrons to fly from one aerodrome to another, changing their insignia from time to time to give the impression that Hitler had a vast concentration of fighter aircraft equal to anything the British or French could put in the air.[15] This activity considerably enhanced the already prevalent view that German rearmament had reached dangerous proportions. At the

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[14]Mowat, Europe in Crisis, p. 78.

[15]F. W. Winterbotham, CBE, The Nazi Connection (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 134.

same time, there is also evidence to suggest that the German Chancellor was attempting to conceal the re-armament of Germany and to proceed with great secrecy in the Rhineland. In spite of this apparent contradiction in intent, Hitler apparently succeeded simultaneously in both endeavors. His success can perhaps be attributed to the already prevalent diplomatic practice in both France and Great Britain of pretending not to notice what they did not want to see.

As the year 1936 approached Hitler became increasingly convinced that his revisionist plans could be carried out in the near future. He was determined to cut away the remaining "chains of Versailles" and to gain for Germany a position of equality in international affairs. Hitler was riding the crest of popularity because of the successes of his domestic policies. A new Germany was being built. Hitler had generated a feeling of excitement among his people and convinced them that Germany was destined for greatness.[16]

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[16] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 20, 21.

There was no doubt in Hitler's mind that the Rhineland demilitarized zone would have to be reoccupied by German troops. The only question was whether it would be accomplished when the international situation drew attention away from such a move or when the armed forces had reached sufficient strength.[17]

The German dictator, now solidly entrenched in power, believed in the interdependence of internal and external policy. In his Zweites Buch, Hitler wrote:

> Domestic policy must secure the inner strength of the people so that it can assert itself in the sphere of foreign policy. Hence domestic policy and foreign policy are not only most closely linked but must also mutually complement each other.[18]

Hitler's early successes in foreign policy had made him bold. He had used the excuse of French bellicosity to reintroduce conscription in Germany, in unequivocal contravention to the Treaty of Versailles. He had withdrawn from the World Disarmament Conference in October 1933, once again blaming France, but this time using delaying tactics and promises of peace to soften the blow

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[17]Ibid., p. 21.

[18]Carr, Arms, Autarky, p. 32, quoting Adolph Hitler, Hitler's Secret Book, p. 34.

and insure against reprisals. Striking confirmation of Hitler's ascendancy in the field of foreign affairs had come in January 1934, when Germany signed a non-aggression pact with Poland. This pact was a logical extension of Hitler's anti-Marxist feelings and indicated his fear of "encirclement." In 1932, France had persuaded Poland to sign a nonaggression pact with Russia so that the Poles would not be intimidated by the growing power of that state. Hitler apparently believed that in the absence of a German agreement with Poland, that country might be tempted by France into military action against Germany. Ironically, the pact with Poland had the ultimate effect of actually speeding up the encirclement which Hitler feared by hastening Russia's rapprochement with the West. In February 1934, Russia, alarmed by the agreement between Poland and Germany, ratified her nonaggression pact with France and in September of that year became a member of the League of Nations.[19]

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[19]Ibid., pp. 33-35.

Having calmed the Polish fear of German aggression and diplomatically pacified his eastern borders, Hitler again turned his attentions westward. While secretly rearming Germany and laying careful plans to increase Germany's living space, Hitler endeavored to assure the rest of Europe that he had no intentions of disturbing the peace. In an attempt to allay the fears of his western neighbors, Hitler sent German emissaries to the various European embassies. Their responsibility was to make it plain to those who were concerned with rumors of a possible German move that Germany had no intention of occupying the Rhineland or in any other way breaching the peace. In addition, they were instructed to stress that the Germans felt isolated by a hostile Europe, and fearful for their own security. They were further instructed to ascertain the likelihood of a military response from any quarter in the event of a German move in the demilitarized zone.[20]

In the midst of these diplomatic maneuverings an event occurred which would further Hitler's cause. In

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[20]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 22.

October 1935, Benito Mussolini went to war with Ethiopia. This was precisely the international scene stealer the Führer needed to divert world attention from the Rhineland. On October 4, the day after the Italian invasion began, William Shirer wrote in his Berlin Diary:

> The Wilhelmstrasse is delighted. Either Mussolini will stumble and get himself so heavily involved in Africa that he will be greatly weakened in Europe, whereupon Hitler can sieze Austria, hitherto protected by the Duce; or he will win, defying France and Britain, and thereupon be ripe for a tie-up with Hitler against the Western democracies. Either way Hitler wins.[21]

Events proved this to be an accurate appraisal of the situation. A torrent of international criticism descended upon Mussolini. The League of Nations condemned Italy as an aggressor and voted a partial embargo of strategic items against her.[22] Britain favored sanctions against Italy, but desired no involvement severe enough to precipitate armed conflict. British public opinion indicated overwhelming willingness to support the League against Italy, in any move short of war. France was amazed at the British stance. The nations that had been unwilling to accept responsibility for the integrity of the Eastern European allies of France suddenly seemed

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[21]Shirer, Rise and Fall, p. 288, quoting his Berlin Diary, p. 43.

[22]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 32.

eager to support Ethiopia, a country whose security redounded not at all on European interests. Coming right after the British abandonment of the "Stresa Front" in the naval treaty with Germany, the anti-Italian thrust of British policy was especially regretted by the French government, which had recently signed a secret agreement with Italy to resist German aggression in Europe, particularly Austria.[23]

The disastrous Hoare-Laval Plan, which was secretly made by the British and French Foreign Ministers, cost both ministers their jobs when details of the plan were made public. The agreement would have ended the conflict with Ethiopia, but would have rewarded Italy's aggressive efforts with two-thirds of Ethiopia's territory. British public opinion blamed France for the fiasco. This episode significantly cooled the zeal for any sort of combined action with France.[24]

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[23] Weinberg, Foreign Policy, pp. 196, 197, 217, 218.

[24] John W. Wheeler-Bennett, Munich: Prologue to Tragedy (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1948), pp. 251, 252.

The British were unwilling to push forward against Italy alone. Their disenchantment with France for her failure to support full sanctions against Italy negatively influenced British policy on the question of supporting France against Germany during the Rhineland crisis. The significance of these developments was not lost on Adolph Hitler. The Ethiopian invasion had served his purposes by drawing international attention way from Europe. It also widened the breach between Britain and France and paved the way for the Rome-Berlin axis.

Hitler's international position had been strengthened by rearmament and his opponents weakened by quarrels among themselves. By the summer of 1935, Hitler believed that the time was coming when his troops could occupy the Rhineland. Simply to march in would not do, however, since he was still operating under the premise that Germany considered herself bound by agreements signed voluntarily but not by those imposed on her. It was therefore necessary to prepare a legal case against the continued validity of the Locarno agreement. The Franco-Soviet Pact provided a convenient excuse.[25]

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[25]Weinberg, Foreign Policy, pp. 240, 241.

France and the Soviet Union, both of whom felt threatened by the growing power and antagonism of Hitler towards them, had agreed in May 1935 to form a defensive alliance against possible German aggression. The pact had to be ratified by the legislatures of both countries, and since this was an infinitely more difficult task in France than in Russia, it was not accomplished there until March 1936. When Hitler learned of the pact, he sent memoranda to both France and Great Britain, asserting his belief that the proposed alliance conflicted with France's obligations under the Locarno treaty and was therefore illegal. The claim that a Franco-Soviet treaty contradicted Locarno would give Germany a perfect pretext for violating it herself.[26] It is ironic that the Franco-Soviet Pact provided both the justification and the occasion for doing just that.

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[26]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 17, 18.

CHAPTER III

HITLER MOVES

By early 1936 Adolph Hitler was convinced that the time was right for a move in the Rhineland. The Führer had begun definite plans for a coup in June 1935, but his target date was mid-1937. This is revealed in the minutes of the Working Committee of the Reich Defense Council, which were used as evidence at the Nuremberg War Crimes Trial in 1946. Alfred Jodl told the Working Committee that the preparations for mobilization in the demilitarized zone were to be kept absolutely secret and that written records were prohibited. If paperwork was essential, it was to be kept in safes, and all weapons, uniforms and other equipment must be stored out of sight. Administrative personnel were instructed to be cautious and to recognize the principle that "concealment is more important than results."[1]

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[1]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 17, citing Minutes of the Tenth Meeting of the Working Committee of the Reich Defense Council, June 26, 1935, in Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression, Volume VII (Washington, D.C., 1946-1948), p. 454.

Only a few of Hitler's most trusted officials were aware of his plan, although it was common knowledge in military circles that the rearmament of the Rhineland was an important goal of the Third Reich.

It was in February 1936 when Hitler apparently first told anyone outside his most intimate circle that he was considering a move in the Rhineland. This decision to reoccupy and rearm the demilitarized zone in no way represented the consensus of opinion between Adolph Hitler and his military leaders. There was also dissent from some government officials and members of the diplomatic corps. According to General Fritz von Manstein, the German generals did not demand the military occupation and certainly did not intend it as a preparation for war. General Werner von Fritsch, a technical expert who had commanded the German Army since 1934, told Hitler that the armed forces were not yet strong enough to take such a risk, and warned that the affair might lead to a major conflict. He advised Hitler that if the French retaliated with force, they would have little difficulty in driving the Germans back, and it would be they who would occupy the Rhineland and not the Germans.[2]

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[2]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 114, citing Trial of the Major War Criminals, International Military Tribunal (Nuremberg, 1948), Volume XV, p. 351.

The German Chancellor received support for his plan from Hermann Goering and Joseph Goebbels, but his uncertainty prior to the coup led him to call General Fritsch back to hear his views again. The General repeated his previous arguments, and offered to resign, saying that he would not bear the responsibility for the impending disaster. Hitler assured Fritsch that the whole responsibility would be his own, and that if the German forces met any resistance, they were to retreat.[3]

At the Nuremberg trials, General Manstein expressed the view that the apprehension shown by the Generals first aroused the distrust and contempt which Hitler felt toward his military leaders.[4]

Hitler's distrust and dissatisfaction extended to the career diplomats who shared the apprehension of the military and cautioned the Führer against action in the Rhineland. One diplomat, however, assured Hitler that he had nothing to fear. The former wine merchant and opportunist extraordinaire, Joachim von Ribbentrop, ran an independent extension of the German Department of

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[3]Ibid., p. 115.

[4]Ibid., Citing Trial, Volume XX, p. 603.

State known as the Büro Ribbentrop. In an office across from diplomatic headquarters on Wilhelmstrasse, the flamboyant Ribbentrop conducted the Reich's foreign affairs when ordinary channels did not suffice. He was responsible only to the Führer, and as Hitler became more and more disenchanted with the slow-moving and tradition-bound diplomats, Ribbentrop's influence grew. He ingratiated himself with Hitler and was named Special Envoy to Great Britain. Ribbentrop was fluent in English and could therefore engage in direct and private conversation. He convinced Hitler that public opinion in Britain was favorable to Germany and that many Englishmen would adopt the same attitude regarding the Rhineland if they stood in Hitler's shoes. He also told Hitler that Great Britain was too weak to risk any military engagement.[5]

Although warned by most of his top advisors not to undertake action in the demilitarized zone, Hitler chose his own course. In mid-January, Pierre Laval announced that the long-delayed ratification debate over the

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[5]Ibid., p. 24. The career of Ribbentrop is discussed in Gordon A. Craig and Felix Gilbert, eds., The Diplomats 1919-1939 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953), pp. 419-426.

Franco-Soviet Pact would finally occur. This announcement probably caused Hitler to seriously consider advancing his 1937 target date by resurrecting his excuse.[6]

The legal experts at the German Foreign Ministry may have legitimately believed that the Franco-Soviet Pact was incompatible with Locarno. Whether or not Hitler shared this view is immaterial. For him it was an ideal pretext and he was not prepared to lose it by warning the French of the consequences of ratification. He appears to have been more than willing to trade passage of the treaty for a remilitarized Rhineland. Since the previous spring, Hitler had excoriated the Franco-Soviet agreement as a threat to the German people. Having been exposed to anti-Bolshevik arguments for more than three years, they could reasonably be expected to regard Hitler's coup as a justifiable and prudent response to ratification. Hitler believed that the anti-Communist arguments would also strike a sympathetic chord throughout significant segments of British and French public opinion, as well as in other European countries and in America.[7]

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[6]Weinberg, Foreign Policy, p. 247.

[7]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, pp. 76, 77.

There were, in addition to this, several internal and external factors which favored an early move. Domestically, the arguments for action were economic, strategic and political. The economic situation in Germany as a whole as not critical but there were the beginnings of a serious tightening of the economy as the German rearmament boom approached a state of full employment. There were fiscal problems involving international currency as well as domestic monetary difficulties.

The situation was serious enough to warrant a new propaganda campaign to rally German public opinion behind the government's policies. The old slogan of the National Socialist Party had been "Freedom and Bread," but on 17 January 1936, Joseph Goebbels launched a new slogan, "Guns or Butter." Some observers subsequently argued that one of the reasons for the timing of the Rhineland action was to divert the attention of the German public from the economic difficulties of the winter of 1935-1936 by a spectacular coup.[8]

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[8]Weinberg, Foreign Policy, pp. 245, 246.

Inside the demilitarized zone, economic conditions had deteriorated to the point where press criticism of the German government was becoming heated and demands were being made for immediate relief. Unemployment, housing shortages, and rising costs had encouraged both Communists and the always troublesome Rhenish separatists to call for action. Hitler had sent Goering and other officials to deal with the problem, but with no success. Because of the unrest, German industrialists viewed the zone as vulnerable and either refused to build new plants there or transferred existing operations to other areas of the country.[9] Because of the zone's industrial capacity and potential armament production capabilities, the Chancellor of the Third Reich could not allow the situation to worsen.

Strategically the situation had deteriorated with the French government's decision to submit the Franco-Soviet Pact for ratification. German military leaders, already chafing over the difficulties posed by the demilitarized zone to their rearmament and army reorganization efforts, now became concerned over the possibility

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[9]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 72.

of a clash provoked by the Soviet Union which would oblige the French to attack the Reich. Furthermore, according to Constantin von Neurath's testimony at Nuremberg, German military intelligence learned in the winter of 1935 of the existence of French plans to attack and divide Germany by driving along the Main River and linking up with Czech and Soviet forces advancing from the east. Also important were the defensive gains made by the Reich during the recent months of intensive rearmament efforts. Although the German military capability was much less remarkable than many foreign experts believed, the common international over-estimates of Germany's land and air power worked significantly to the Reich's advantage. In addition, Germany's relative military position, which had improved so dramatically, was likely to be less favorable in 1937, since her potential foes had begun to correct their military deficiencies.[10]

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[10] Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, pp. 73, 74. This paragraph closely follows Emmerson's assessment of Germany's strategic advantages. His sources include Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Series C, Volume IV, and Trial of the Major War Criminals, Volume XVI, pp. 677, 678, and Volume X, p. 94. His conclusions are similar to those drawn by E. M. Robertson, Hitler's Pre-War Policy and Military Plans 1933-1939 (New York: The Citadel Press, 1967). Emmerson cites Robertson frequently in this section.

Hitler also had personal and political reasons for choosing to act when he did. His penchant for surprises coupled with a desire to further consolidate his position motivated the Führer to restore military sovereignty in the Rhineland. It had been almost a year since he startled the world by reinstituting conscription. He now saw further means of regenerating enthusiasm for himself and the National Socialist Party by casting off the last of the "chains of Versailles." The demilitarized zone stood as the sole remaining major domestic symbol of Germany's second-class status. There were few Germans who would not hail its disappearance, nor were they likely to regret the repudiation of Locarno.[11]

These domestic and political considerations combined with the favorable juxtaposition of external events and the apparent disunity of Germany's major opponents to seal the fate of the Rhineland demilitarized zone. The Abyssinian conflict paved the way. As a result of Italy's invasion of Ethiopia and Mussolini's subsequent political isolation, the "Stresa Front" had been totally destroyed and it now seemed possible that Italy might not be dis-

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[11]Ibid., pp. 74, 75; and Shirer, Rise and Fall, pp. 231, 290-293.

posed to fulfill her obligations as a guarantor against German aggression in the demilitarized zone. This was all the more likely in view of the fact that Germany, by not joining in economic sanctions against Italy, had become that country's most important trading partner. This benevolence toward the Duce was not something Hitler intended to go unrewarded. Mussolini's adventure in Africa also benefitted Hitler by disrupting Anglo-French relations. The ill feeling generated by the Hoare-Laval affair, the belief in Great Britain that the French were dragging their feet in defense of the Italian aggressors, and the conviction in France that the British were destroying the front against Germany by isolating Mussolini and driving him into the arms of the Fuhrer all worked to Germany's advantage.

The Abyssinian crisis also proved helpful to Germany in other ways. As Hitler observed, sanctions against Italy were not a burden eagerly borne by the nations of Europe, and their imposition had reduced both the ability and the willingness of the lesser powers to undertake a second such obligation. Hitler believed he had nothing to fear as far as economic sanctions were concerned. As has already been mentioned, the Ethiopian invasion diverted international attention from Germany, but at the same time it provided a contrast for Hitler's move. People were dying

in Africa; Hitler was planning a bloodless coup. Moreover, the African venture enabled German leaders and diplomats to argue that it was absurd for France to support only economic sanctions against a blatant aggressor and then demand heavier penalties for an internal action that posed no threat to anyone's security.[12]

In spite of the opportunities offered by the Abyssinian conflict and the existence of a handy pretext, Hitler would probably not have risked his coup in March 1936 had it not been for the weakness and disunity of the opposition.[13]

Hitler watched and evaluated every move the British and French made, searching for the points over which the two powers could be separated. German intelligence reported in January that the new French Foreign Minister, Pierre-Etienne Flandin, sounded out the British government

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[12]Andre Francois Poncet, The Fateful Years: Memoirs of a French Ambassador in Berlin, 1931-1938 (France: Flammarion, 1946; reprinted., New York: Howard Fertig, 1972), pp. 235-238.

[13]Emmerson, Weinberg and Shirer all make this observation and it is implicit in the writings of several other authors as well. For examples, see Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, pp. 76-77; Weinberg, Foreign Policy, p. 243; and Shirer, Rise and Fall, p. 281.

regarding the position it would take in the event of a reoccupation of the Rhineland. He was told it would be up to the French to make the first move.[14]

Some of the intelligence which came to the German foreign office indicated French determination was strong. One report indicated that Flandin told Anthony Eden that in the event of a flagrant breach of Locarno, France would mobilize her forces.[15] Nevertheless, Hitler did not believe the French would respond militarily to a coup, as long as it could not be perceived as a preparation for an attack on France. His confidence stemmed from his knowledge of French domestic weakness and from the conviction that the French would not march without Britain, whose desire for a military solution was deemed non-existent.[16]

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[14]Anthony Eden, Facing the Dictators, The Memoirs of Anthony Eden Earl of Avon (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1962), p. 373.

[15]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 27, quoting Telegram from Charge d'affaires in France to Foreign Ministry, February 7, 1936, in Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Series C, Volume IV (Washington, D.C., 1962), p. 1112.

[16]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 77.

Hitler's conviction that the French would not make a military rejoinder was reinforced by the German Chargé d'affaires, Dirk Forster, who had observed the operations of the French government from his diplomatic post in Paris. He reminded Hitler that the French had reacted vociferously when the Führer reinstituted conscription the previous year, but French troops had not marched. Now, some eleven months later, the Reich was considerably stronger, while internal developments in France had caused a general deterioration in her ability and willingness to take action. The current ministry of Albert Sarraut was strictly a caretaker government whose goal was to maintain the status quo. The alliance of the French Communists with the Socialists and Radical Socialists which formed the government titled the Popular Front, led to a series of ugly leftist-rightist confrontations throughout the country. In mid-February, Forster was summoned from Paris for a meeting with the Führer. Although Forster refused to guarantee French inaction, he expressed doubt that the Sarraut government could sustain resistance in the face of a coup in the Rhineland. Equally useful during the pre-coup period were the assurances

made to Hitler that the French people were so deeply pacific, possibly even defeatist, that they would fight only if France were invaded. A "very influential" member of the French government had said as much to the German Ambassador, Roland Köster, in December. Premier Pierre Laval had later confirmed to Köster that French public opinion would not support military action beyond the frontiers of France.[17]

Hitler's belief in France's infirmity was heightened by the debate in the Chamber of Deputies over ratification of the treaty with Russia. The proceedings, which began on February 11 and ran through February 27, brought fresh confirmation of the political and ideological conflicts with which France was plagued. French editor Charles Maurras reflected the sentiment of many rightists when he predicted that upon ratification, France would find herself in a dilemma between acceptance of a fait accompli in the Rhineland and the risk of defeat in

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[17]Micaud, French Right, pp. 69-84, 87-101, 119.

attempting to prevent it. It became obvious to Germany during the debates that many among the French right believed that ratification of a treaty with the Soviets would provide justification for a retaliatory occupation of the Rhineland by Germany.[18] The rhetoric from the rightists was strong enough to provoke a reproach from Flandin on February 25 for "the dangerous thoughtlessness of their words."[19]

In spite of the Franco-Soviet alliance, Hitler discounted the possibility of Russian aid to France in the event of a German coup in the zone. Even though he continued to warn his countrymen of the Soviet menace, he was convinced that Russia was too preoccupied with internal problems to desire any European catastrophe, particularly since the Japanese appeared to be awaiting an opportunity to attack the Soviet Union. No other European power, including England, was apparently considered by Hitler or his advisors as a potential source of military support for France if she chose to react forcefully to the remilitarization of the Rhineland.[20]

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[18] Ibid., pp. 69-84.

[19] Paul Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight 1930-1945 (France, 1951; reprint ed., New York: Simon & Schuster, 1955), p. 123.

[20] Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 80

Adolph Hitler believed, and most of his diplomatic advisors agreed, that the British would not only fail to support France in the event of a German reoccupation of the Rhineland, they would actively seek to prevent her from taking any action. This confidence was based on knowledge of British military weakness, British desire for an air pact with Germany, the preoccupation of the Baldwin government with domestic and Abyssinian affairs, and the presence in Britain of a great deal of sympathy for Germany and respect for the achievements of the Chancellor. Ribbentrop submitted a report to Hitler in which he detailed his conversation with British government officials during a recent week long mission. Neurath, too, had visited England and shared Ribbentrop's impression that Britain desired only cordial relations with the Reich.[21]

By mid-February it appeared that Hitler was determined to reoccupy the Rhineland in the coming weeks and that he would change his mind only if presented with convincing evidence that a coup would provoke a military response from any quarter. None of his diplomatic or military counselors could produce this sort of proof.

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[21]Ibid., pp. 82, 83.

On 2 March 1936, the military directives for the reoccupation of the Rhineland were issued by General von Blomberg. On 5 March, Hitler set the date. He chose the coming Saturday, 7 March, in the hope of gaining a weekend's respite before any counter moves could be made. On the day of the reoccupation, the Locarno powers were to be informed. The Reichstag would convene on that day to hear a special message from the Führer.[22]

The code word for the reoccupation of the Rhineland was "Winterübung." The orders provided for German troops to move into the Rhineland, joining the local Landespolizei, already in position. They were to "remain after their arrival in their new stations in such a state of readiness that they can withdraw within an hour." Withdrawal did not mean a return to the status quo, however. The orders specified a fighting retreat only as far as the Rhine if a military rejoinder was made by the West.[23] The orders

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[22]Weinberg, Foreign Policy, pp. 251, 252.

[23]Donald Cameron Watt, "German Plans for the Reoccupation of the Rhineland: A Note," Journal of Contemporary History I, No. 4 (October 1966): pp. 193-199.

indicate that Hitler was prepared to go to war to keep the zone, once it had been occupied. It is important to note, however, that the orders were issued under the assumption that military opposition would not be forthcoming.

On 7 March, as planned, German troops marched into the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland. Hitler had carefully surveyed the international situation, made his plans and carried them out. His timing was exact. His move was unopposed.

CHAPTER IV

FAIT ACCOMPLI

Most of the soldiers involved in Winterübung knew nothing of their missions until they reached the edge of the demilitarized zone on the morning of 7 March. Hitler had maintained the secrecy of his plans by involving a minimum of persons in planning the operations. It appears that he confided in only nine people during the weeks preceding the coup. Those who were consulted or charged with preparing for the action were either trusted colleagues or diplomats who had been threatened if they did not keep silent. Most of the diplomats were informed less than twelve hours before the move began and military preparations were delayed as long as possible. The same sort of secrecy was maintained with the German press. Members of Hitler's cabinet were informed on the night of 6 March, when he presented his decision to remilitarize the Rhineland as a fait accompli and urged the government ministers to keep their nerve in the face of foreign reactions.[1]

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[1]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, pp. 101-102, citing the private papers of Friedrich Hossbach, "Zwischen Wehrmacht und Hitler, 1934-1938," (Göttingen, 1965), pp. 97,98; Trial, Volume XI, p. 39; and various other documents, primarily from private collections of German officials and diplomats.

By the time the Saturday morning mist had risen, German troops had entered the demilitarized zone. The Führer called a special session of the Reichstag to announce his plan and the speech he presented that morning was broadcast all over Europe. While Adolph Hitler thundered before a stunned audience, infantry, artillery, motorized cavalry, tanks, machine gun units, anti-aircraft artillery and other paraphernalia of modern warfare were crossing the Rhine bridges. As Hitler declared the death of the Locarno pact, German troops goose-stepped into the Rhineland.[2] The troop movement totalled between twenty five and thirty five thousand men.[3]

In a speech that lasted ninety minutes, Hitler attacked the Treaty of Versailles, blaming it for the ills of European society in general and Germany in particular:

> In the year 1919, when the Peace Treaty had been signed, I took upon myself the duty of solving (the German) question. Not because I wanted to injure France or any other state but because the German people cannot permanently bear the wrong which has been done to them. They shall not bear it and they will not bear it.

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[2]New York Times, March 8, 1936.

[3]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 121.

Hitler declared that the peace treaty had forced Germany into a position of inequality among nations, a situation which had eroded the confidence and stability of both the German people and their government. He then cited his own efforts to restore these qualities. Once he had achieved this, the newly recovered German sense of honor demanded the destruction of the state of inequality.

> In view of the fact that the idea of inequality had become so rooted in the minds of our neighbors, it was naturally difficult to show that the restoration of German equality was not only unharmful to them, but that on the contrary it was, in the last analysis, an international benefit. You, my fellow members of the Reichstag know how hard was the road that I have had to travel since 30 January 1933 in order to free the German people from the dishonourable position in which it found itself and to secure equality of rights step by step without thereby alienating Germany from the political and economic commonwealth of European nations, and particularly without creating new ill-feeling from the aftermath of old enmities. There will come a time when I may appeal to history for confirmation of the fact that at no moment of my struggle on behalf of the German people have I ever forgotten the duty incumbent on me and on us all to uphold European culture and European civilization . . .
>
> In these three years I have again and again endeavored-unfortunately too often in vain-to throw a bridge of understanding across to the people of France. . . The German people have no interest in seeing the French people suffer. And on the other hand what advantage can come to France when Germany is in misery?

Hitler went on to excoriate Bolshevism and to chastise the French for entering into an alliance with "those who preach world revolution." He then praised his own efforts to rid Germany of the Bolsheviks. He criticized the French "pactomania" and insisted that Germany was not a threat to any of her neighbors, and declared that he continually sought peaceful solutions to problems, favored disarmament and had even gone so far as to seek an agreement with the British which severely limited German naval development.

Hitler then spoke of the Treaty of Locarno and of the sacrifice which Germany had made by joining in the pact. The Treaty of Locarno, he said:

> was intended to prevent for all future time the employment of force between Belgium and France on the one side, and Germany on the other. Unfortunately the treaties of alliance that had already been made by France were the first obstacles lain in the practical path of this Pact, namely the Rhine Pact of Locarno.* To this Pact Germany made a contribution which represented the greatest sacrifice; because while France fortifies her frontier with steel and concrete and armament, and garrisoned it heavily, a condition of complete defencelessness was imposed upon us on our Western frontier. Nevertheless, we abided by that obligation in the hope that we might serve the cause of European peace and advance international understanding by making a sacrifice which meant so much for a great power.

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*This refers to the Rhineland provisions of the treaty.

> The agreement concluded between France and Russia last year, and already signed and accepted by the French Chamber, is in open contradiction to this Pact. This new Franco-Soviet Agreement introduces the threatening military power of a mighty empire into the centre of Europe by the roundabout way of Czechoslovakia, the latter country having also signed an agreement with Russia.

Hitler reiterated his desire for an understanding with the French, once again charging them with unwillingness to seek common ground with Germany. He then read to the Reichstag a memorandum to the French government. It had been prepared earlier and was to be distributed to the Ambassadors of all the Locarno nations as he spoke. The memorandum said, in part:

> 1. It is an undisputed fact that the Franco-Soviet Pact is exclusively directed against Germany.
>
> 2. It is an undisputed fact that in the Pact France undertakes, in the event of a conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union, obligations which go far beyond her duty as laid down in the Covenant of the League of Nations, and which compel her to take military action against Germany when she cannot appeal either to a recommendation or to an actual decision of the Council of the League.
>
> 3. It is an undisputed fact that France, in such a case, claims for herself the right to decide on her own judgement who is the aggressor.
>
> 4. The German Government are now constrained to face the new situation created by this alliance, a situation which is rendered more acute by the fact that the Franco-Soviet Treaty had been supplemented by a Treaty of Alliance between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union exactly parallel in

> form. In accordance with the fundamental right of a nation to secure its frontiers and ensure its possibilities of defense, the German Government have today restored the full and unrestricted sovereignty of Germany in the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland.

Hitler then read Germary's proposals "for the creation of a system of peaceful security for Europe." These included German willingness to enter into negotiations with France and Belgium on the subject of a new zone, demilitarized on both sides of the border; the formulation of a twenty-five year non-aggression pact between Germany, France, and Belgium, with Great Britain and Italy as guarantors; a similar agreement with the Netherlands; an air pact with the Western powers; non-aggression pacts with the Eastern European states, provided that Lithuania would respect the autonomy of the Memel Territory; and willingness to re-enter the League of Nations.

The Chancellor concluded his oration with a glowing defense of his own efforts on behalf of the German people. He urged them to give him a vote of confidence:

> I now beg the German people to strengthen me in my faith and through the force of their will further to endow me with the strength to take a courageous stand at all times for their honour and their freedom and their economic welfare. And I specially request the German people to

support me in my struggle to bring about real peace.[4]

On 8 March 1936, the New York Times printed the full text of Hitler's speech and indicated that his oratory efforts were rewarded with a five-minute standing ovation.

While Hitler spoke, the German Foreign Minister, Baron von Neurath, received the ambassadors of Great Britain, France, Italy and Belgium and handed each a copy of the Chancellor's memorandum.[5] In the Rhineland, as the soldiers of the Reich entered the various towns and cities in which they would be stationed, crowds poured into the streets to greet them. Flags appeared at windows, church bells rang, bands played, and young girls showered the marching soldiers with flowers. In Cologne, the troops paraded in Cathedral Square, and in Frankfurt's Roemer Square, a Nazi rally was held. Two hours after Hitler finished his address advance units had reached Saarbrücken, only three kilometers from the French border.[6]

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[4]Norman H. Baynes, The Speeches of Adolph Hitler April 1922-August 1939 (New York: Howard Fertig, 1969), pp. 1271-1302.

[5]Mowat, Europe in Crisis, p. 47.

[6]Newsweek, Vol. VII, No. 11, (March 14, 1936): 7,8.

The German government announced that troop movements would continue throughout the next day and that soldiers would be stationed on the Rhine, in the Rhine Valley, and between the Black Forest and the Rhine. Aachen, Trier and Saabrücken were to be garrisoned "lightly," and Air Force squadrons were to be stationed at Cologne, Düsseldorf, Frankfort-am-Main, and Mannheim. An appeal was issued to the German nation by the Minister of Propaganda, Joseph Goebbels. He urged the citizens of the Reich to fly German flags as a symbol of their unity with those Germans who had died during the World War, whose sacrifice was no longer in vain.[7]

As night fell over Germany on 7 March, torch light parades lit up the skies in cities all over the country. In Berlin, 15,000 Brownshirts passed between cheering crowds and paraded down Wilhelmstrasse. Hitler and his cabinet reviewed them from the balcony of the Chancellory and listened while the marchers sang the familiar Horst Wessel Lied, "Today all Germany belongs to us. Tomorrow the whole world."[8]

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[7] New York Times, March 8, 1936.

[8] Newsweek, Volume VIII, No. 11, (March 14, 1936): 7,8; Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 133.

International reaction was immediate. The Sunday New York Times carried banner headlines:

> "HITLER SENDS GERMAN TROOPS INTO RHINELAND; OFFERS PARIS 25-YEAR NON AGGRESSION PACT; FRANCE MANS HER PORTS; BRITAIN STUDIES MOVE"

In articles covering the entire front page and several full pages throughout the paper, British, French, Russian and other European reactions were recorded. The British seemed non-plussed, the French outraged, and the Russians angry but not surprised. Americans seemed to share all of these emotions. The Times' foreign correspondents reported their observations in detail. From Berlin, Otto D. Tolischus wrote:

> The move was carried through with that characteristic German efficiency which drew from foreign military experts tribute to the German Army Command amid manifestations of both popular enthusiasm and grave apprehension. It brought back echoes of the last German westward march nearly 22 years ago, but also it was made to look like a dress rehearsal for more serious business.

The London correspondent wrote:

> Anthony Eden used strong words to condemn the German action. . . He said the British Government must consider entry of German regular troops into the forbidden zone to be in defiance of treaty obligations and a flagrant breach of a territorial frontier.

He apparently had studied the situation carefully and his analyis was proved correct by subsequent events.

> The fact is that at the bottom of their hearts Cabinet Ministers here are not so displeased with Hitler's proposals as it officially must be said they are. For some time past the demilitarized zone has been written off as lost. A chance to obtain a solid counter-value for a hopeless item on the balance sheet appears attractive for practical politicians in London. The real question awaiting reply is whether Hitler offers advantages that upon closer inspection may be found ephemeral once the fact of the illegal military occupation of the Rhineland is accepted without demur.[9]

Experts from European press releases follow:

From the Red Star, an Army organ of Moscow:

> The Rhine invasion is a new symbol of aggression, making Germany the hotbed of war throughout Europe. The invasion and the Locarno Pact repudiation cannot be justified. With unparalleled insolence Hitler said each German had 18 percent less land than each Russian. Hitler has often revealed that Fascist Germany is dreaming of acquiring Soviet territory - Let him only try it!

The Paris Independent:

> Hitler's present action continues in logical succession the Versailles Treaty violations because the Allied Governments are divided.

The Amsterdam Telegraaf:

> Germany invites Holland to participate in its proposals, but Holland cannot enter into an agreement which would place her in the dangerous position of Belgium.

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[9] New York Times, March 8, 1936.

The Vienna Reichspost:

> The announcement of Germany's readiness to reenter the League of Nations is aimed to achieve favorable reaction in England, where such is considered most important, due to the Italo-Ethiopian situation.

Journal de Geneve, Switzerland:

> It is clear that Hitler is playing for high stakes. He is capitalizing on the confusion into which France and Britain were thrown by Mussolini's action in Ethiopia, and the German press is using ratification of the Franco-Soviet agreement as justification for these actions.

The Berlin Deutsche Allegemeine Zeitung:

> We are still ignorant of who will excite himself over Hitler's speech, but we suspect it will be France; but particularly toward France the Führer directed a passionate appeal for reconciliation.

The London Sunday Observer:

> Hitler's two new points are the suggestion that the covenant of the League of Nations should be completely disjoined from the Treaty of Versailles, and that the Rhineland should honestly be recognized as German fully and without impediment. On both points he is right. There can be no peace without elementary justice and common sense. There is no more reason why German territory should be demilitarized than there is that French, Belgian, or British territory should be demilitarized.[10]

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[10]Literary Digest, Vol. 121, No. 11 (March 4, 1936), p. 12.

The London Times expressed similar sentiments, but with reservations:

> Though the realization of the constructive aims outlined in Germany's memo is greatly to be desired, it is felt that the short cut of easy complacency towards Hitler's violation of solemn treaty pledges might prove to be the longest and perhaps a disastrous road. Great Britain has held France to the League covenant and the policy of collective action in Abyssinia. She is in honour bound to remain true now to her own pledges in full considertion of France.[11]

European condemnation was swift, but reserved. No one appeared ready to condone Germany's action, yet Hitler's offers of harmony and agreement led many to consider the possibility of a trade - the Rhineland for peace. Whatever else can be said about the Rhineland crisis, it cannot be said that the British and French governments were taken by surprise. Niether were Germany's other neighbors, and although most of the European governments appeared to be outraged by the remilitarization of the Rhineland, their bellicose words were not translated into action. Their responses were, for the most part, rhetorical.

Both Great Britain and France had suspected for some time that Germany might rearm the area. If the move had been anticipated, why had these two governments not formulated a policy to deal with the threat? The evidence indi-

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[11] The Times (London), March 9, 1936.

cates that some contingency planning had been done, but the key to the responses of Great Britain and France lay largely in their differing interpretations of what constituted a threat to their own national interests and indeed as to what posed a potential threat to the peace of Europe. The British had pinned their hopes for peace basically upon reconciling Germany to a status quo, sufficiently revised to meet Germany's legitimate aspirations. This stance is reflected in Britain's position that Germany's move in the Rhineland was just a march in Hitler's own back yard. The French, on the other hand, had attempted to increase their strength by means of a broadened alliance system, pinning their hopes for peace on the ability to confront Germany with such overwhelming power that it would not dare attack France.[12] The lack of concerted opposition insured the success of Hitler's coup and allowed him to diplomatically stall until his march was indeed a fait accompli.

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[12] Frederick H. Hartmann, The Relations of Nations (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1978), p. 368.

CHAPTER V

EUROPE REACTS

The remilitarization of the Rhineland was a clear-cut unilateral violation of international treaties. By reoccupying the demilitarized zone, Germany was in contravention not only of the Treaty of Versailles, which Hitler maintained had been imposed on Germany, but also of the Pact of Locarno, which had been freely negotiated with the governments of France and Belgium and guaranteed by the governments of Great Britain and Italy. As a result of Germany's move, France now had every legal right and certainly every military reason to undertake an occupation of the Rhineland. In spite of these facts Hitler's move went unopposed.

From the moment of the German announcement, Hitler seemed virtually assured of victory, for although the nations of Europe reacted with surprise and dismay, none took military action. As the nation most directly affected by the German move, France was entitled to unilateral military action as well as a request for assistance from the guarantors of Locarno. If France hesitated, the

initiative rested with Great Britain and Italy, the guarantor powers. Italy was under sanctions as a result of the Abyssinian embroglio, therefore responsibility fell implicitly to Great Britain, a nation which was not inclined to support military action as a means of settling the dispute.

If a forceful reaction was to be made, responsibility for making it clearly rested with the French government, and there were several courses of action which it could take. The French could ignore the Locarno pact and march into all or part of the Rhineland on the grounds that this was permitted by Article 44 of the Versailles treaty, which stated that any violation of the Rhineland provisions was to be regarded as "a hostile act, calculated to disturb the peace of the world." Another alternative was to postpone action until the League of Nations could convene and make a determination in the case. If the League found in favor of France, she could then either impose military or economic sanctions against Germany and call upon the Locarno guarantors for assistance, or forego her right to determine punishment independently and submit the question to her treaty partners for a joint decision.[1]

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[1]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 48.

France was entitled to military action, and some French officials at least considered such a move. The French Ambassador in Berlin, Andre Francois-Poncet, urged "energetic reaction." Premier Sarraut broadcast a message of stern defiance: never would France negotiate while Strasbourg was menaced by German guns. But the Commander-in-Chief of the French army, General Maurice Gamelin, warned his government that a war operation, however limited, would necessitate a general mobilization, a step he was not willing to take. He did agree to rush thirteen divisions to the Maginot Line, and even this pusillanimous gesture provoked General von Blomberg into begging Hitler to at least withdraw troops from the cities closest to the French frontier, Aachen, Trier, and Saarbrücken. If the French attacked, Blomberg told Hitler, the Germans would have to pull back without a battle, and thus suffer a humiliating moral as well as military defeat. Hitler remained resolute. He told Blomberg to wait, if necessary, they could retreat tomorrow.[2]

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[2]John Toland, Adolf Hitler, Volume I (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., INc., 1976), pp. 407, 408.

The issue of retreat is a controversial one. As has previously been mentioned, the orders for Winterübung stated that the troops were to stage a "fighting withdrawal" if opposition was encountered. Hitler apparently did not believe that France would intervene, and many historians write that the German troops would have fled the Rhineland had a shot been fired against them. The German Chancellor certainly pondered retreat. On 5 March, he asked his adjutant, Friedrich Hossbach, whether the movement of troops could still be halted and when such a decision would become irrevocable. Hossbach replied that the movement of troops could still be stopped, but he could not say when the latest time for reaching a final decision might be.[3] Testimony at the Nuremberg Trials indicated that Hitler was resolved to withdraw the occupation forces as soon as France adopted a menacing stance.[4] But as the weekend passed, the possibility of a forced retreat became more remote.

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[3] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 118, citing Friedrich Hossbach, Zwischen Wehrmacht und Hitler 1934-1938 (Wolfenbuttell, 1949), p. 97.

[4] Ibid., citing Trials, Volume XV, p. 351.

By Monday, 9 March, more than 25,000 German troops were in the Rhineland. While there were still only words from the British and French governments, the German Chancellor was consumed by anxiety. He later confided to his chief interpreter, Paul Schmidt, that "the forty-eight hours after the march in the Rhineland were the most nerve-racking of my life." He also said that had the French retaliated, "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."[5]

Indeed, Hitler's anxiety was such that he shared it with one of his favorites, Albert Speer. In his memoirs, Speer recalls the evening of March 7:

> The special train in which we rode to Munich on the evening of that day was charged, compartment after compartment, with the tense atmosphere that emanated from the Fuhrer's section. At one station a message was

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[5]Toland uses these quotes on p. 408 without a citation. However, Hitler's anxiety is discussed by Carr, Arms Autarky, p. 67, and the conversation is referred to indirectly. Carr cites P. Schmidt, Statis auf diplomatischer Buhne, 1923-1945 (Frankfurt, 1949), p. 230; and K. von Schuschnigg, Ein Requiem Rot-Weiss-Rot (Zurich, 1946), p. 43.

> handed into the car. Hitler sighed with relief. 'At last! The King of England will not intervene. He is keeping his promise. That means it can all go well.' He seemed not to be aware of the meager influence the British crown has upon parliament and the government. Nevertheless, military intervention would have probably required the King's approval, and perhaps that is what Hitler meant to imply. In any case, he was intensely anxious, and even later, when he was waging war against almost the entire world, he always termed the remilitarization of the Rhineland as the most daring of his undertakings. 'We had no army worth mentioning; at that time it would not even have had the fighting strength to maintain itself against the Poles. If the French had taken any action, we would have been easily defeated; our resistance would have been over in a few days.'[6]

The causes of Hitler's anxiety were evidently illfounded, in spite of the fact that Germany's chances in the event of a full-scale French attack seemed hopeless. The Rhineland action was no hastily conceived leap in the dark. Hitler had carefully appraised his opponents. Not only were French and British leaders preoccupied with Ethiopia, but their reaction to Mussolini's aggression in that country had convinced Hitler that they possessed a general paralysis of will and a reluctance to resort to any type of seemingly

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[6]Albert Speer, Inside the Third Reich: Memoirs (New York: Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 72.

extreme and therefore dangerous measures in moments of crisis. The Chancellor had also chosen his time well. The French domestic situation militated against concern over foreign affairs. Hitler believed that the current French leadership lacked the resolution and the nerve to undertake an invasion of Germany, and if France did not react forcibly to a situation so vital to her interests, then Great Britain was most unlikely to do so. The Chancellor's concerns prior to the coup were not whether France 'could', but whether it 'would' march. Having convinced himself that the French would not move to stop him, he proceeded with the remilitarization of the Rhineland. Although Hitler was convinced that France would not act unilaterally, he did remain concerned about some kind of joint action against Germany. He therefore concentrated on dissuading French allies from choosing such a course of action. This could be accomplished, he believed, by promising to rejoin the League of Nations and to engage in bilateral agreements with his neighbors. Hitler believed the British could easily be convinced that the Rhineland effort was purely a German internal affair, and no threat to Britain or to the peace of Europe.[7]

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[7]Rich, Hitler's War Aims, pp. 86, 87.

To justify his actions and allay the fears of his European neighbors, Adolph Hitler accompanied the remilitarization of the Rhineland with a massive propaganda campaign. The German action, he said, had been undertaken in response to the ratification of a French alliance with Russia. This agreement, he charged, had completely upset the existing European balance of power and negated all the political and legal conditions under which the Treaty of Locarno had been concluded. He defended Germany's right to sovereignty over its own territory. The remilitarization of the Rhineland, besides being essential to German national security, was no more than an assertion of that right and a step toward securing justice for Germany. He reiterated his desire for peace and again offered to negotiate a series of new agreements which would guarantee the peace of Europe.[8]

Hitler's anxiety soon turned to exhilaration. His gamble had been successful. The French and British governments protested, as they had done the previous year when he announced his plans to rearm Germany and conscript

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[8]Ibid., p. 87.

an army, but again they did nothing. Britain deplored the breach of treaty, but did not see in Hitler's action a threat to peace. France decided that unilateral military resistance would be futile. Hitler held the weakest hand in the game, yet he had bluffed England and France into acceptance of his coup with little more than a murmur of disapproval. This is all the more astonishing given the stakes of the game.

The remilitarization of the Rhineland was one of the boldest and most momentous gambles of Adolph Hitler's career. He destroyed in one blow the major strategic advantage that the Allies had won as a result of their victory in the First World War. Hitler's action affected France most directly, because in the event of another conflict, German forces would be poised directly on the French border, while conversely, the French would be deprived of the advantage of being able to strike at Germany through a demilitarized zone. That this zone was also the industrial heartland of Germany was hardly incidental.

Hitler's action was also a blow to the small states of Eastern Europe for it virtually eliminated France's ability to come to their aid in the event of a German attack in that area. Poland and the nations of the Little Entente immediately declared their support for French military action.

On the day of the remilitarization, the Polish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jósef Beck, asked the French Ambassador in Poland to relay to Paris the message that his country understood the difficult position of France and was ready to carry out its alliance obligations. The message was sent with the full approval of the President, the Inspector General of the Armed Forces and the Premier. The Poles considered the chances of armed reaction on the part of France extremely small, yet they advised the Germans of the position they had taken. The Polish Envoy to Berlin informed the German government that his country's non-aggression agreement with Germany did not restrict Polish freedom of action within the framework of the French alliance. The Poles later charged that Pierre Flandin did not notify his government of the Polish declaration, possibly because he was concerned that the stand taken by Poland might strengthen the position of French cabinet members who favored military action.[9]

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[9]Waclaw Jedrzejewicz, ed., Diplomat in Paris, 1936-1939: Papers and Memoirs of Juliusz Lukasiewicz Ambassador of Poland (New York and London: Columbia University Press, 1970), pp. 8, 9.

On the surface, the Polish reaction was impeccably loyal, but it has been suggested that Beck was convinced that France would not resort to force, so he could safely make promises which he would never be called upon to fulfill.[10]

In any event, when it became evident that France would not take military action, the Poles found themselves in a difficult situation with regard to Germany. In less than a week, the Polish policy was reversed. Although Poland may have been willing to march against Germany, she could not afford to wait while France vacillated.[11]

The Czechoslovakian government also offered support when the Rhineland occupation took place. Czech President Eduard Benes told the French Minister in Prague that his country "would follow France, in accordance with our treaty obligations, if she should draw the logical conclusion from Hitler's act." As in the case of Poland, days passed and it became apparent that the French government was not going to take up the Czech offer of military aid. So the Czechs, like the Poles, began to change course,

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[10]Taylor, Munich, p. 190.

[11]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 211-213.

because they realized that they were going to have to deal with Hitler in the future, probably with little assistance from the French government.[12]

The Rumanian Foreign Minister, Nicolae Titulescu, conveyed assurances of his country's support as well, and became extremely critical of the French government when it failed to react forcibly.[13] Similar statements came from Hungary and Yugoslavia.[14]

In spite of their willingness to support military action, France's inaction made it necessary for the nations of Eastern Europe to adjust their foreign policy to one of accommodation with the Third Reich. The reality of their impotence was heightened by their total inability to form a concerted opposition among themselves. Economic ties with Germany played an important part in their reluctance to take an overtly anti-German position in the face of French inactivity, and many of the Eastern European countries believed it would be economically suicidal for them to carry out sanctions against Germany.

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[12]Ibid., p. 214.

[13]Elizabeth Cameron, Prologue to Appeasement: A Study in French Foreign Policy 1933-36 (Washington, D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1942). p. 199.

[14]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 219.

Even though most of these countries were sympathetic to the French position, they believed far-reaching changes were about to be made in the European political scene and therefore they did not want to prejudice their cases in advance.[15]

A similar reaction occurred in the Netherlands. Although Holland shared a common border with Germany and her security was greatly affected by the remilitarization, she hesitated to condemn the German move. Her actions are typical of the small states who claimed neutrality. Their weakness and size made it much easier to turn over the problem to the larger powers than to suffer the consequences of taking a hard line. The Netherlands' economic life depended to a large extent on exports to Germany, and the Third Reich owed that country a large sum of money.[16]

The Soviet Union was also affected by the remilitarization of the Rhineland. The Russians were aware of the strategic importance of a demilitarized zone in the Rhineland. They knew once the region was occupied and fortified by German troops, France would be effectively blocked from aiding her Central and Eastern European allies

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid., p. 219.

if Hitler struck towards the east. If Eastern Europe fell under Nazi domination, Russia would no longer have a buffer between herself and the Third Reich. Consequently, Joseph Stalin ordered the Soviet Ambassador in Paris to see Flandin on the day of the reoccupation and to offer him support in any move which France decided to make.[17]

During the Weimar period, the Soviet Union and Germany had enjoyed a close relationship, which included secret military agreements, but this relationship had been destroyed when Hitler outlawed the German Communist Part and violently attacked Bolshevism as the world's foremost menance. Hitler's move led Stalin to adopt a policy of cooperation with various European anti-Fascist elements, one result of which was the Franco-Soviet Pact. The Russians urged action during the Rhineland crisis, stating that the Rhineland coup was not an isolated incident, but rather one of a series of acts motivated by an aggressive spirit and if it went unpunished, the results would be disastrous. However, the reality of French inaction made it necessary for them to adjust their policy to one of accommodation, just as the Eastern European na-

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[17]Max Beloff, The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1936-1941, Volume II (London, New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 50.

tions were doing. The Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, Vyacheslav Molotov, indicated his nation's official position in the French newspaper Le Temps on 12 March:

> The main trend among our people . . . considers an improvement in relations between Germany and the Soviet Union possible. . . . The participation of Germany in the League of Nations would be in the interests of peace and would be favorably regarded by us.[18]

The Rhineland episode points up the weaknesses in the Franco-Soviet Pact. The agreement required France and Russia to assist each other in the event of German aggression. But the pact was pure illusion—it had no specific military provisions, and it did not require the U.S.S.R. to intervene if Germany attacked Poland, or any of the eastern allies of France. The major weakness however, was that Russia, having no common border with Germany, could do nothing against the Reich, except through Poland, and therefore could act only with Poland's consent, and given the history of Polish-Soviet relations, this was extremely unlikely. From two viewpoints, therefore, the Soviet alliance was useless. If the Germans invaded Poland, the Russians were not obliged to inter-

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[18]Ibid., p. 53

vene, since their alliance was with France. If Germany attacked France, Poland could refuse transit of Russian troops through her territory, and render the two-front response unworkable. The alternatives were air support, which was impractical as well as virtually non-existent, or an illegal march through hostile or at best, neutral territory.[19]

The Soviet Union was committed by separate treaty to come to the aid of Czechoslovakia in the event of German aggression, but this was also contingent upon a French response. The Soviet connection can be briefly summarized. If Great Britain and therefore France adopted a hard line policy against Germany, the Soviets were willing to join the contest, either by marching through Rumania or by forcing their way through Poland, but only if the western democracies were intent on crushing Germany. The Russians harbored a dismal view of both French military capacity and willingness to react forcefully and believed it extremely unlikely that they would soon become a participant in hostilities.[20]

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[19]Rene Lauret, France and Germany: The Legacy of Charlemagne (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1964), p. 119.

[20]Taylor, Munich, pp. 454-456.

As a nation which bordered on the newly remilitarized Rhineland, Belgium was of necessity involved in the crisis which arose over Germany's activity there. The coup in the Rhineland reminded many Belgians of the 1914 affront suffered at the hands of their neighbor to the east. Because of the dreadful experiences of Belgium at that time, she had signed a military agreement with France in 1920, a move designed to protect her against another military incursion by Germany. Despite these past experiences, the Belgian government acted in a restrained manner when the Rhineland crisis occurred. Belgian Prime Minister Paul van Zeeland declared in a radio broadcast from London on 13 March that Belgium had done nothing to justify a breach of the Locarno Treaty and that the reduction of his country's security was deplorable.[21]

Van Zeeland steered Belgium on a middle course during the crisis, and actually became a mediator between France and Great Britain in their efforts to deal with the breach of treaty. Although Belgium was cast in the role of mediator, she insisted that she be compensated

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21 The New York Times, March 14, 1936, p. 8.

for her loss of security in any new agreement which the Locarno powers might make. Several internal political considerations influenced the direction of Belgian foreign policy during the Rhineland crisis. Many among Belgium's Flemish population believed that a close association with France would involve Belgium in a war. Belgian conservatives opposed the Franco-Soviet Pact, and the Belgian Fascist Party was rapidly gaining adherents. The failure of France to act decisively when her own interests were so clearly threatened led these three groups to call for a disentanglement of Belgium from French foreign policy. Although Belgium would probably have supported French action in 1936 as she did in the Ruhr occupation of 1923, the pressure brought to bear on the Belgian government ultimately resulted in a policy of neutrality, which unfortunately for the Belgians was to be as beneficial in 1940 as it had been in 1914.[22]

The other Locarno signatory, Italy, was also to feel the impact of the Rhineland coup. Italy was the pawn in the diplomatic maneuverings necessitated by the Rhineland affair. France was eager to maintain cordial relations

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[22] Cameron, Prologue, pp. 198, 199.

with Benito Mussolini and tried to convince Great Britain that League sanctions would only drive him into the arms of Hitler at a time when the western democracies needed his support against the German aggressor.

In February, Hitler had attempted to bargain with Mussolini, urging him to support a German denunciation of Locarno. Hitler told the Italian dictator that the Rhineland occupation would deflect world attention from Ethiopia and focus the wrath of the democracies on Germany for a change. Although Mussolini saw the value in such a bargain, he was unwilling to denounce Locarno at that point, as Hitler requested. He did, however, assure Hitler that he would not oppose a German move in the Rhineland. He also promised Hitler not to support sanctions against Germany. During the early days of the remilitarization, Mussolini publicly remained neutral, and vowed that the Italians would carry out their Locarno obligations faithfully. But as the crisis wore on French and British inaction became a fact of life, and Mussolini began to move closer to the side of the Führer and the partnership known as the Pact of Steel.[23]

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[23]Rich, Hitler's War Aims, pp. 88, 89.

Clearly the policy of drift followed by Great Britain and France in the days immediately following the Rhineland coup strengthened Hitler's hand and forced the other nations of Europe to realign and re-evaluate their policies with regard to Germany. The Rhineland episode dealt a death blow to collective security. No longer would a united front serve as a deterrent to Nazi aggression. The Chancellor of the Third Reich had penetrated its thin facade, and discovered that it was built on words alone.

Hitler had survived the period of greatest danger to his designs, during which he lacked the means of a military defense, and had to rely on a series of judgements that the western democracies would not act to stop him. Hitler's generals had warned him in the most pressing manner not to risk a move that was certain to provoke a French military riposte and could only result in the humiliation and defeat of the Third Reich. The German Chancellor disregarded their caution and when circumstances proved the generals wrong, Hitler became contemptuous of the old-guard conservative leadership and was increasingly convinced that his judgment was superior to that of his military experts.

Hitler's success in the Rhineland is often regarded as a turning point in the history of the inter-war years, and it is clear that if Hitler could have been stopped he should have been stopped in March 1936. It is difficult to draw a clear line across any given point of time and to claim that the errors of human judgment lie on one side and not the other. Nevertheless, a close examination of the reactions of France and Great Britain to the Rhineland crisis indicates that such a line should be drawn. Both countries reacted to the crisis with a policy of military and political paltering and prevaricating, a gross paralysis of will, and incredible errors of assessment and judgment. The Rhineland episode set the precedent for avoiding the small risk, only to confront the larger risk in the future, a policy that was followed once again at Munich in 1938.

CHAPTER VI

THE FRENCH RESPONSE

In March of 1936, France, together with her allies, held a considerable military advantage over any possible aggressor in Europe. However, her military preparedness was based on defensive, rather than offensive capabilities, and public opinion was decidedly pacifist. At that time French leaders were unwilling to risk a war that probably would not have been fought at all if they had been unwilling to call Hitler's bluff and force German troops out of the Rhineland. It seems incredible now that such an obvious choice was rejected when the stakes for France and Europe were so high.

Hitler's conviction that remilitarization of the Rhineland would not provoke a military rejoinder from his western neighbors proved correct. Both England and France were aware that Hitler regarded the recovery of full sovereignty in the Rhineland as a major policy objective, and the French government had been warned repeatedly by its agents in the Rhineland and its attachés in Berlin and Berne that a German initiative could be

expected soon. In fact, as early as 1932, the Ministry of War had informed the Foreign Ministry of continuing violations of the Rhineland restrictions. In reaction to these violations, the French General Staff drew up a retaliatory "Plan D," which provided for a French occupation of the Saar region and a further penetration into the Rhineland to a line from Trier on the Moselle River through Kaiserslautern and Landau to the Rhine.[1]

There is no evidence to suggest that anyone seriously considered putting "Plan D" into operation on 7 March. Instead, it appears that in the months directly preceding the coup, the French government was either unwilling or unable to formulate a policy to deal with the impending crisis. They were definitely forewarned, but certainly not forearmed. The first intelligence reports concerning Germany's intentions to actually remilitarize the Rhineland were made in October 1935. The French Consul General in Cologne, Jean Dobler, sent a report which apparently reached the Vice President of the Supreme War Council, General Maurice Gamelin, who was also the Commander in

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[1] Taylor, Munich, p. 128.

Chief of the French Army. Gamelin's memoirs indicate that on 31 October, 1935, the day Dobler filed his report, he (Gamelin) wrote to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs: "The possibility of a repudiation of the Rhineland statute should be contemplated before Autumn of 1936 at the latest."[2] This proves that the French military leadership was certainly aware of the imminent danger to the demilitarized zone.

Dobler reported to his superiors in Paris the secret construction of barracks, the use of Rhineland airfields by military aircraft, and the establishment of an army regional headquarters in Cologne. Over the next year, Dobler was the source of a steady stream of intelligence reports confirming clandestine preparations for the reoccupation of the demilitarized zone. He reported that the local police forces were being augmented and militarized, and that stocks of munitions were being accumulated in the old Cologne forts. In addition, ground and training crews had arrived at the airfields and army camps, and maneuver areas were being established throughout the countryside. Dobler supplemented these physical observations with reports of speeches by ranking Nazis, including Dr.

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[2]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 51, citing General Gamelin, Servir, Volume II (Paris, 1951), p. 195.

Goebbels, and talks with local officials, on the basis of which he predicted open remilitarization in the spring of 1936. Confirmatory on-the-spot reports also reached Paris from the Consul General in Dusseldorf.[3]

In testimony before the Parliamentary Committee of Inquiry after the war, Dobler charged that this information never reached the responsible authorities in Paris. Either the Foreign Minister had been too busy to read the dispatches or foreign service personnel had been unable or unwilling to give them directly to him. He believed that this was the initial cause of the French failure to act against Germany both prior to and during the Rhineland crisis.[4] Although his reports went unacknowledged, it is clear that his dispatches were read. At least by mid-January 1936, the French political leaders were well aware that the Germans might move at any time.[5]

Another source of information concerning Germany's plans was André Francois-Poncet, the French Ambassador

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[3]Taylor, Munich, pp. 128, 129.

[4]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 50, 51.

[5]Taylor, Munich, p. 130.

in Berlin. He met with Hitler on 21 November 1935, to advise him that debate was beginning in the French Chamber on ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact. The German Chancellor reacted by violently denouncing the pact, charging that it was a military alliance directed against Germany. Hitler's reaction convinced Francois-Poncet that the Germans would retaliate against the pact by denouncing Locarno and occupying the Rhineland:

> In a long dispatch on 26 November I requested the government to consult upon what conduct it should fittingly adopt on the day when Hitler passed from words to action. Personally I suggested that we should not wait for this to happen; we should forestall it by openly asking the question, thus forcing Hitler to lay his cards on the table. Such a policy might perhaps persuade Hitler to pledge himself to raise no fortification in the Rhine zone in return for our approving the establishment of a few garrisons . . . . Or else, I urged, let us threaten to oppose with armed force the realization of his aims.[6]

Faced with two concrete alternatives suggested by a man with first hand knowledge of the situation, the Foreign Ministry decided to accept neither of them. The French Foreign Minister told Francois-Poncet that if the French government appeared to admit any possibility of revising the Locarno Pact the whole agreement might crumble,

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[6] Francois-Poncet, The Fateful Years, p. 189.

with Great Britain and Italy freed of their commitments in the Rhineland. The military high command knew of his November dispatch, Francois-Poncet said, and pressed the government to tell them what reaction it would have to a German move in the demilitarized zone. The answer was that in such an event the French government would depend upon the regular procedures of the League of Nations.[7]

On 25 January, the Sarraut cabinet took office, with Pierre Flandin as Foreign Minister. This was barely six weeks before the Germans made their move, and what little the French government did in the way of preparation for the anticipated blow was done during this short time. The Minister of War was General Joseph Maurin, a very defense-minded individual who regarded the Maginot Line as the ultimate safeguard against aggression from any quarter.[8]

Albert Sarraut was merely heading an interim ministry, maintaining the functions of government until the spring elections. He was sixty-four years old, a moderate who had been in and out of government office for thirty years.[9] It is important to note that Sarraut commanded

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[7]Ibid., pp. 189, 190.

[8]Taylor, Munich, pp. 130, 131.

[9]Ibid.

the allegiance of neither the left nor the right, and was in many ways, a man without a party. The fact that Hitler chose March 1936 for his coup indicates that he had a clear understanding of the French political situation, and planned to take advantage of the struggles between the left and right which had weakened the French government almost to the point of impotency.

Maurin, the Minister of War, had been chosen for ministerial office by Flandin, with the approval of Marshal Philippe Petain. To a 1935 request for a French armored force, Maurin responded in the French Chamber:

> How can anyone believe that we are still thinking of the offensive when we have spent so many billions to establish a fortified frontier! Should we be mad enough to advance beyond this barrier on I don't know what sort of adventure?[10]

General Gamelin, regarded by Pertinax as one of the "Gravediggers of France," shared this viewpoint. The General was convinced that the concrete and steel of the Maginot Line could withstand all manner of assault. This reliance on the defensive was the credo of the French military leaders of the 1930's and lies at the

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[10]Ibid., p. 131.

heart of their reluctance to commit the French forces to military action during the Rhineland crisis.[11]

Pierre Flandin is somewhat of an enigma. An avowed Anglophile, he cultivated English customs, dress and friendships, and sought to soften the blow of the Rhineland remilitarization with a revival of the Entente Cordiale. Although he appeared to support a forceful French response to Hitler's coup in the demilitarized zone, he has been reviled as a "Gravedigger," a German sympathizer, a fool, and a coward. He has also been touted as a farsighted statesman who merely lacked the courage of his convictions.[12]

These four men, Sarraut, Flandin, Maurin, and Gamelin shared the burden of formulating French policy immediately prior to and during the Rhineland coup.

In mid-January 1936, Gamelin prepared a memorandum on the growing German military menace. In it he estimated Germany's effective ground strength at 790,000

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[11] Pertinax, The Gravediggers of France: Gamelin, Daladier, Reynaud, Petain and Laval (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1944), pp. 11-16.

[12] Ibid., p. 393; Reynaud, Thick, p. 135.

men, although the evidence indicates it was more nearly 500,000 at that time. Approximately 200,000 men made up the Labor Service (Arbeitdienst), but this group was not armed in 1936, nor was it trained to any significant degree. His estimate apparently also included 40,000 SS men, a contingent similarly lacking in military significance. Three days before he wrote the memorandum, he had been warned by his intelligence service that the Rhineland would be reoccupied in "the near future." He pointed out in his memorandum that the loss of the Rhineland would put France's eastern allies at the mercy of Germany, but recommended nothing to counter the threat. His message was considered on 18 January by the Military High Commission. The only action taken at the meeting was an agreement to request additional military appropriations.[13]

Gamelin's memorandum clearly exemplifies the French dilemna regarding German rearmament and the remilitarization of the Rhineland. The Government of France was convinced that once Germany remilitarized the Rhineland, the zone would immediately be fortified and the value of the Little Entente would be strategically nullifed. However, this conviction seems to have been outweighed by

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13 Taylor, Munich, p. 131.

their exaggerated view of German military strength. The French leadership seemed so terrified of what it imagined German military strength to be that it was unable to muster the necessary resolve to lay plans for a counteraction in the event of a German reoccupation of the zone. Since the French government was reasonably well-informed as to the extent of German rearmament the belief that the Reich exceeded France in trained men and was about to pull ahead in materiel may have been due to the psychological effect of such para-military formations as the SA and SS, in spite of the fact that their miltiary utility was negligible. It could also perhaps be attributed to the fear that secret German rearmament was far more extensive than French intelligence had realized, or perhaps to a need on the part of the French government to deceive itself with good excuses for refraining from action. It is also conceivable that the French fear was the result of a combination of all three. Whatever the origins of this exaggerated view of German might, it clearly palsied the will of the French government and the French military establishment.[14]

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[14] Weinberg, Foreign Policy, pp. 243, 244.

Pierre Flandin spoke with the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, on 27 January regarding the Rhineland issue. Flandin told Eden that his government was concerned about the possibility of German action in the demilitarized zone, and asked what advice Eden would give concerning the attitude the French government should adopt. Eden responded that he considered it "improbable" that Hitler "would take any precipitate action in the near future."[15] Eden also told Flandin that the French government must decide for itself how much importance it attached to the demilitarized zone, and whether the French wished to maintain it at all costs or if they would prefer to bargain with the German government while the existence of the zone still had some value in German eyes. Eden suggested that if they wished to negotiate with Hitler, they should do so, but if they intended to repel a German invasion of the zone, they should lay their military plans. Flandin replied that these were just the subjects which he thought their governments should carefully consider and on which they should then consult. Eden remarked in his memoirs that "This was hardly the attitude or language of a man determined to fight for the Rhineland."[16]

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[15]Eden, Facing, p. 373.

[16]Ibid.

The Supreme Military Committee met in early February with Flandin presiding. The French Foreign Minister described the recent influx of intelligence information regarding the zone, and asked what measures could be taken if the Germans reoccupied the Rhineland. Maurin informed him that the French Army had been organized solely to conduct a defensive campaign, and had made no preparations for offensive action, and was not ready for any type of military intervention.[17]

During the course of the meeting Gamelin, the Minister of the Navy and the Air Minister all expressed similar views. When Flandin voiced his astonishment at their position, General Gamelin told him that the General Staff was an executive organ, and that it was the government's responsibility to make the necessary decision. The military would then carry out the orders of the government.[18]

This capitulation on the part of the Chief of Staff appears to be characteristic of the reluctance on the part of French government officials to shoulder responsi-

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[17] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 57, 58, citing Flandin's memoirs, Politique Francaise, p. 195.

[18] Ibid., p. 59

bility and make decisions. The military refused to suggest a course of action, instead insisting that any resistance, short of a general mobilization, would be ineffective. Sarraut, who apparently favored a forceful response, hesitated to make any kind of commitment so close to the general elections.[19]

There is no evidence to indicate that between Flandin's conversation with Eden on 27 January and the ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact a month later that the French government was able to formulate a policy to deal with what had now become a certainty - A German reoccupation of the Rhineland. On 14 February, the British Ambassador asked Pierre Flandin for a specific statement of French policy regarding the Rhineland. The French Foreign Minister evaded the question, indicating that he would contact Anthony Eden regarding the matter. The Ambassador also approached Gamelin on the same subject, but once again was refused an answer.[20]

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19 Ibid.

20 Taylor, Munich, p. 133.

Finally on 27 February, the day the treaty with Russia was ratified, the French cabinet met to consider for the first time what action should be taken when the Germans made the expected move. No record of the proceedings has survived, except for postwar testimony and the memoirs of Gamelin. The official formulation of France's position, which was given in confidence to the Belgian Ambassador that same day and to Anthony Eden on March 3 was as follows:

> The French government will not take any isolated action. It will act only in accord with the cosignatories of Locarno.
>
> In case of a flagrant and incontestable violation (of the Rhineland provisions) the French government will immediately consult with the British, Belgian and Italian governments with a view to taking common action in execution of the League of Nations pact and the Locarno agreements.
>
> While awaiting the opinion of the guarantor powers, the French government reserves the right to take all measures, including those of a military character, preparatory to such collective action as may be decided upon by the Council of the League of Nations and the Locarno guarantors.[21]

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21 Ibid.

This statement amounts to little more than procrastination. It did not take into account the fact that French Allies might be unwilling to act, and did not deal with the possibility of unilateral action by France if her Allies did not rally to her aid.

On the morning of March 7, the long awaited blow came. Premier Sarraut immediately called an informal meeting to attempt to establish one policy or solution out of the discussions of the past weeks. Present at the meeting were Flandin, Maurin, Joseph Paul-Boncour, who was France's representative to the League of Nations, General Gamelin, and George S. Mandel, the Minister of Post and Telegraph. Mandel and Paul-Boncour urged Sarraut to issue a formal demand to the Germans that they withdraw. If they refused, the military would then force them to do so. Sarraut asked Gamelin whether France could accomplish this if she were not assisted by her allies. Gamelin replied that under current conditions France was strong enough to do so, but a war of long duration would favor Germany because of her superior numbers and industrial capacity.[22]

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[22] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 136.

That evening, a similar meeting was held, and it was decided that the Council of the League of Nations should be formally notified of Germany's breach of treaty and that the Locarno powers, other than Germany, should be called to emergency session. Similar meetings continued on the eighth, with Flandin, Sarraut, Mandel and Paul-Boncour continuing to favor immediate military action. However, the military ministers urged caution, and Sarraut did not attempt to impose his will upon the cabinet.[23]

The French government immediately received notes of support from Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Rumania, Hungary and Yugoslavia. All these nations indicated their willingness to support France in the military response to which she was by treaty entitled, but the French held to their decision to appeal to the League of Nations. The British Foreign Office, which had made an urgent plea to Flandin to be "prudent, coolheaded and conciliatory," supported the French decision.[24]

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[23] Arthur H. Furnia, The Diplomacy of Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations and the Prelude to World War II 1931-1938 (Washington, D.C.: The University Press of Washington, 1960), pp. 190, 191.

[24] Ibid., p. 191.

Eden informed Flandin that he had warned the German ambassador that the British government took an extremely serious view of the situation. He added that if the French would bring the matter before the League of Nations, as provided by the Locarno Treaty in the case of a non-flagrant violation, the British government would support the French case. Since it had become an axiom of French foreign policy that France would not move against Germany without the cooperation of the Locarno signatories, it is not surprising that Eden's promise kept Flandin from pressing for military action. To the Eastern European nations who had offered support, this was tantamount to abandonment. Eduard Beneŝ wrote in his memoirs a particularly apt summary of the situation:

> On March 7, 1936, Hitler, in reoccupying the Rhineland, dealt a decisive blow at the cause of European peace. Czechoslovakia - and probably Poland also - was ready to march by the side of France against Germany. We had told the French Minister in Prague that we should support France if she decided to reject the consequences which were imposed upon her by Hitler's attitude. The latter had broken the Treaty of Locarno and the Rhineland Pact and, because of this Pact, authorized France and Britain to go immediately to war. The Western democracies would have been able to stop Germany, whilst there was still time, in the pursuit of this criminal war. In my opinion, we were obliged to march at the side of these two Powers and we would have done so. But nothing happened. France thus committed the most dangerous of errors. . . . France did not act, when she had the right to do so in accordance with the terms of a treaty signed by Germany and . . . concluded to provide for this particular case.

> The Western democracies gave evidence of indecision, of weakness. . . and with a lack of foresight which bordered on frivolity. This important fact was the cause of the tragic collapse of France. It was the first chapter in the story of Munich and of the surrender of June, 1940. In March, 1936, France abandoned herself to her fate; it was thus the easier for her to abandon us to ours in September, 1938.[25]

In choosing League action, France was taking the line of least resistance. Both the left and right opposed a military response. The French right charged that the French government had provoked Hitler into the remilitarization of the Rhineland by ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact. While the French left did not defend Hitler, it announced that it was madness to believe that Germany should continue to endure the restriction of Versailles seventeen years after the cessation of hostilities. Both groups based their statements to the overriding conviction that there should be "above all, no war!"[26] In spite of the fact that public opinion did not favor military resistance, the solution ultimately lay in the hands of the French government, and the ministers had a difficult decision to make. The alternatives were to accept the breach as non-flagrant and await League action, or to view the coup as a flagrant violation and

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[25]Eduard Benes, quoted in Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight, p. 125.

[26]Ibid., p. 127.

a cause for war. Hitler had carefully limited his troops and equipment in the Rhineland so as to avoid giving the impression that the move was a forerunner to invasion of either France or Belgium. The Chancellor's decision to employ moderation may also have been partially based on the idea that a French response would have been limited, if it were made at all. If, on the other hand, the French Army mounted a major offensive to throw a few thousand troops out of the Rhineland, it risked committing a major psychological error similar to the Ruhr incursion, giving the world "the hateful spectable of war mongering."[27]

In spite of some talk about using "a hammer to kill a fly,"[28] Flandin was apparently convinced by Gamelin and others in the War Ministry that not only did France lack an adequate striking force, but that she also lacked the wherewithal to sustain a lengthy assault. The evidence though, indicates that the French military was adequately manned and well enough equipped to have answered the challenge and indeed to have driven the Germans out of the Rhineland.[29] But it has also been suggested that the French Army of 1936 had no strike force capable of marching as

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[27]Eden, Facing, p. 367.

[28]Taylor, Munich, p. 136.

[29]This view is shared by Taylor, Rich, Shirer, Weinberg, and Goldman.

far as Mainz, or of occupying the entire demilitarized zone, and that it did not possess a single unit which could be made instantly combat ready.[30]

The consensus of evidence indicates that France did have adequate military resources to answer the Rhineland coup with force, even had she been forced to act unilaterally. Such a move, however, would have required a courageous and imaginative, as well as determined, military leadership. This France did not possess. The General Staff, by clinging to the belief that its defensive concept was infallible, did much to undermine the French will to resist a Rhineland occupation. Any army is only as good as its leadership, and if the leadership refuses to lead, the cause is lost. Therefore the question of whether France alone had the military capacity to reply forcefully is a moot point, since she obviously did not have the will to do so, but it is clear that German strength was not nearly as great as was widely presumed.

The French General Staff consistently overrated Hitler's military strength. As early as 1934, fears were being expressed in Paris that the illegal Reich forces had surpassed the French Army numerically and that Germany's war industries would soon be superior to those of

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[30]Emmerson, The Rhineland Crisis, p. 105.

France. During the last half of 1935, the question most often pondered by French military experts was not whether Germany could defend herself, but how soon Hitler could successfully launch an offensive. These alarms may have been voiced initially to arouse the French public to the need for greater rearmament, but there is no doubt that by 1936 the French Army high command had become convinced that Germany was an armed camp. Overestimates of German strength continued during the reoccupation, when General Gamelin numbered the troops in the Rhineland at 250,000, roughly ten times their actual number.[31]

Flandin also had to consider future relations with Great Britain. Even though he favored military action, he believed that to force Britain to march against her will by initiating hostilities against the Reich would have a grave effect on Anglo-French relations. Once their obligation had been fulfilled, Flandin believed the British would repudiate other commitments to France and either retire into isolation or negotiate directly with Germany. Nothing, he believed, could be worse for France than the collapse or even the weakening of Franco-British unity in the face of the German menace.[32]

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[31] Ibid., p. 110.

[32] Ibid., p. 113.

At Flandin's request, delegations from Great Britain, Belgium and Italy met on 10 March at the Quai d'Orsay in Paris. The talks opened with the French Foreign Minister attempting to put his colleagues at ease by stating at the outset that he did not expect any resolution to be made at the meeting. Instead he urged them to discuss the Rhineland situation and arrive at a "common position" which could be taken when the Council of the League of Nations met. A flagrant violation had occurred, he stated, and France had an incontestable right to act in order to force a German evacuation of the illegally occupied zone. France would, however, respect the desire of Great Britain that she follow proper procedure and bring the question before the Council of the League of Nations. Flandin stated his assumption that the League Council would endorse any action which the Locarno powers decided to undertake.[33]

At that point the formal cordiality of the meeting was destroyed by the emergence of a basic disagreement between France and Great Britain. Anthony Eden pointed out that

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[33] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 241-243.

the other League members were under no obligation to support France or the Locarno powers. If Flandin assumed that France would get automatic support from the League members, Eden added, there could be great difficulty in store at the League Council meetings.[34]

Flandin proceeded to outline the procedure which he believed the Locarno powers should follow. First, he said, an ultimatum should be sent to Germany, demanding an immediate withdrawal from the zone. Second, no negotiations should be held as long as Germany retained military forces there. Finally, if Hitler refused to withdraw, the Locarno signatories would demand sanctions and start by removing their ambassadors from Berlin as a gesture of discontent. The sanctions would be applied in successive stages, beginning with economic measures but resorting to military ones if the former were ineffective. Flandin then announced, in front of the Italian Ambassador, that sanctions against Italy should be lifted if she would now support France. This statement widened the Anglo-French breach. Eden viewed this as a cynical action amounting to rewarding one aggressor if he would help deal with a more powerful one.[35]

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[34]Ibid., p. 243.

[35]Ibid., pp. 244-245.

Eden then announced that France should "not undertake anything against Germany which would create an irreparable situation." He assured Flandin that the British government had no intention of evading its obligations, but declared that the problem could certainly be settled by diplomatic means, and that his country would be glad to take charge of these.[36]

Flandin and his countrymen had difficulty understanding how the guarantor of a treaty could be the mediator in a dispute involving a breach of that same treaty. Yet it was clear from the outset that this neutral role had been taken on by Great Britain and would be accepted by the French.[37]

The talks in Paris really accomplished little except to expose the Anglo-French antagonism which had been latent for some time. Before adjournment, it was agreed that further talks should be held in London, where the League Council meetings were scheduled to take place.[38]

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[36] Eden, Facing, p. 393.

[37] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 245.

[38] Ibid.

The Locarno powers met again in London on 12 March, and here Flandin was confronted with British intransigence. He implored the British statesmen and politicians to adhere to a strict interpretation of the Locarno Treaty, to support France military action became necessary and to lead Europe in a crusade against Nazi aggression. The Locarno powers, including Italy, merely agreed that they would permit the Council of the League of Nations to decide whether or not Germany had violated the Locarno Treaty. The Council met in London between 14 and 17 March. Hitler sent von Ribbentrop as his personal representative. The Council declared Germany guilty of a breach of her obligations under Locarno, but Neville Chamberlain and Stanley Baldwin convinced Flandin that the only course left was for France to negotiate with the Germans. This merely reinforced French policy, which had already become one of trying to save face with vociferous demands for action which were carefully calculated to cover retreat. On the nineteenth, the Locarno powers submitted to von Ribbentrop a set of proposals aimed at achieving detente between France and Germany. The proposals asked if the Germans would submit their

doubts about the Franco-Soviet Pact to the Hague Court, and whether they would limit their forces and refrain from making fortifications in the Rhineland pending negotiations over Germany's counter proposals.[39]

With the submission of these proposals the French initiative was lost. She had surrendered her right to military action and passed her leadership to Great Britain. The fate of the Rhineland was sealed. Hitler could take his time in answering the questions and in submitting counter proposals. No French guns were aimed at Saarbrücken and no French soldiers were preparing to cross the Maginot Line.

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[39] Furnia, Diplomacy, pp. 195, 196.

CHAPTER VII

EARLY BRITISH RESPONSE

> When Her Majesty's Government are considering whether or not there is a basis of negotiation, I should like to suggest to my noble friend a test which they might apply: It is whether the agreement for which they are working will serve only to relax tension for a while, or whether it is in the true interests of lasting peace. We must not perpetrate an injustice in order to get a little present ease; and the Government have (sic) to consider whether their decision gives peace, not just for an hour or a day or two, but in their children's time. That is the difference between appeasement and peace.[1] Lord Avon, Anthony Eden, 1961

Perhaps that is the lesson the Rhineland crisis taught, but in studying that episode, one is forced to the conclusion that in 1936, appeasement was the order of the day. While the French government preferred to think of Locarno and the Rhineland guarantees as non-negotiable, and therefore chose to put the whole issue aside and await the inevitable, it appears that only in retrospect did the British government reach the conclusion that the demilitarized zone was critical to the peace of Europe. Great Britain regarded the Rhineland as a valuable bargaining counter, one

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[1]Eden, Facing, p. viii.

which could be used to appease Hitler's appetite for aggrandizement while at the same time securing for Great Britain an air pact with Germany. Neither the French policy (or non-policy) nor the British took into consideration "the whim of a mad dictator" until it was too late. Hitler's sudden move left the two western democracies without a coherent policy, and neither was sufficiently prepared, on the spur of the moment, to formulate one.

The key to understanding the position taken by the British government during the Rhineland crisis lies in an examination of several political and diplomatic developments which had just taken place. First, the British government had only recently changed hands. The elections held in the fall of 1935 saw the victory of Stanley Baldwin, whose program was based on a peace platform. Baldwin chose Anthony Eden to succeed Sir Samuel Hoare as Foreign Minister. These two men, along with Neville Chamberlain, the champion appeaser, were largely responsible for the formulation of British policy during the remilitarization episode. Domestically, the Baldwin government was caught between attempting to rearm, but without placing a strain on industry,

and shoring up Britain's offensive and defensive capabilities in the face of a pacifist public opinion. Second, the issue of Italian sanctions, Anglo-French relations and the German revisionist plans combined to make a quagmire of British foreign policy. The issue of Mussolini's aggression in Ethiopia loomed large, and Great Britain, still smarting from the Hoare-Laval fiasco, favored sanctions. France, fearful of alienating Mussolini, did not. Pierre Flandin was anxious to enhance Franco-British unity and offered to support sanctions in return for a British agreement regarding the Rhineland. This offer was just one of several attempts made by the French to secure a pledge from Great Britain concerning the sanctity of the demilitarized zone. The British government steadfastly refused to accede to such a trade-off, and furthermore shunned any statements regarding the demilitarized zone. From January 1935 through pre-coup 1936, the British government resisted all French efforts to secure pledges or other statements on behalf of the demilitarized zone. Great Britain chose only to reaffirm in general her fidelity to Locarno.[2]

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[2] Furnia, Diplomacy, pp: 183-185; Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, pp. 56, 57.

The British government during this time practiced a double-edged policy with regard to Germany. Its ministers avoided anything resembling a direct warning regarding the demilitarized zone. In the face of Hitler's growing power and potential for mischief making the British wanted to avoid any statement which would definitely commit them to some kind of military action or force them to climb down from some untenable position. But at the same time, they preferred Hitler to think that the British government regarded the Rhineland statutes as inviolable.[3]

The Baldwin government was attempting to secure public approval for rearmament, an issue which placed the British government on the horns of a dilemna. For the last fifteen years, British official policy had been to support the League of Nations and disarmament, under the mantle of collective security. While the French appear to have totally embraced this illusive doctrine and allowed its ideology to paralyze their will, the British took a more practical stance. The British government apparently realized that the Ethiopian crisis and German rearmament were seriously undermining collective security, and although the French seemed con-

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[3]Emmerson, The Rhineland Crisis, p. 60.

strained to bury their heads in the sand, the English decided to rearm themselves as a counter to this threat. In 1935, the Defense Policy and Requirements Committee was established. Baldwin presided over the committee, whose members included the Lord President, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Foreign Secretary, and the three service ministers. It has been suggested that no single document goes so far to explain British foreign policy during the Ethiopian and Rhineland affairs than this committee's report, which was written under presure of Germany's expansion of her air force. The report warned that:

> It is of the utmost importance that this country should not become involved in war within the next few years. We cannot urge too strongly. . . that no opportunity should be lost to avoid the risk of war. . . as long as possible.[4]

The possibility of hostile action by Italy in response to League sanctions combined with fears of extensive German rearmament to convince the British leadership that it must quicken the pace of its own rearmament program. A report from the Air Ministry indicated that by fall of 1935, the Germans would have fifty squadrons, comprising 600 aircraft, ready for use. That same year, Winston Churchill made a comparison of British and German air strength and concluded that the government's

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[4]Taylor, Munich, p. 227.

promise to maintain air parity was not being fulfilled and that Britain was entering a time of "perilous weakness."[5]

During the late 1930's rearmament in Great Britain was hampered by a stringent peace-time budget and quarreling often arose among the military ministers over who would get what. Fear of aerial bombardment and faith in strategic bombing had led Stanley Baldwin to declare in the House of Commons as early as 1932 that "the bomber will always get through. . . ."[6] This faith in air power and fear of aerial attack determined the course British rearmament would take, and led Baldwin to seek increased spending for defense.

The Defense Requirements Committee issued a series of reports in late 1935 estimating that Germany would not attain her intended naval strength until 1942, that her army would closely approach the size of the French by 1939 and considerably exceed it by 1945, and that the German Air Force would be formidable by 1938. The committee concluded that it was "unlikely" that the Germans would launch an aggression before 1942, but that the British should reach a reasonable state of preparedness by 1931.[7]

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[5]Ibid., p. 234.

[6]Will Fowler, ed., Strategy & Tactics of Air Warfare (New Jersey: Chartwell Books, Inc., 1979), p. 13.

[7]Taylor, Munich, p. 235.

In order to achieve this, Baldwin and his ministers sought to enter into negotiations with Germany so that their opposition in Parliament could not charge them with rearming precipitately. An attempt to negotiate would clear the air. Either Hitler would comply or he would refuse, in which case the British people would have a better view of the danger posed by Adolph Hitler. At the time, Hitler made frequent protestations of his peaceful intentions, and decried his total devotion to Locarno and the demilitarized zone. Many Britons believed that any agreement signed by Hitler would be worthless, but others believed that even if he signed an agreement and later repudiated his signature, Britain would have at least gained some time for her rearmament efforts, which were thought to require at minimum a three year effort.[8]

This policy has been regarded as foolhardy and circuitous by many and Baldwin is often criticized for his attempt to lure support for rearmament in this manner. It has been suggested that the Prime Minister could have been elected on a program of limited rearmament in 1935 had he enlightened the British people to the potential

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[8]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 59.

dangers of Adolph Hitler and German rearmament, a situation amply proven by British intelligence reports.[9] Such a policy would certainly have made the British response to remilitarization of the Rhineland much simpler.

The British government was operating on the premise that France lacked the military and moral strength to respond forcefully to German aggression. At the same time, Eden and others suspected that the French might seek to excuse themselves for not fighting on the grounds that the British would not join them. Nevertheless the possibility could not be entirely ruled out that the Sarraut ministry might react forcefully to a coup, perhaps even by mobilizing. If that occurred, Britain would be morally, if not legally, bound to support France in punitive measures against Germany. This possibility, coupled with the increasing likelihood of a fait accompli in the zone, prompted Eden to advise the cabinet against adopting any attitude which might oblige the government to either fight for the zone or abandon it in the face of a German reoccupation.[10]

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[9]Winterbotham, Nazi Connection, pp. 126, 127.

[10]Emmerson, Rhineland Crisis, p. 61.

In early 1936, at the suggestion of the British cabinet and under the direction of Anthony Eden, the Foreign Office conducted a study of Locarno, the Rhineland statutes, the strategic significance of the zone, and its impact on the issue of British rearmament. The officials first studied and evaluated the positions of the Soviet Union, Belgium and Italy with regard to the maintenance of the demilitarized zone. Cognizant of the fact that Russia was committed by the Franco-Soviet Pact only in the event of a direct attack on France, they reached the conclusion that the most Russia was likely to offer in the event of a German reoccupation was advice. Belgium, on the other hand was a Locarno signatory and vitally interested in maintaining the demilitarized zone because it bordered on her own frontiers as well as those of France. Since Belgium was not a party to the Franco-Soviet Pact, if the Germans used that as a pretext to reoccupy the zone, the Belgian government would have a legitimate grievance and could appeal to the League Council. The ministers also speculated that Belgium would follow the French lead in any reaction to a breach of treaty, in spite of the fact that the Belgians, like the English, did not believe the zone

could be preserved indefinitely. As a guarantor of Locarno, Italy had the same obligations as Great Britain, but there was very little expectation that the Italian government would honor them. The heavy drain on Italian resources, the international animosities engendered by the Abyssinian conflict, and the imposition of League sanctions all precluded Italian cooperation with the other Locarno powers in any action against Germany, who had not joined in the sanctions against Italy. Italian inaction would repay this favor, while a crisis in the Rhineland would benefit Italy by diverting world attention from the Ethiopian situation. As matters stood, the British government concluded that Italy would be most likely to do nothing in the event of a German remilitarization of the Rhineland.[11]

In addition to estimating the probable reactions of the Soviet Union and the Locarno signatories, the Foreign Office also assessed the military, political and diplo-

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[11]Lawrence Warner Hill, "British Official Reaction to the Rhineland Crisis, November 1935-May 1936," Ph.D. dissertation, Texas Christian University, 1972, University Microfilms, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1972, pp. 74, 75.

land. In early January 1936, Foreign Office leaders requested that a military evaluation be made by the appropriate departments. Anthony Eden raised two specific questions before the Committee of Imperial Defense: (1) Of what defensive value would the demilitarized zone be to France, Belgium and Great Britain; and (2) Did the zone constitute any obstacle to the defense of Germany against an attack by the western powers? On 27 January, in response to Eden's inquiries, the Secretaries of State for Air and War forwarded reports to the Foreign Office. Their conclusions were that the Rhineland zone was of negligible defensive value to the western powers and constituted no obstacle to the defense of Germany in the event of an air attack. They reported that modern aircraft range capabilities eliminated the necessity for Germany to establish permanent air bases there. On the other hand, if a land attack was launched against the Reich, the Germans possibly would have to divert aircraft from other areas to defend the frontier. This would weaken the air defense of Germany as a whole. In addition, if the zone remained demilitarized, German anti-aircraft equipment

would have to be positioned further back from the frontier, which would allow attacking forces some tactical advantages.[12]

This report, coupled with the Foreign Office assessments of the zone's almost negligible political value led the British Government to conclude that the Rhineland demilitarized zone had one significant value - as a basis for negotiation. What emerged from the study was a British policy plan which favored negotiation and peaceful remilitarization of the Rhineland. This would necessitate a revision of Locarno. In return for remilitarization, Great Britain wanted an air pact and some guarantee of the security of Central and Eastern European allies of France, who would be adversely affected by remilitarization.[13]

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[12] Ibid., pp. 67-75. Hill uses material from the British Public Record Office in London. The documents concerning the Rhineland affair remained closed until 1968, when the British government repealed the old 50 year rule, and this opened them for use. In this section he cites "Secret" C.I.D. papers, Air Ministry papers, and minutes of the Foreign Office from the month of January, 1936.

[13] Ibid., pp. 74, 75.

This policy plan, although practical in some ways, ignored the significance of the Rhineland for the rearmament of Germany. If the British wanted only time to rearm and prepare, was it not foolhardy to return the Rhineland to total German control? Demilitarization meant that there was to be no manufacture of armaments or munitions in the zone. Krupp and I. G. Farben had been specifically prohibited from manufacturing weaponry, and many of the Krupp works had literally been obliged to beat their swords into plow shares. However, this treaty imposed hiatus actually worked to the advantage of the Reich, because Krupp entered the crucial 1930's with modern facilities and techniques. The restoration of German sovereignty in the Rhineland would mean the end of limitations on the manufacture of weaponry, and the "Armorers of the Reich" could begin to produce openly and in unlimited quantity what they had been turning out secretly for at least three years.[14]

The British policy plan also failed to take into account the psychological value of the demilitarized zone. It remained to the Germans the last remnant of the Ver-

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[14]William Manchester, The Arms of Krupp 1587-1968 (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1964), p. 324.

sailles diktat and if it could be regained by the Führer so easily, what might the western democracies accede to in the future? Conversely, abandonment of the demilitarized zone would mean the end of collective security and the virtual desertion of Central and Eastern Europe by the western democracies, a capitulation which would cast them in the role of craven cowards in the eyes of the world.[15]

A major consideration addressed by the Foreign Office was how to handle French recalcitrance. It was agreed that the British would attempt to convince France that public opinion in neither country would support military action, and that neither country was prepared for war with Germany. If this failed, they could then insist that the Rhineland problem had assumed the character of a Franco-German dispute which should be handled by the arbitration procedures set forth in the Covenant of the League of Nations.[16]

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[15]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 418.

[16]Hill, "British Official Reaction," p. 75.

Clearly, British prospects for success in negotiating a settlement with Germany appeared bleak, but in the opinion of Anthony Eden and other Foreign Office officials, Europe stood at the crossroads and the only hope for European peace and stability lay in curbing Germany. This, they believed, was impossible until Britain and France were in a stronger military position. The British believed they could buy the time needed for rearmament and simultaneously secure a better agreement than Locarno by sacrificing the demilitarized zone. The Foreign Office determined, therefore, that an attempt should be made to forestall an impending crisis over the Rhineland in order to prevent a greater catastrophe.[17]

Eden reported his conclusions and those of the Foreign Office to the British Cabinet on February 14:

> Taking one thing with another, it seems undesirable to adopt an attitude where we would either have to fight for the zone or abandon it in the face of German reoccupation. It would be preferable for Great Britain and France to enter betimes into negotiations with the German Government for the surrender on conditions of our rights in the zone while such surrender still has bargaining value.[18]

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[17] Ibid., p. 77.

[18] Eden, Facing, pp. 375, 376.

The Foreign Office had concluded that to wait and merely react to Hitler's initiatives was to court disaster, yet that is exactly what the British government did. The Cabinet was deeply involved in consideration of a forthcoming "British White Paper" on rearmament and in the establishment of a new ministry for the coordination of imperial defense. Consequently, with apparent indifference to the urgency of the Rhineland situation, the Cabinet took no immediate action on Eden's recommendations other than to refer his suggestions to the Cabinet Committee on Germany for further study.[19]

During the days following the 27 February ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact, a series of developments occurred which underscored the differences between French and English attitudes toward the zone. The British were intent upon negotiating some air and arms agreements with Germany using the zone as a bargaining point, in spite of the fact that the Rhineland was not theirs to give away. They had decided to approach the Germans, secure a working agreement with them, and then submit the proposals to the French as the very best of a bad deal. But Eden encountered Pierre Flandin at a meeting of the League Council in Geneva

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[19]Hill, "British Official Reaction," p. 77

on 3 March. The Frenchman asked for specific assurances that England would assist his country in upholding the Rhineland statutes. This created an extremely awkward dilemna for Eden. He could hardly promise to support Articles 42 and 43 when the British policy makers had just dismissed them as non-vital. Nor could he admit that his government was preparing to negotiate the articles out of existence. Neither could be refuse to reaffirm Great Britain's existing commitments regarding the demilitarized zone without expecting his country to be censured in France for taking a selective attitude toward her treaty obligations. This would almost certainly have provoked the French government into retaliating by refusing to impose oil sanctions against Mussolini on the grounds that French security required a strong and friendly Italian ally.[20] Eden evaded the issue. Flandin told the Foreign Secretary that the French government had made a decision as to what action it would take in the event of a German reoccupation of the demilitarized zone. He also told him that in the event of a flagrant breach of treaty by Germany, France would instantly inform the League Council and consult Great Britain, Belgium and Italy in order to

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[20] Emmerson, Crisis in the Rhineland, p. 69.

determine a concerted course of action. France reserved the right to take any preparatory measures, including military ones, in anticipation of collective action by the League and the guarantors of Locarno. The French plan was set forth in a memorandum which Flandin subsequently sent to Eden.[21] Eden confined himself to the reply that he would report the French Government's position to the cabinet, and then adivse his counterpart of their response. He never did so.[22]

The League was meeting in Geneva to discuss the imposition of oil sanctions against Mussolini. At the suggestion of Flandin, the Council agreed to postpone action until 10 March. This proved to be fatal, because by 10 March the Abyssinian crisis had been relegated to a very minor issue due to the actions of Adolph Hitler on the seventh.[23]

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[21] Eden, Facing, p. 378. (see page 98)

[22] Reynaud, In the Thick, p. 122

[23] Eden, Facing, p. 379.

The British interpreted the French memorandum to mean that they were not planning to take immediate action in the event of a German reoccupation, but were counting on Great Britain's support to maintain the demilitarized zone. They then concluded that they must negotiate with the Germans on the subject of the zone while such action was still possible.

Anthony Eden detailed the urgency of the situation in his memoirs:

> There was not one man in a thousand in the country at that time prepared to take physical action with France against a German reoccupation of the Rhineland. Many went further than this and thought it unreasonable that Germany should not be allowed to do as she wished in her own territory, nearly twenty years after the end of the war. These opinions were represented among my colleagues, but I knew that I must rebuild the Anglo-French alliance for the sake of both our countries and that the Locarno Treaty must be kept alive, as the most effective deterrent to Hitler in the future.[24]

To achieve this, Eden suggested that his government take the initiative toward the German government and begin a discussion of an air pact. On 6 March, Eden saw the German Ambassador and asked him to "refer to the Chancellor the possibility of the opening of serious discussions on the Air Pact." The Ambassador agreed, but remarked

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[24]Ibid., p. 380.

that he had received warning from Berlin that a special messenger was on his way to London with an important declaration for Eden from Hitler.[25]

Time had suddenly run out and the moment of truth arrived. The British government's careful formulation of a policy was virtually nullifed because they had presumed that sufficient time remained to achieve a settlement by means of negotiation. They found their position of strength abruptly and seriously undermined, because the bestpossible bargaining counter, the Rhineland demilitarized zone, had vanished.

Anthony Eden was the first member of the British government to learn of Hitler's coup. He is generally regarded by historians as an opponent of appeasement, because in February 1938, he resigned his office rather than carry out the appeasement policy of the Chamberlain government. Yet he was unable in March 1936 to do other than compromise with a man who he feared really did not want to compromise at all.[26]

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[25] Ibid.

[26] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 169

After listening to the German Ambassador read Hitler's memorandum on the morning of the seventh, Eden advised him that "The effect of this unilateral repudiation of a treaty upon His Majesty's government must inevitably be deplorable."[27] He did, however, add that he considered Hitler's new attitude toward the League to be important.[28]

When the German Ambassador left, Eden immediately summoned the French Ambassador. Seeking to placate the French and restrain them from taking any dangerous steps that might lead to war, he informed him that the British cabinet would want to consider the memorandum on Monday morning and then the situation could be discussed fully and frankly by the two governments. This indicated that the Foreign Secretary expected at least a forty eight hour delay in French military action, the period during which any decisive counter attack should have been made.[29] It is important to note that at no time during this critical period did the French government request any British

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27 Eden, Facing, p. 381.

28 Ibid., p. 382.

29 Ibid. p. 383.

military assistance or indicate in any way that they were considering a hostile response.[30] Eden and Flandin were in constant telephone contact throughout 7 and 8 March. In addition, the Foreign Secretary met with the Prime Minister and the two men agreed that Hitler could not be believed, but that there was no public support in Great Britain for a military move. They concluded that there was nothing to do but call a cabinet meeting for Monday morning, and wait to see what France did.[31]

It has been suggested that the British king, Edward VIII, who had maintained a close friendship with the German Ambassador, intervened in the Rhineland crisis and told his Prime Minister that he would abdicate if he made war. Whether he actually did intervene has never been satisfactorily determined. The Germans were nevertheless convinced that he was on their side during the Rhineland dispute.[32]

On Monday, 9 March, the British cabinet met and agreed that Great Britain should restrict her reaction to support for a formal condemnation by the League and

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[30]Furnia, Diplomacy, pp. 192, 193.

[31]Eden, Facing, pp. 385, 386.

[32]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 176, 177, citing Fritz Hesse, Hitler and the English (Wingate, 1954), pp. 21, 22.

assurances for France and Belgium that Britain would fulfill her Locarno obligations.[33] That same day, Anthony Eden addressed the House of Commons and stated the British official position regarding the German coup. He said there was no reason to believe that the German action implied a threat of hostilities. He did say, however, that in the event of an actual attack on France or Belgium, the British would regard themselves as in honor bound to come to the aid of the country attacked.

Also on the 9th, an article appeared in The Times (London) which perhaps best describes the reaction of the British nation to the German reoccupation of the demilitarized zone. Entitled "A Chance to Rebuild," it stated:

> The Locarno agreement was in some ways ahead of its time. So much that it was never in fact allowed to create the conditions requisite to that frank understanding between France and Germany which was and is the first essential of European stability. . . . British opinion will be nearly unanimous in its desire to turn an untoward proceeding to account and, far from weakening the regime of treaties, to seize the opportunity of broadening and strengthening the collective system which opens with the German offer of reentry. . . . The old structure of European peace, one sided and unbalanced, is nearly in ruins. It is the moment, not to despair, but to rebuild.

Hitler's Saturday surprise had caught both the French and British governments off guard. The week-end passed without significant response to Hitler's aggression, and

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[33]Eden, Facing, pp. 387, 388.

by mid-week it was apparent to Germany and the rest of the world that neither the French nor the British would attempt to eject the Germans from the Rhineland. The cumbersome process of League deliberations was called into play, and Hitler merely had to sit back and await the outcome, already convinced that victory was his.

CHAPTER VIII

STALEMATE

The rearmament of the Rhineland brought with it a change in international diplomatic leadership. Paris had for generations been the seat of diplomatic initiative and achievement, but due to French inaction during the Rhineland crisis, that leadership fell by default to Great Britain. It is significant that the center for maintaining the peace of Europe shifted to London both symbolically and physically. The traditional home of the League of Nations was Geneva, yet when the League Council met to consider the Rhineland question, deliberations were held in London at St. James Palace. By 14 March, the day on which the League Council held its first session, it was apparent that Great Britain had assumed the initiative and had undertaken the role of mediator.

Because of this shift in diplomatic responsibility, the failure of the western democracies to oust the Germans from the Rhineland is generally attributed to Great

Britain. Writing in October of 1936, Reinhold Niebuhr stated that the British consistently employed a type of diplomacy best termed "muddling through." He asserted that the resolution of the Rhineland crisis hinged on Britain's response and because the British had adopted a "wait and see" attitude, the rest of Europe had to do likewise. Niebuhr argued that Germany's immediate goal was to wrest the hegemony of the continent from France without directly challenging either France or Soviet Russia. The Nazi purpose as he saw it was to expand at the expense of the smaller nations of Europe while avoiding conflict with the larger ones. The importance of British diplomacy in relation to this ambition arose from the fact that the cornerstone of Nazi international politics was to do nothing which would arouse the British and to seek by every possible means to detach England from her alliance with France. The Anglo-German Naval Agreement was Hitler's notice to the world that the one error of the German imperialists in 1914 - which he intended to avoid - was to challenge the British Navy. Niebuhr charges Hitler with taking advantage of Great Britain's sense of fair play. His article concludes on a prescient note:

> Even if war is avoided for five or ten years at the price of an unchallenged expansion of Germany, Britain will ultimately have to face a triumphant Germany for a final joining of the issue. The assumption of the British pro-German party that justice to Germany, allowing her a moderate expansion, will avert war fails to take the dynamics of politics into account, particularly the dynamics of a fascist dictatorship. Germany is bound to regard every successful test of strength, not as an appeasement of her just grievances, but as a preliminary victory which encourages to a more ultimate conflict. Britain thus threatens to repeat the mistake of 1914 in encouraging Germany by her indecision to hope for an ultimate British neutrality. . . . The peace of today has been bought at the price of the certainty of war tomorrow.[1]

British public opinion, in addition to being dangerously pacific, also held that Hitler's move in the Rhineland was just a "walk in his own back garden."[2] In addition, the British king was a friend to several German diplomats and was known to have pro-German sentiments. Add to this the fact that many British government officials publicly eschewed military action against Germany and there can be little doubt that the shift in diplomatic initiative came as good news to the Chancellor of the Third Reich.

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[1] Reinhold Niebuhr, "Which Way Great Britain?" Current History XLV (November, 1936): 2.

[2] Eden, Facing, p. 389.

In spite of the fact that the British Foreign Office had taken the lead in attempting a settlement of the Rhineland crisis, the League of Nations met at the request of the French government. Pierre Flandin represented his country at the meetings, and took the floor as the first speaker at the opening session. He emphasized that the Treaty of Locarno compelled him to bring the question before the League Council. He detailed the German breach of international law and then, almost self-righteously, stated that the French government, by bringing the issue before the League had not so much exercised a right as performed a duty. "If it were only a question of rights," he said, the Locarno pact entitled France "to take strong and decisive measures forthwith." But because his government sought above all else to maintain the peace, France voluntarily refrained from taking military action.[3]

If Flandin had really expected the League of Nations to take action against Germany he could have specified, when submitting the dispute to the League Council, that Germany's action constituted a flagrant breach of the Treaty of Versailles and the Pact of Locarno. He did

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[3]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 264, 265, citing League of Nations Journal, 1936, Minutes of the ninety-first (extraordinary) session of the Council, London, March 14, 1936, p. 313.

not. Neither did he demand the immediate military assistance from the Locarno guarantors to which his government was entitled. Instead, he stated that he would accept whatever action the League of Nations recommended. This decision implied that France regarded the violation as non-flagrant, and restricted France from taking unilateral action.[4]

Paul van Zeeland, representing Belgium, spoke at the second session which convened on 17 March. In his speech he eloquently described the plight of the smaller nations of Europe whose security depended upon respect for justice and international law. He stressed the need for an international structure based on law and respect for accepted obligations, and urged the formulation of new agreements to replace Locarno.[5]

The third speaker was Maxim Litvinov, the representative of the Soviet Union. He spoke frankly, stating that Germany's verbal attacks on his country made "circumlocution and diplomatic niceties" unnecessary. The official

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[4] Wolfers, Britain and France, pp. 49,50.

[5] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland,", p. 268, citing League Journal, p. 237.

Soviet position called for full support for France, and indicated a willingness to accept Germany into the League of Nations. Litvinov, however, denounced Hitler's aggression, defended the Franco-Soviet Pact, and announced that Germany planned to isolate the small nations of Eastern Europe, then attack them, one by one. The new bilateral agreements Hitler proposed, Litvinov charged, would make this possible. He also stated that Russia was willing to welcome Germany back into the League only when she recognized the principles on which the League was founded. In a pointed reference to Germany's behavior, he enumerated these principles; the observance of treaties, respect for territorial integrity, renunciation of the settlement of disputes by the sword, and equality of all members of the League. His statements implied that the physical removal of German troops from the Rhineland would be a condition of Germany's acceptance into the League.[6]

Anthony Eden's address on the following day was considerably more conciliatory than that of the Soviet representative. He stated:

> The breach, however plain, does not carry with it any imminent threat of hostilities, and has not involved that immediate action for which, in

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[6] Ibid., pp. 269-271, citing League Journal, pp. 319-324.

> certain circumstances, the Treaty of Locarno provides. We happily have time in which to endow our action with prudence, as well as the determination, which the situation requires. The situation, however grave, carries with it an opportunity.[7]

The British Foreign Secretary denounced the breach of treaty, but insisted that there was no chance of war. By publicly eliminating the possibility of hostile action, Eden significantly reduced the ability of the League of Nations to secure a settlement, and indicated to Hitler and the rest of the world that the Rhineland was not worth fighting for.

Following Eden, representatives of other European nations made their views known. The Italian representative indicated his country's dissatisfaction with League sanctions over the Ethiopian affair, and issued a thinly veiled threat that unless they were lifted, the Italian government would seek an understanding with the government of the Reich. Josef Beck, representing Poland, used the League meeting as a forum to try to repair relations with Germany, and carefully refrained from offering any support for the French position. Nicolae Titulescu, on the other hand, offered Rumania's full support to the French. He warned the League of the possible consequences

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[7]Ibid., p. 273, citing League Journal, p. 328.

if it accepted and legalized what Germany had done. If it acquiesced in this violation against the rights of two such powerful states as France and Belgium, he asked, what are less powerful states to think about the effectiveness of the League as an instrument of peace? He concluded that "If the League of Nations emerges from the present crisis as the vanquished party, it will represent in the future a noble ideal of the past rather than a living reality of the present."[8]

At the suggestion of Anthony Eden, League members agreed to hear a German representative, and on 18 March, Joachim von Ribbentrop appeared before the Council. Although he was fluent in English, Ribbentrop addressed the gathering in German, interpreted by Paul Schmidt. The German diplomat explained that Germany had long borne the burdens of limited sovereignty, but when the Franco-Soviet Treaty violated Locarno, Hitler had no alternative but to secure German territory unilaterally. His country had not violated Locarno, he said, because France had unilaterally violated it first and it had therefore ceased to exist. Ribbentrop further explained that Germany had not raised the question of the compatibility of the treaty with Locarno before the League because the problem

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[8] Ibid., pp. 273-276, citing League Journal, pp. 329-332.

was political as well as legal. His country would not have been likely to obtain satisfaction in the face of French recalcitrance. He added that now Germany was in full control of all her territory, and was ready to live in peace and friendship with her neighbors. Germany's willingness to cooperate in building European solidarity lay at the heart of Hitler's foreign policy, he said. In spite of Ribbentrop's defense of his country's actions, the League Council formally condemned Germany's aggression, and adjourned.[9]

Following adjournment of the League Council, the Locarno powers met and drew up a series of proposals for settling the dispute. On 20 March the British government published them in the form of a British White Paper, announcing the terms under which Britain, France, Italy, (included only as a formality) and Belgium were willing to settle the crisis. They proposed the following:

> The German Government is invited to present its argument against the Franco-Soviet mutual assistance pact to the Permanent Court of International Justice at The Hague.
>
> All movement of German troops or war materials into the Rhineland would be suspended and a limit placed on troops already there.

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[9] Ibid., pp. 280, 281, citing League Journal, pp. 334-337.

> An international force composed of troops of the Locarno Guarantor powers would be stationed in a buffer zone in Germany along the borders of France and Belgium until a new security treaty was drawn up. The zone would be 12½ miles wide paralleling the frontier. German troops would be withdrawn from the zone.
>
> An international commission would be formed to supervise the new zone.[10]

That same day, the Baldwin government prepared a letter which was to become the formal instrument used to revive the Entente Cordiale. The British government promised to immediately come to the assistance of the French government, in accordance with the Treaty of Locarno, in regard to any measures which might be jointly decided upon. The letter pledged that Great Britain would, in return for reciprocal measures from the French government, take all practical measures to ensure the security of the French government, take all practical measures to ensure the security of the French nation against unprovoked aggression. The letter really only reaffirmed what Stanley Baldwin had said in 1934, that the British frontier was no longer the chalk cliffs of Dover but the Rhine.

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[10]"Salvaging Locarno in London," Literary Digest CX XI (March 28, 1936): 12.

It did not make any provisions for aid to the Eastern European allies of France or indicate in any way that their security was vital to the peace of Europe. The letter was, in the event of the failure of the above proposals, to be addressed to both the French and Belgian governments, at which time it would become effective.[11]

When Flandin returned to Paris on the 19th, he was convinced that not only had he secured for France a valuable accord with Great Britain, but that the British White Paper constituted a solid basis for negotiations which would necessitate concessions by the Germans. The following day, he addressed the French Chamber and shared these convictions. He received a hearty ovation when he spoke of the letter of guarantee given him by the British government. His faith in the British White Paper was voiced in his statement:

> Negotiations on the subject of the new status of the Rhineland, and on other subjects, will not be opened with Germany until she has expressly accepted all the preliminary conditions which form an indivisible whole.[12]

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[11] Furnia, Diplomacy, p. 197.

[12] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 289.

His speech was followed by a decision on the part of the Chamber to raise the treasury's limits on defense spending to meet the increased needs brought about by the crisis.[13]

Flandin's optimism was short lived. Anthony Eden addressed the British Parliament that same day and his remarks indicated that the British government did not regard the White Paper as an ultimatum to Hitler. Instead it was presented as a tentative plan. In his speech, Eden stressed that the British government was not taking the side of France, but was acting as a mediator in the dispute.

Flandin made his dissatisfaction with Eden's remarks known on 23 March through the French Ambassador in London. The Foreign Secretary replied that France had misunderstood the proposals if she believed they were binding and not merely provisional.[14]

Primarily as a result of this incident, any agreement or understanding between France and Great Britain which had been engendered by the 19 March letter rapidly

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[13]Ibid.

[14]New York Times, March 24, 1936, p. 10.

disintegrated and was replaced by ill-feeling and mistrust. In an interview with the weekly newspaper Journal des Nations, Pierre Flandin expressed his irritation over Britain's actions:

> For reasons known only to herself. . . . Britain has taken up the position of umpire in this dispute. From the first, she has not considered herself an injured party in the same position of France but has assumed the role of mediator. Whose fault will it be if the rising generation reflects only the bitterness resulting from Britain's failing us at every turn? If in a case like this, where we are defending the rights of everyone, we are obliged to make an isolated stand, can the Franco-British entente possibly stand such a test?[15]

Adolph Hitler was certainly aware of the disunity which plagued the western democracies, and realized that concessions on his part would not likely be necessary. It was to his advantage to let time pass. As the days went by the chances that action would be taken to reverse the coup grew increasingly remote. Consequently, Germany issued lengthy proposals and took her time in studying the proposals of the other powers. On 1 April, Ribbentrop presented a memorandum to the British government. It explained Germany's action in the Rhineland once again, and answered the British White Paper of 20 March. The memorandum repeated the Reich's criticism of the Franco-Soviet Pact, and even claimed that the demilitarized zone

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[15] Ibid., March 26, 1936, p. 14

had never been voluntarily accepted. The memorandum stated that the Rhineland clauses had been incorporated into the Locarno treaty only after the Ruhr was forcibly occupied and German territorial integrity violated. It also declared that the creation of the demilitarized zone had been illegal in the first place, because Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points did not intend that Germany's sovereignty in the Rhineland be restricted. The memorandum rejected the proposal for bringing the question before the court at The Hague, because the court could only judge legal, not political, matters.[16]

A nineteen-point German Peace Plan was contained in the memorandum. It was primarily a reiteration of the German offer of 7 March, and included the proposals for a twenty-five year security pact between Germany and her eastern neighbors, a promise to rejoin the League of Nations if her proposals were accepted, and a pledge to limit her western frontier fortifications if the French and Belgians did the same. But it also called for a four-month negotiating period during which Germany would not increase the number of troops in the Rhineland or move them nearer the frontier. It was also suggested that an international commission be set up to verify this, pro-

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[16]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 371, 372.

vided that the French and Belgian governments would agree to restrict similar activity in their own countries. The plan also called for a Franco-German agreement on "moral disarmament" and a special court of arbitration to rule on the various aspects of such an agreement.[17]

The French reaction was the same as it had been on 7 March. The government of France could not understand why a twenty-five year pact was necessary to replace one of infinite duration, and once again expressed concern that bilateral pacts with Eastern European nations might allow Hitler to absorb those countries one at a time while the others were helpless to prevent it. The French government reiterated its opposition to limiting fortifications on the Franco-German border, pointing out that this would mean dismantling the Maginot Line.[18]

The British government regarded the German memorandum as a refusal of the conditions set forth in the British White Paper. Consequently, the Prime Minister transmitted the March 19 letter to the French and Belgian governments and the declarations contained therein came into

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[17] Ibid.

[18] New York Times, April 2, 1936, p. 21.

effect. The British intended this move to show Hitler that they were displeased with his proposals, and to show France and Belgium that they would stand by them. They also decided to begin arrangements for military staff talks. The French had been pressing them to do this, and there now seemed no reason to delay any longer.[19]

British public opinion was immediately hostile to military staff talks, and Anthony Eden spoke to the British Parliament on the subject. He tried to make the talks seem palatable by explaining that Britain was obligated to France and Belgium and had a proud history of not going back on her commitments. For those who were concerned about British involvement in the wars of their neighbors across the channel, Eden made it plain that the staff talks would be strictly limited and clearly defined. "They are purely technical conversations. They can in no measure increase our political obligations - in no measure."[20] Eden had been forced by the pacifism and anti-French sentiment within his country to assure critics of

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[19] Furnia, Diplomacy, p. 197.

[20] Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," p. 376.

the government that the military staff conversations would not commit Great Britain to any overt action against Germany. In a sense this nullified the value of the talks themselves. By totally disallowing the possibility of joint military action, Eden and his government eliminated any chances of ousting the German troops from the Rhineland.

On 15 April, tripartite conversations among the British, French and Belgian Chiefs of Staff began. In the course of the two-day meetings they discussed naval, air and ground strategies and strengths, and laid the foundation for military collaboration in the event of a German attack.[21]

In the meantime the French cabinet approved a reply to the German memorandum of 1 April along with a group of counter-proposals labeled the French Peace Plan. The two statements were submitted formally to the Locarno powers on 8 April, in Geneva and afterwards to the League Council. The first of the statements was a severe indictment of Germany's rearmament of the Rhineland and the proposals that went with it. The French refuted the German contention that the Ruhr occupation had forced the Germans into Locarno, declaring that the Ruhr had been evacuated before

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[21]Eden, Facing, p. 417.

the negotiations even began. Germany's offer to join the League was questioned as well. How could Germany, after violating international agreements, fulfill the conditions of the League Convenant which said that scrupulous respect for all treaty agreements is necessary for peace?[22]

The French plan for peace was a general call for harmony and unity based on the League of Nations and aimed at a united and secure Europe. It called for an international commission controlled by the League, with armed forces at its disposal.[23] The plan put forth by the French government is virtually a reaffirmation of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and clearly illustrates the degree to which collective security and League action had permeated French diplomacy. Totally devoid of concrete proposals, it illustrates the wishful thinking and lack of resolve which was characteristic of the French leadership in 1936.

The Locarno powers met in Geneva on 10 April, at which time Flandin explained the proposals and defended the French government's statements against charges that they were counter-productive and hampered negotiations.

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[22]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 380, 381.

[23]Ibid.

Flandin argued that the failure of the Germans to accept the proposals of 19 March clearly indicated that peaceful settlement was impossible, and that it was time to carry out sanctions against Germany. Eden disagreed, maintaining that a negotiated settlement was still possible, and promised the French Foreign Minister that he would attempt to get Hitler to clarify the 1 April memorandum. His plan was to submit a detailed questionnaire to the German government which would by the directness of the questions educate public opinion even if Hitler refused to reply.[24]

The resulting questionnaire was presented in Berlin on 7 May, but for more than a week, Hitler refused to accept it. In the meantime, the press learned of the questions and published them before the German Chancellor had officially received the document. The questionnaire began by stating that the British government found it regrettable that Germany had not made a "more substantial contribution" to a settlement, and declared that there was a need to achieve the "greatest possible precision" so that negotiations could succeed. Therefore, the government of Great Britain wished to put some questions to the German government regarding the 1 April memorandum.[25]

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[24]Eden, Facing, p. 419.

[25]Ibid.

The first question asked whether Hitler was in a position to conclude genuine treaties. The next asked whether the German government drew any distinction between the Reich and the German nation. Eden included this question because he wanted it made clear whether or not Hitler considered himself the ruler or protector of German speaking peoples who lived outside the boundaries of Germany. If he had such claims, Eden believed the world should be aware of them. Other questions asked whether Germany would respect Europe's political and territorial status, and if the non-aggression pacts proposed by the Germans could be extended to include Russia, Latvia and Estonia.[26]

On 14 May, Sir Eric Phipps, the British Ambassador to Germany, finally secured an interview with the Chancellor. Phipps reported to Eden that it was a lengthy tirade of little substance, and that Hitler refused to reply until the new French government was installed.[27]

The French elections of 3 May resulted in the replacement of Prime Minister Albert Sarraut and Foreign Minister Flandin with Leon Blum and Yvon Delbos, but even after they had taken office, Hitler procrastinated in spite of

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[26] Ibid.

[27] Ibid., p. 420.

the fact that he had promised to reply when the new government took over. On 18 June, Eden stated in Parliament that Germany's failure to answer the questionnaire had shown that Britain's attempts at mediation had been unsuccessful. He declared that everyone wanted Germany's reassurance that the existing territorial status of Europe would be respected. Once the Germans had agreed on this point, a permanent settlement based on the disappearance of the demilitarized zone could be made. He added that the government hoped Germany would reply to the questionnaire of 6 May so that Europe would know Germany's intentions and progress toward peace could be continued.[28]

The Foreign Secretary knew that Germany was fortifying the Rhineland, and he knew that once the fortifications were completed the French would never agree to negotiate.[29] Whether Eden pressed this issue or not, negotiations were finished. The fact that he chose not to attempt to pressure the German Chancellor on this point indicated that he had decided to accept fortification of the zone. The only alternative was military intervention, a step never seriously under consideration by his govern-

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[28]Goldman, "Crisis in the Rhineland," pp. 390, 391.

[29]Eden, Facing, p. 420.

ment. Had he informed the French, it is doubtful that they would have forced the issue either. As soon as Blum took office, his government was plagued by strikes and economic difficulties. Blum concluded that the best course of action was to accept the unfortunate circumstances and to go along with the British who sought a peaceful settlement.[30]

The kind of pressures which the Blum government faced were well illustrated by a conference of the Union of French Teachers at Lille in July. The 800,000 member union passed a resolution which indicates the strength of pacifism in France in 1936. Their statement said, in part:

> Slavery is preferable to war. . . We can recover from slavery, perhaps, but never from war. . . There is no conceivable cause for which the French nation should take up arms.[31]

On 23 July, representatives of Great Britain, France and Belgium met in London and publicly recognized Hitler's reoccupation of the Rhineland. Although a few more futile attempts to achieve a negotiated settlement would be made during the next few months, the representatives of the democracies had accepted the reality of the German presence in the Rhineland and acquiesced to the fact that the

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[30]Goldman, pp. 393, 394.

[31]Ibid., p. 405.

troops were there to stay. At the London meeting a communique was issued which spoke of the "situation created by the German initiative of the 7th March," the same subject which had been called in previous months "the brutal repudiation of international agreements." This change in phraseology reflected the position of the Blum government. There was little the new Premier could do to reverse the blunders of his predecessors. He believed history would blame them, not him. He had no other alternative, short of a major military offensive against a refortified Rhineland, and his countrymen would not support such a move. As Germany rearmed the Rhineland, with each gun they installed and each structure that was erected, the French alliance system grew more and more meaningless, and France's international prestige diminished accordingly. Once France accepted the remilitarization of the Rhineland, she became increasingly dependent upon British foreign policy and military support. Eventually this capitulation would bring her full circle, from the cornerstone of a firm alliance system with the Eastern European nations to her role as one of the four nations which presided over the destruction of Czechoslovakia at Munich in 1938. Ironically, the finale of the

Rhineland crisis did not even receive the dignity of a conference, a vote, or even a memorandum. It simply became a part of the European diplomacy of appeasement, the first step on the road that would lead to Munich in 1938 and to war in 1939.

CONCLUSION

The remilitarization of the Rhineland wrought several distinct changes in the European international situation. Strategically, France was blocked from rendering aid to Poland and the nations of the Little Entente. As long as the Rhineland remained demilitarized, France could, in the event of a German attack on her Eastern European Allies, invade Germany through the Rhineland and inflict a serious, if not fatal, blow. This capacity was not only a very strong deterrent against such an attack, it also carried the prospect of prompt and effective aid if such an attack did occur. An important consequence of remilitarization was that the French lost that capacity. Once German troops occupied the zone and fortified the border, France could accomplish nothing without breaking through the fortifications. Such a delay could result in an Ally begin overrun before France could do them any good.

Strategically, the alliances had been rendered unworkable, but the impact upon the morale of the Eastern European nations was perhaps even more devastating. This is all the more tragic given the fact that when Hitler

struck, these nations indicated their willingness to march in the defense of France. France never requested the aid of her Eastern European Allies, and therefore her failure to take action cannot be blamed on them. The Rhineland crisis clearly pointed up the fact that to be effective, alliances must be backed by the will to act. Following that episode the nations of Eastern Europe became convinced that the manner in which France dealt with threats to her own security gave little assurance of support should their security be threatened. They felt abandoned, and began to turn away from France, seeking friends wherever they could find them. Recognizing that Germany's growing might would soon make her the dominant power in Central Europe, the Eastern European nations attempted to come to terms with the Third Reich. During the next few years Austria and Czechoslovakia were incorporated into the German sphere, while Hungary and Rumania became more closely associated with Germany, both economically and politically. Faced with the steady deterioration of her former grand alliance system, France began to disassociate herself from the problems of Eastern Europe and to look steadily toward Great Britain for leadership in diplomatic affairs.

After France accepted the remilitarization of the Rhineland, she became more and more dependent upon British foreign policy and military support. This revival of Anglo-French solidarity was more a confirmation of mutual weakness than an alignment of strong resolve, and it resulted in two casualties. Belgium, uncertain of any continuing benefits from a French alliance, once again assumed the cloak of neutrality, a move that would not long protect her from the winds of German aggression. The Soviet Union, already contemptuous of the western democracies, became increasingly dissatisfied with the Anglo-French policy of appeasement and entered into a non-aggression pact with Germany in 1939.

The Rhineland crisis also had a rather critical domestic result for Adolph Hitler. Although the military plans for the Rhineland action called for a fighting withdrawal if there was an armed counteraction from the west, Hitler had opposed the inclusion of such a plan. When his generals insisted, he seemed to give in on the point. The success of the coup, which had been carried out in spite of the misgivings of the German military hierarchy, changed the relationship between Hitler and his military advisors. He became convinced of his own ability to master any sit-

uation and contemptuous of the caution shown by the Generals. As the Fuhrer said, "With dictators, nothing succeeds like success."[1] Adolph Hitler, who had acted against the counsel of his closest military advisors became confident that he could assume even greater risks, disregard cautious advice, and triumph by bluff until he could conquer by force.

The risk Hitler took might have ended his career had his bluff been called. In his book The Gathering Storm, Winston Churchill states that "If the French government had mobilized, there is no doubt that Hitler would have been compelled by his own General Staff to withdraw, and a check would have been given to his pretensions which might well have proved fatal to his rule." This supposition cannot be proven, but it is logical to surmise that had the French reacted forcefully and succeeded in driving the Germans from the Rhineland, even if Hitler had remained in power, he would likely have been more cautious in the future. Perhaps then Germany's desire for equality in international affairs could have been dealt with at the negotiating table instead of on the battlefield. Instead, the failure of Britain and France to stop Hitler's

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[1]Wheeler-Bennett, The Nemesis of Power, p. 353.

treaty violations when they had the power to do so convinced him that they were not likely to stop him from carrying out his plans in the future.

The remilitarization of the Rhineland was not an isolated incident, or a chance encounter. It was part of a preconceived plan on the part of Adolph Hitler to secure "living space." He prepared for it by carefully rearming. After the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935, he had the tacit approval of Great Britain to rearm, even though it was prohibited by treaty. He announced a return to conscription, and left the League of Nations without incident. These successes led him to tear up the Versailles and Locarno agreements by reoccupying the Rhineland at a time when Great Britain and France were at odds over Italian aggression.

The French government maintained that the Rhineland was essential to its security. Why then did France not expel the troops from the zone? The fearful risk of war, the strong possibility that Great Britain would not assist them, the reluctance of the military chiefs and a strongly pacifist public opinion all contributed heavily to the French decision to appeal to the League of Nations. Once the French turned away from the possibility of direct

action and to the machinery of the League of Nations, they greatly reduced the possibility of removing the German hold on the Rhineland.

Great Britain must share responsibility for the decision to resort to League action. Throughout the crisis, British officials urged their French counterparts to exercise caution and to keep their heads. The British government responded to public opinion and skirted its role as a guarantor of the Locarno treaty. She attempted to fulfill her Locarno obligation by guaranteeing French and Belgian borders and then sliding into the role of mediator in the dispute, but she had agreed to guarantee not just the borders of Belgium and France, but the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland as well. Clearly, the British cannot remain blameless, but their role was as a guarantor; initiative on 7 March indeed rested with the French. Could the British government, whose people did not support military action, be expected to give it to France, when the French themselves appeared palsied by pacifism and blind faith in their Maginot Line?

In defending their actions during the crisis, the British maintained that they were not adequately prepared militarily to undertake an offensive, and that time was

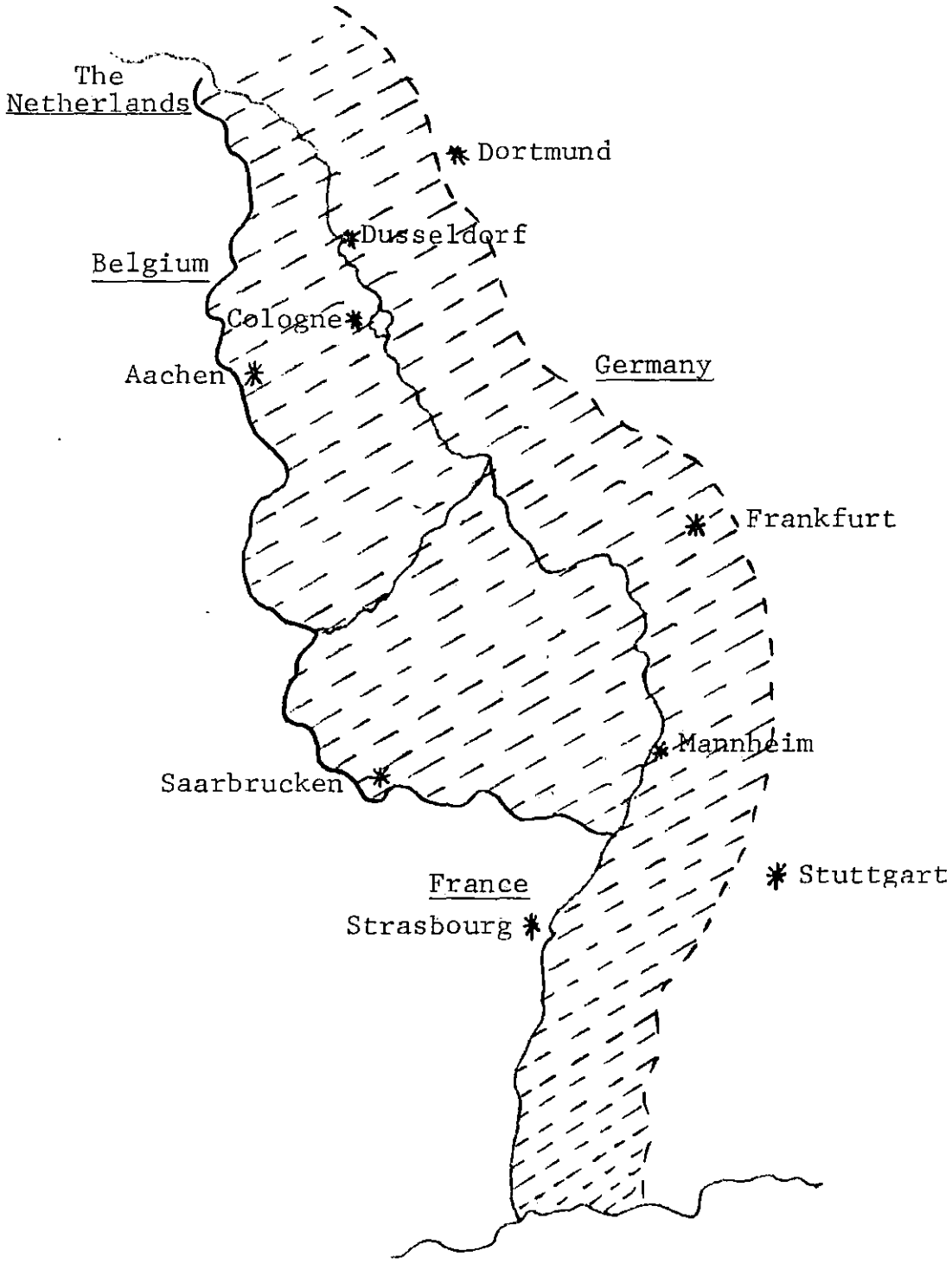
needed to beef up Great Britain's armed capabilities. This tactic of playing for time failed to take into account the fact that while they rearmed, the Germans did likewise, and that regaining sovereignty in the Rhineland gave them the industrial wherewithal to do so.

By failing to oust the Germans from the Rhineland, France and Great Britain sowed the seeds of war. By attempting to negotiate with Adolph Hitler they set the precedent of appeasement that was to result in the Munich conference of 1938.

The term "Munich" has become synonomous with capitulation and appeasement, for it was there that Great Britain and France presided over the destruction of Czechoslovakia, an event many historians regard as a turning point in the history of the inter-war years. Yet it was in the Rhineland two years earlier that the precedent was set for this capitulation. It can therefore be concluded that the Rhineland crisis was much more than a harbinger of Munich, it was in large measure a determinant.

APPENDIX A

The Rhineland



APPENDIX B

Treaty of Versailles

Part III Section III

Article 42. 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. 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 works of mobilization, are in the same way forbidden.

Article 44. In case Germany violates in any manner whatever the provisions of Articles 42 and 43, she shall be regarded as committing a hostile act against the powers signatory of the present treaty and as calculated to disturb the peace of the world.

APPENDIX C

Treaty of Locarno

Article 1. The high contracting parties collectively and severally guarantee . . . the observance of the stipulations of articles 42 and 43 of the said treaty (Versailles) concerning the demilitarized zone.

Article 2. Germany and Belgium, and also Germany and France, mutually undertake that they will not attack or invade each other or resort to war against each other. This stipulation shall not, however, apply in the case of--

> The exercise of the right of legitimate defense, that is to say, resistance to a violation of the undertaking contained in the previous paragraph or to a flagrant breach of articles 42 and 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 demilitarized zone immediate action is necessary.

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 findings 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 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 by reason either of the crossing of the frontier or of the outbreak of hostilities or of the assembly of armed forces into the demilitarized zone immediate action is necessary.

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