

FRANCE AND THE REMILITARIZATION  
OF THE RHINELAND

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1967

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate College  
of the Oklahoma State University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of  
MASTER OF ARTS  
July, 1971

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OF THE RHINELAND

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## PREFACE

It is generally assumed that opposition to the German remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936 probably could have prevented World War II. Through an examination of the diplomatic documents published by the French government and the recollections of those who participated in the decisions that were made, this study attempts to determine why France failed to act.

I acknowledge the attention of the members of my committee, Dr. Douglas Hale, Dr. George Jewsbury, and Dr. John Sylvester. To the entire faculty of the Department of History at Oklahoma State University, I must express my deepest appreciation for the fairness, kindness, and confidence which I have recently been given.

I am obligated to Dr. William Rock, of the Department of History at Bowling Green State University, Bowling Green, Ohio, for his suggestion of the topic and his guidance in the initial preparation of my work.

I am also indebted to the staff of the Oklahoma State University Library for their assistance in obtaining many sources.

I am very grateful to my typist, Mrs. Dixie Jennings, for the sympathy which she has shown me, as well as for her fine work.

The unceasing reassurance and support given me by my parents has been the primary factor in my ability to continue working against constant discouragement. For this and my other academic achievements, I must give them the credit.

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## CHAPTER I

### FRANCE AT THE FRONTIER OF FREEDOM

On March 7, 1936, German troops entered the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland, violating the Treaty of Versailles as well as the Treaty of Locarno, which Germany had freely accepted in 1925.<sup>1</sup> At the end of World War I, France had insisted upon the demilitarization of Germany's western border in order to prevent a sudden devastating attack and to allow France to attack swiftly into the industrial heart of Germany if Poland or Czechoslovakia were threatened. Yet, when challenged in the Rhineland, France failed to act in what was probably its best opportunity to check Adolf Hitler's aggression without war. A firm response from France in 1936 might have removed Hitler from power and averted World War II -- or at least would have made the war easier when it came. For the French, the most crucial period was the first few days immediately following the entry of German troops into the Rhineland, and it is the activities of the French government during these critical hours which will be explored. The Rhineland crisis provides a useful study of the decision-making process in a government faced with a coup and indicates the general pattern of appeasement that Britain and France would take toward Nazi aggression.

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<sup>1</sup>The Rhineland is a rather imprecise term applied to the Rhine Valley. It generally refers to the Prussian province of Rheinland and those portions of Hesse-Nassau, Hesse, Baden, and the Bavarian Palatinate lying within the valley.

The most important question that can be asked is why those men in France who could have decided to act against Germany failed. In attempting an answer, it will be necessary to develop the diplomatic background and then present an account of the actions of the French government. Fortunately, many of the participants wrote memoirs which eloquently relate the concerns of each and present his version of the events. Although their writings could be considered exercises in placing the blame elsewhere, it is possible to develop a fairly lucid narrative from their recollections. General Maurice Gamelin, the Chief of the Army General Staff, kept a daily journal and wrote the most complete account.<sup>2</sup> The memoirs of Pierre-Etienne Flandin, the Foreign Minister, tend to be more emotional and slightly less reliable, and his tendency to omit dates contributes to some confusion.<sup>3</sup> Joseph Paul-Boncour, the Minister of the League of Nations, wrote an account which dealt very explicitly with the meetings of the Council of Ministers in Paris, but he was unaccountably reticent about the League meetings.<sup>4</sup> André François-Poncet, the French ambassador in Berlin, left a thoughtful memoir which is remarkably free of faultfinding.<sup>5</sup> In regard to documentary sources, the French government has published Documents

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<sup>2</sup>General Maurice Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, Le prologue du drame, 1930-août 1939 (Paris, 1946).

<sup>3</sup>Pierre-Etienne Flandin, Politique française, 1919-1940 (Paris, 1947).

<sup>4</sup>Joseph Paul-Boncour, Entre deux guerres (New York, 1946).

<sup>5</sup>André François-Poncet, The Faithful Years: Memoirs of a French Ambassador in Berlin, 1931-1938 (New York, 1949).

Diplomatiques Français.<sup>6</sup> Regrettably, the documents for 1935 have not yet been published.

For the French, the problem of the Rhine as a frontier was at least two thousand years old. Roman legions established the Rhine as their border with the Germans, and with the end of the Pax Romana, there came three centuries of invasions across the Rhine. The history of the Rhine Valley as a formal buffer zone between the regions that became modern France and Germany began in 843 with the Treaty of Verdun, which divided Charlemagne's Empire among his grandsons. The unfortunate Lothar, who received the middle kingdom which ran along the Rhine, was the victim of continual war between his brothers. The Thirty Years' War brought indescribable destruction which was repeated when Louis XIV devastated the Palatinate in 1688.

Although German in race and language, Rhinelanders developed a feeling of being different from their Prussian neighbors who provided the impetus for the formation of modern Germany. Rhinelanders have sometimes exhibited a capricious nature which favored first the French and then the Germans. For example, they welcomed the armies of revolutionary France and then turned to Prussia when it became evident that France intended annexation. In fact, it was during the French Revolution that the concept of natural frontiers was first realized for France. Georges Danton, a leader of the Jacobins, formulated the doctrine quite concisely: "The limits of France are marked by nature. We shall reach them in the four corners of the horizon, to the Ocean, to

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<sup>6</sup>Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1932-1939, 2nd Series, 1936-1939 (Paris, 1963), (hereafter cited as DDF).

the Rhine, to the Alps, to the Pyrenees."<sup>7</sup> Hence, the tradition of French concern for a natural frontier on the Rhine was conceived during the Revolution and realized by Napoleon.

In 1815, the Congress of Vienna, which attempted to restore the balance that Napoleon had destroyed, gave most of the Rhineland to Prussia and Bavaria. After the Congress of Vienna, both France and Prussia appeared to accept the status quo, but French fears for their security were proved correct when Germany was able to deliver a crushing blow through the Rhineland in 1870. Then Germany completed its victory by annexing Alsace-Lorraine. Consequently, from 1870 to 1918, France's position on the Rhine was exactly what it feared most. The military advantage which Germany held on the left bank of the Rhine seemed almost insurmountable.<sup>8</sup>

Again in 1914, Germany was able to advance rapidly into Flanders and northern France due to the advantage of controlling the bridgeheads of the Rhine. World War I was the greatest test and the greatest victory of the Third French Republic, which had been born in the defeat of 1870, but the price of victory was indeed high. France had lost one hundred thirty-four billion francs in goods and property and, more important, one and one-half million Frenchmen had been killed. One out of ten Frenchmen had been killed at the front, and the youth had been decimated most. Population losses during the war further lowered the French birthrate, which had already been declining for several years. When World War II started in 1939, France had less than half as many

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<sup>7</sup>Georges Danton, Les plus beaux discours de Danton, ed. by Paul Lorquet (Paris, n.d.), p. 52.

<sup>8</sup>Goronwy Rees, The Rhine (New York, 1967), pp. 158-167.



men as Germany between the ages of twenty and thirty-four. The celebration of victory in 1918 was necessarily short lived, for Frenchmen sensed that they could not stand against the greater population and superior industrial base of even a defeated Germany without the help of the United States and Britain.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the Rhineland, through which Germany had launched invasions in 1814, 1815, 1870, and 1914, was logically the first French concern in establishing security after the war. Although the French Parliament remained mostly silent on the Rhineland issue during World War I, a great many private citizens had advanced various theories concerning France's role in the Rhineland and its implications for the future. Their main theme was that the Rhinelanders were Gallo-Roman, not truly German in origin, and that they would recognize the advantages of being associated with France when the war was over.<sup>10</sup> The plans of the French government were formulated in two documents written early in 1917. In January, French Premier Aristide Briand advised his ambassador in London that France must have the primary voice in determining the settlement of the Rhineland, since France was the most concerned. Furthermore, a secret Franco-Russian Agreement in February provided that the left bank of the Rhine should be ceded by Germany to constitute a neutral state which would be occupied by France until the terms of the peace settlement had been carried out.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, these designs remained to

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<sup>9</sup>William L. Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic: An Inquiry Into the Fall of France in 1940 (New York, 1969), pp. 142-143.

<sup>10</sup>Jere C. King, Foch versus Clemenceau, 1918-1919 (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1960), pp. 2-11.

<sup>11</sup>W. M. Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 1918-1939 (London, 1943), pp. 171-172.

be implemented in the face of considerable reluctance on the part of France's allies. When the text of the Franco-Russian Agreement was published in December, 1917, the British government hastily pointed out that

Never did we desire, and never did we encourage the idea that a bit of Germany should be cut off from the parent State, and erected into some kind of independent Republic or independent Government of some sort on the left bank of the Rhine, so as to make a new buffer state between France and Germany.<sup>12</sup>

When the Allied governments met at Versailles in January, 1919, one of the main issues was the future status of the left bank of the Rhine. For the French, the occupation of the left bank and the bridge-heads of the Rhine was an indispensable guarantee for enforcement of the treaty and the only assurance against invasion. As early as November, 1918, Marshal Ferdinand Foch, the French Commander in Chief of the Allied Armies, had insisted that German sovereignty must end at the Rhine. On January 10, 1919, he presented his arguments to the commanders of the Allied Armies.

Henceforth the Rhine must be the Western frontier of the German peoples. Germany must be deprived of all access to or military utilization of it, that is to say, of all territorial sovereignty on the left bank of this river--in a word, of every facility to reach by sudden invasion . . . of Belgium and Luxemburg, the shores of the North Sea, and threaten England; to move around France's natural defenses, the Rhine, and the Meuse; to conquer her northern regions and approach her northern regions and approach that of Paris.<sup>13</sup>

To Woodrow Wilson and David Lloyd George, who headed the United States and British delegations in Paris, French demands for the

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<sup>12</sup>Arthur Balfour, December 19, 1917, Great Britain, Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 5th Series, vol. C, col. 2017.

<sup>13</sup>André Tardieu, The Truth About the Treaty (Indianapolis, 1923), p. 146.

occupation of the Rhine seemed dangerous and unjustifiable. Colonel Edward House, Wilson's aide, reported a conversation on February 9 with the British foreign secretary as follows:

We talked at great length of the French proposal of setting up a "Rhenish Republic" as a buffer state between Germany and France. The French have but one idea and that is military protection. They do not seem to know that to establish a Rhenish Republic against the will of the people would be contrary to the principle of self-determination; and that if we should establish it, the people could at any time become federated with the other German States. If we did such a thing, we would be treating Germany in one way and the balance of the world in another. We would run the danger of having everything from the Rhine to the Pacific, perhaps including Japan, against the Western powers.<sup>14</sup>

Britain and the United States were not prepared to submit to French demands, but finally agreement was reached on a short-term occupation of the left bank of the Rhine as a guarantee for the payment of reparations. To allay French anxiety, Wilson and Lloyd George agreed to Anglo-American defense treaties separate from the Versailles settlement. Moreover, the Treaty itself dealt at length with the problem.

The provisions of the Treaty of Versailles regarding the Rhineland were as follows:

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 assembly of armed forces, either permanently or temporarily, and military maneuvers of any kind, as well as the upkeep of all permanent works for 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 to disturb the peace of the world.

Article 428. As a guarantee for the execution of the present

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<sup>14</sup>Charles Seymour, The Intimate Papers of Colonel House (New York, 1928), vol. IV, p. 345.

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

Article 429. If the conditions of the present Treaty are faithfully carried out by Germany, the occupation referred to in Article 428 will be successively restricted as follows:

(1) At the expiration of five years there will be evacuated: the bridgehead of Cologne and the territories north of a line running along the Ruhr, then along the railway Jülich, Duren, Euskirchen, Rheinbach, thence along the road Rheinbach to Sinzig, and reaching the Rhine at the confluence with the Ahr; the roads, railways and places mentioned above being excluded from the area evacuated.

(2) At the expiration of ten years there will be evacuated: the bridgehead of Coblenz and the territories north of a line to be drawn from the intersection between the frontiers of Belgium, Germany and Holland, running about from 4 kilometres south of Aix-la-Chapelle, then to and following the crest of Forst Gemünd, then east of the railway of the Urft Valley, then along Blankenheim, Valdorf, Dreis, Ulmen to and following the Moselle from Bremm to Nehren, then passing by Kappel and Simmern, then following the ridge of the heights between Simmern and the Rhine and reaching this river at Bacharach; all the places valleys roads and railways mentioned above being excluded from the area evacuated.

(3) At the expiration of fifteen years there will be evacuated the bridgehead of Mainz, the bridgehead of Kehl and the remainder of the German territory under occupation.

If at that date the guarantees against unprovoked aggression by Germany are not considered sufficient by the Allied and Associated Governments, the evacuation of the occupying troops may be delayed to the extent regarded as necessary for the purpose of obtaining the required guarantees.

Article 430. In case either during the occupation or after the expiration of the fifteen years referred to above the Reparation Commission finds that Germany refuses to observe the whole or part of her obligations under the present Treaty with regard to reparation, the whole or part of the areas specified in Article 429 will be reoccupied immediately by the Allied and Associated forces.

Article 431. If before the expiration of the period of fifteen years Germany complies with all the undertakings resulting from the present Treaty, the occupying forces will be withdrawn immediately.

In addition, the Anglo-American treaties recognized that since Articles 42, 43, and 44 might

not at first provide adequate security and protection to France, the United States of America shall be bound to come immediately to her assistance in the event of any unprovoked

movement of aggression against her being made by Germany.<sup>15</sup>

While the negotiations concerning the Rhine were in progress, French General Charles-Marie Mangin, the Commander of the French Tenth Army, attempted to present the Peace Conference with the fait accompli of a Rhenish Republic. The separatist movement among Rhineland Germans was fostered by the shock of defeat, their suspicion of an anti-Catholic policy by the new government of Berlin, and the desire of the industrialists to evade the burden of reparations. Demonstrations for separation from Germany in the Rhenish cities of Coblenz, Mainz, Trier, Speyer, Wiesbaden, and Aachen supported the separatist leader, Dr. Hans Dorten. When the Rhineland Republic was declared at Coblenz on May 17, 1919, Lloyd George and Wilson, who had heard of French complicity in the movement, complained, and Mangin was recalled. Without active French support, the Rhineland Republic could not last. The spirit of separatism continued in the Rhineland until 1923 but gradually faded as a result of Prussian activities and a lack of understanding by the French themselves.<sup>16</sup> However, Dorten justified the somewhat dubious course he had taken on the grounds that "the disturber of peace on the Rhine is Prussia. We Rhinelanders are Germans, but we are not Prussians."<sup>17</sup>

When the Treaty of Versailles came before the French Parliament, there was considerable criticism of the compromise Premier Georges

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<sup>15</sup>United States Department of State, The Treaty of Versailles and After: Annotations of the Text of the Treaty (Washington, 1947), p. 148.

<sup>16</sup>Hans A. Dorten, "The Rhineland Movement," Foreign Affairs, vol. III (April, 1925), p. 408.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 410.

Clemenceau had made in trading occupation of the Rhineland for defense treaties with the United States and Britain. Many members of Parliament supported Foch's contention that the Rhineland should be independent of Germany, but few were willing to renounce the Treaty of Versailles and face Germany alone. The only real crisis in the French debate came when news arrived that the United States Senate had delayed voting on the ratification of the treaty. Clemenceau then took the opportunity to justify his work. He argued that there was no such thing as a completely secure frontier. He added that he had tried to place Germany's frontier at the Rhine, but the Allies objected strongly, and the demilitarization of the Rhineland was the best France could get.<sup>18</sup> One of the most valid criticisms of the treaty came from Jules Delahaye, a Royalist, who warned that the irritation and humiliation of the treaty would be sufficient to cause trouble from a Germany which still had the capacity for revenge.<sup>19</sup> The best organized opposition to the Treaty of Versailles came from the Socialists, who felt that rather than punishing Germany, support should have been given to those democratic elements in Germany who recognized their guilt.<sup>20</sup> Finally, most members of Parliament unenthusiastically accepted the view that Clemenceau had negotiated the best possible treaty considering the attitude of Britain and the United States. The final vote registered 372 deputies in favor of the treaty, 53 against, and 74 abstentions. Socialists comprised 51 of

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<sup>18</sup> Georges Clemenceau, September 25, 1919, France, Journal officiel: Débats parlementaires--Chambre des Députés, 1919, pp. 4572-4586, (hereafter cited as Débats).

<sup>19</sup> Jules Delahaye, October 2, 1919, *ibid.*, pp. 4717-4718.

<sup>20</sup> Debate of August 28, 1919, *ibid.*, pp. 4049-4058.

those voting against the treaty and one-third of those abstaining.<sup>21</sup>

In 1920, the news came across the Atlantic that Clemenceau's sacrifice had been in vain. The American Treaty of Guarantee and the Treaty of Versailles were rejected by the United States Senate in March. The treaties had become the victims of political bickering among the Democrats and Republicans, personal hostility between the President and the Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and traditional American suspicion of foreign entanglements. Moreover, Clemenceau had made a serious mistake in the original negotiations at Paris when he agreed to make the enforcement of the British treaty contingent on American ratification. For on these grounds, the British were not required to honor their treaty of guarantee.<sup>22</sup>

Faced with a diplomatic retreat by Britain and the United States, and left without the material guarantee of separating the Rhineland from Germany, France began to seek pledges of military assistance as the best remaining means of security. The first treaties France sought were with countries such as Belgium, Poland, and Czechoslovakia, which had common borders with Germany and would be subject to German invasion. The French considered the League of Nations inadequate for providing immediate help against Germany, and they hoped that the nations which were the most threatened by Germany could enter into special accords and military agreements that could meet any challenge.

Belgium was the first candidate for France's new alliance system. The Franco-Belgian agreement was signed on September 7, 1920, and

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<sup>21</sup>King, Foch versus Clemenceau, pp. 113-125.

<sup>22</sup>Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, pp. 38-39.

registered with the League as the Treaty of Versailles required, but the military details were kept secret. The alliance, according to Belgium and France, was "purely defensive" and referred "exclusively to the case of unprovoked aggression." Their object was "to reinforce the guaranties of peace and security resulting from the Covenant of the League of Nations." The guarantees of assistance were not automatic since each nation reserved the right to determine "in each case whether the eventuality contemplated by the present understanding has in fact arisen."<sup>23</sup>

France's next alliance was with Poland. Of the new nations created after World War I, Poland had acquired the largest share of German territory and thus might expect to be the target of German revenge and revision of the Treaty of Versailles. The Polish agreement provided that in the event of an unprovoked attack, "the two Governments shall take concerted measures for the defense of their territory and the protection of their legitimate interests."<sup>24</sup> In Central Europe, France relied on what came to be called the Little Entente of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania. The Little Entente was directed toward maintaining the settlement of World War I, and France formally recognized their common interest through treaties with Czechoslovakia in 1924, Romania in 1926, and Yugoslavia in 1927. At last it seemed that France had found a substitute for its prewar alliance with Russia, since Poland and the Little Entente could provide continental armies which could collaborate with

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<sup>23</sup>World Peace Foundation Pamphlets, Postwar Political Alignments (Boston, 1923) vol. VI, no. 2, pp. 95-100.

<sup>24</sup>Stephan Horak, Poland's International Affairs, 1919-1960 (Bloomington, Indiana, 1964), pp. 149-150.



the French.<sup>25</sup>

Though searching for alliances on the Continent, France still wanted to preserve its entente with Britain. Relations between the two nations were complicated by the fact that Britain was interested in promoting German economic recovery and stimulating a European market, while France, although hoping for large reparations, feared that German prosperity might inspire a challenge to the Treaty of Versailles. The British were less inclined than the French to use coercion against Germany. For example, when the French ordered troops into some southern German towns because they thought that the number of troops Germany had sent into the area to quell a Communist disturbance was excessive, the British protested and asked for French assurances that they would inform the Allies and obtain their consent before taking such an important step.<sup>26</sup>

Another strain in relations with Britain occurred when France and Belgium occupied the Ruhr on January 11, 1923. Under the Treaty of Versailles, they could invoke this right of intervention whenever the Reparation Commission certified that Germany was behind in reparation payments. Britain and the United States were opposed to this French action which they considered provocative and counter-productive. In fact, the French occupation of the Ruhr had serious economic repercussions for Germany and the world. In response, the German government

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<sup>25</sup>Arnold J. Toynbee, ed., Survey of International Affairs, 1924 (London, 1928), pp. 440-456, (hereafter cited as SIA); Felix John Vondracek, The Foreign Policy of Czechoslovakia, 1919-1935 (New York, 1937), pp. 211-216.

<sup>26</sup>Arnold Wolfers, Britain and France Between Two Wars (New York, 1966), p. 43, fn. 19.

mounted a program of passive resistance and organized the destruction of the mark. In order to extract some profit, French Premier Raymond Poincaré was finally forced to send French and Belgian workers into the Ruhr.

The Ruhr episode was the last time France acted against Germany in defiance of Britain.<sup>27</sup> The exchange of notes between Britain and France over the Ruhr incident emphasized the difference in their views. The British advised France that

an undertaking freely entered into, because acknowledged to be just and reasonable, stands, in practice, on a different footing and offers better prospects of faithful execution, than an engagement subscribed under the compulsion of an ultimatum, and protested against at the very moment of signature as beyond the signatory's capacity to make good.<sup>28</sup>

Poincaré countered that it was

German resistance which has prolonged an unfortunate situation; all those who have encouraged German resistance have contributed to this prolongation, and all those who have not discouraged German resistance have encouraged her.<sup>29</sup>

It was only with remorse that France submitted to the British interpretation of the Treaty of Versailles. In his bitterness over Britain's lack of enthusiasm for the Ruhr occupation, Poincaré complained to the Chamber of Deputies that

We are placed at the mercy of powers less interested than we in the execution of the treaty. . . . And this treaty, whose execution relies essentially on the good will of the

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<sup>27</sup> Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, pp. 148-149.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfers, Britain and France Between Two Wars, pp. 90-91, fn. 20, which cites British Parliamentary (Command) Papers, Cmd. 1943, Correspondence With the Allied Governments Respecting Reparation Payments by Germany.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Allies, has been perverted and corrupted.<sup>30</sup>

After the furor caused by the occupation of the Ruhr had settled, it appeared that there might be some hope for lessening the hostility between France and Germany. The first test of any growing trust in Germany came as the date approached for the evacuation of the northern zone of the Rhineland in January, 1925. Withdrawal of Allied forces had been made contingent upon German reparations and disarmament. German hope for complete evacuation of the Rhineland was lost on December 28, 1924, when the Allies decided to delay the evacuation because Germany had failed to fulfill its treaty obligations. Specific defaults mentioned were

reconstruction under another form of the Great General Staff; recruiting and training of short-term recruits; failure to demilitarize factories; retention of surplus war material; failure to reorganize the police; failure to take all the administrative and legislative measures demanded by the Allies.<sup>31</sup>

Premier Edouard Herriot described the occupation of the Rhineland as the only "guarantee of French security and of the Treaty. Our establishment on the Rhine is the essential and, alas, the last condition of our security."<sup>32</sup> This Allied refusal to evacuate the northern zone prompted the German government to offer a pact for all nations interested in the Rhine.

Consequently, the Locarno Pact was signed in October, 1925. The spirit of Locarno, which was distinguished by harmony and accommodation, seemed to indicate that Germany was finally being accepted in the

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<sup>30</sup> Raymond Poincaré, January 18, 1924, Débats, 1924, pp. 155-156.

<sup>31</sup> SIA, 1925, vol. II, p. 182.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

community of Western nations. The Treaty of Mutual Guarantee confirmed the inviolability of Germany's frontier with France and Belgium; this was further strengthened by the adherence of Britain and Italy as guarantors. Germany, Belgium, and France agreed that they would "in no case attack or invade each other or resort to war against each other" except in cases of violations of their treaties, "flagrant violations" of the demilitarized zone, or sanctions taken by the League. In the case of a "flagrant violation" of the demilitarization of the Rhineland, each of the signatory powers agreed to aid the threatened nation as soon as it was satisfied that the

violation constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and that by reason either of the crossing of the frontier or of the outbreak of hostilities or of the assembly of armed forces in the demilitarized zone immediate action is necessary.

If the nature of the violation proved doubtful, the Council of the League of Nations could decide what action was appropriate when one nation refused to submit to arbitration or to accept the judgment of the League and attacked another. The treaty would come into force after it had been ratified by all the signatory nations and Germany became a member of the League. The Locarno Pact was intended to remain in force until the League determined that it was no longer needed. Separate arbitration conventions which provided for the peaceful settlement of disputes by a special court, the Permanent Court of International Justice, or the League were signed by Germany with Belgium, France, Poland, and Czechoslovakia.<sup>33</sup>

On the surface, it appeared that Locarno had contributed to French

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<sup>33</sup>Ibid., pp. 49-57.

security, but there was a fatal flaw in the terminology of the pact. In reality, France was limited by Britain's judgment of what constituted a flagrant violation. If Britain decided that a case was doubtful, League action might take too long and be ineffective when it came. Furthermore, Germany had only signed arbitration conventions with Poland and Czechoslovakia and had proved unwilling to underwrite the status quo in the East. It could thus be inferred that those eastern borders were subject to change. If the theory that Britain entered the Locarno Pact to restrain the French from rash action is accepted, then it had the effect of weakening France. The spirit of Locarno raised French hopes for peace and German hopes that further revisions could be made in the disabilities they suffered under the Treaty of Versailles. With their admission to the League in 1926, the Germans began to anticipate full equality.

Hence they began to press for removal of all Allied troops in the Rhineland or a reduction in the number of occupying forces which they were required to support. The German government argued that it was an equal member of the League and that all obligations under the Treaty of Versailles had been met except reparations, which were subject to the Dawes Plan. In a conciliatory note on November 14, 1925, the Allies responded that

in the Locarno spirit of confidence, faith, and good will, the Governments participating in the occupation of the Rhineland territory have decided to introduce into the occupation all the alleviations compatible with the Treaty of Versailles.<sup>34</sup>

The evacuation of the northern zone of the Rhineland was completed on

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 192-193.

January 31, 1926. On September 5, Britain and France announced that the occupation forces in the Rhineland would be reduced from 70,000 to 60,000 men.<sup>35</sup>

On January 1, 1928, German President Paul von Hindenburg officially raised the question of the complete evacuation of the Rhineland, and the same sentiment was echoed by Chancellor Gustav Stresemann in the Reichstag on January 30. Stresemann declared:

It must be clearly understood that it is precisely this insistence of the continuation of the Rhineland occupation that has depreciated the Locarno Treaty in the eyes of the public. Much had been said about discarding machine guns and cannons. But machine guns and cannons are still staring in the Rhineland in the face of a Power with which one cooperates in the League of Nations and with which no differences of a serious political character exist. The discussion of the evacuation question is not only a formal right of Germany under the Versailles Treaty; it is also a logical consequence, though not expressly formulated, of a treaty excluding the use of force by one country against the other. At one time Locarno was looked upon as the beginning of a new era. Today, however, enthusiasm has had to give way to scepticism in demanding the evacuation of the Rhineland. . . .<sup>36</sup>

Preoccupied with their own security, the French preferred to delay the evacuation of the Rhineland, but their capacity to do this was circumvented when the British and Belgians announced in September that they intended to begin withdrawing their troops by the end of 1929. The French were forced to compromise. On August 30, France, Britain, and Belgium sent a note to Stresemann which stipulated the conditions for evacuation. Britain and Belgium would evacuate the second zone when Germany accepted the principle of the Young Plan for reparations and evacuation of the third zone would come with formal German ratification

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 108.

<sup>36</sup>Stephen Heald, ed., Documents on International Affairs, 1928 (London, 1929), p. 35, (hereafter cited as DIA).

of the plan. In accordance with this agreement, the last Allied troops left the Rhineland on June 30, 1926.<sup>37</sup>

In the eyes of many, by giving up the occupation of the Rhineland five years before the deadline in the Treaty of Versailles, France was making a mistake. Louis Marin, who opposed any concessions to the Germans, expressed the sentiment of the Right when he theorized that the removal of French troops from the Rhineland meant "the loss of all controls, of all security, and of all the guarantees we have."<sup>38</sup> Foreign Minister Aristide Briand defended the government's action by blaming the impatience of Britain and Belgium. He explained that "Our British friends wish to leave. Our Belgian friends wish to leave. We do not want to be separated from friends who have always been faithful to us."<sup>39</sup>

Denied the territorial buffer of the Rhineland, France decided to build the most extensive line of fortifications that the world had ever seen along its border with Germany, from Switzerland to the Belgian-Luxembourg border. The first appropriations for the fortifications, called the Maginot Line after André Maginot, the Minister of War, were approved on December 28, 1929. Maginot advised the Chamber of Deputies that it was indispensable that the northeastern border of France have strong fortifications before the evacuation of the Rhineland.

However, the Maginot Line did not guard France's border with Belgium. The general view held that by continuing the French

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<sup>37</sup> SIA, 1929, pp. 181, 185, 188.

<sup>38</sup> Louis Marin, March 27, 1930, Débats, 1930, p. 1318.

<sup>39</sup> Aristide Briand, November 8, 1929, Débats, 1929, p. 3055.

fortifications along the Belgian frontier, France would present the appearance of abandoning an ally. Marshal Henri Pétain, who dominated French military theory of the 1930's, always maintained, therefore, that it would be necessary to meet the Germans in Belgium. By 1935, the eighty-seven miles of fortifications that were completed had cost seven billion francs. The real danger of the Maginot Line was that it encouraged the French to develop a kind of defensive mentality or complex. Most Frenchmen were susceptible to the notion that the Germans could somehow be stopped with little loss of life and that the French army was safe behind the Maginot Line. Therefore, they were likely to neglect offensive weapons and the development of an armored force.<sup>40</sup>

There were many in the United States and Britain who expected Germany to show gratitude after the evacuation of the Rhineland. However, just the opposite occurred, as incident after incident kindled the embers of Franco-German distrust. By the fall of 1930, Adolf Hitler's Nazi Party had become the second largest in Germany, and it was apparent that the German people felt that the concession from France had come too late. In January, 1931, Hindenburg announced that Germany claimed equal rights and would no longer pay reparations. Germany's refusal to pay and the world depression precipitated the Hoover Moratorium on the payment of war debts. In 1932, Britain and France signed an agreement with Germany which abolished reparations, and they made their last token payments to the United States in 1933.<sup>41</sup>

In March, 1931, Germany announced that a customs union with Austria

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<sup>40</sup>Alistair Horne, To Lose a Battle: France 1940 (Boston, 1969), pp. 26-32; Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, pp. 184-186.

<sup>41</sup>Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, pp. 150-152.



had been concluded. The peace treaties of Versailles and St. Germain prohibited any action that would directly or indirectly violate the independence of Austria without the consent of the Council of the League of Nations. There was automatic French opposition to anything that might strengthen Germany, and the idea was abandoned when the Permanent Court of International Justice ruled that the union was illegal.<sup>42</sup>

In 1932, the Disarmament Conference provided another forum for Germany to demand the end of restrictions associated with the Treaty of Versailles. The German army was limited to 100,000 men, but there was not any real means of enforcing the quota. Moreover, Germany had been assured in Article 8 of the League Covenant that its disarmament was the prelude to the general limitation of arms by all nations. Yet Britain and France always found arguments to prove that their own disarmament was impractical and unwise. The German delegation demanded the end of discrimination and subsequently broke up the conference over the issue of equality. Britain and France continued the half-hearted discussions, but the French were never willing to authorize any increase in German arms.<sup>43</sup>

On January 30, 1933, Adolf Hitler became the Chancellor of Germany. It was obvious that Hitler was not going to be content with a modest role for Germany in European affairs and that he would do everything possible to revise the hated Diktat of the Treaty of Versailles. On October 6, 1933, he presented a memorandum to Britain and the United States in which he demanded full German equality. Hitler declared that

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<sup>42</sup> Wolfers, Britain and France Between Two Wars, pp. 112-113.

<sup>43</sup> Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, pp. 149-153.

Merely to increase the quantity of arms allowed by the Treaty of Versailles by doubling the figures fixed in the Treaty would mean a discrimination which Germany cannot accept and would not satisfy her need for security. Germany wishes either to have full liberty or to be subjected to the same qualitative restrictions as other countries.<sup>44</sup>

German willingness to negotiate rearmament concessions ended on October 14 when Hitler announced that Germany was withdrawing from the League. He further called for general elections and a referendum on government policy. Throughout the campaign, Hitler emphasized the pacific intentions of his people and reaffirmed his commitment to the Treaty of Locarno and his desire for friendship with France and Czechoslovakia. The vote in the general elections and for the referendum was overwhelmingly in favor of the Nazi government's policy.<sup>45</sup> The reaction of the French government was appropriately pessimistic. Joseph Paul-Boncour, the Foreign Minister, acknowledged that the Nazi victory had crushed the forces within Germany that offered some possibility of a political rapprochement with France.<sup>46</sup> Thus, the theory of deux Allemagnes--one Germany that was militaristic and hostile to France and another that favored democracy and peace--was buried.

On April 17, 1934, Louis Barthou, who had succeeded Paul-Boncour as Foreign Minister in February, attempted to redirect France's drifting foreign policy. At last the French government decided to resist British pressures for the legalization of German rearmament and for the reduction of that of France. The French desire for peace, he said, "must not

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<sup>44</sup>DIA, 1933, p. 277.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., pp. 288, 314-316.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid., p. 310.

be confounded with the abandonment of her defense."<sup>47</sup> Upon recognizing the failure of the Disarmament Conference, Barthou started a series of diplomatic moves to strengthen French alliances against Germany.

First, he proposed an Eastern Locarno which would guarantee Germany's eastern border as the Locarno Pact of 1925 had done for the west. Both Germany and Poland refused, and Barthou was assassinated before he could complete a military alliance with the Soviet Union. His successor, Pierre Laval, was suspicious of the Soviet Union, but he followed Barthou's plan and at the same time hoped that Germany could be directed against the Soviet Union. Laval really preferred an alliance with Fascist Italy.

Accordingly, a Franco-Italian Pact was signed on January 7, 1935. Benito Mussolini was interested in French support if Hitler threatened Austria, and France wanted Italian aid on its border with Germany. In the secret talks between the Italian and French General Staffs which followed the political agreement, General Maurice Gamelin, who represented the French, reported that the military guarantee covered all areas of mutual interest from the Alps to Africa.<sup>48</sup> France also made some concessions to Italian interests in North Africa. After the Italo-Abyssinian War broke out in October, there would be a great deal of concern about what sort of *carte blanche* Laval might have given to Mussolini. In public, however, Laval insisted that he intended only to relinquish French economic interests in Abyssinia and that he supposed that Italian actions there would be peaceful and beneficial toward the

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<sup>47</sup>Ibid., pp. 382-383.

<sup>48</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, pp. 162-167.

Ethiopians.<sup>49</sup>

On January 13, 1935, one issue which could have caused trouble between France and Germany was settled when the residents of the Saar voted for reunion with the Reich. The Treaty of Versailles had required Germany to cede the government of the Saar to the League for fifteen years, and France was given the right to exploit the coal mines in the area as compensation for damages from World War I. Hitler campaigned to convince the Saarlanders that they were welcome within the Reich regardless of their political views. To soothe the apprehensions of the French, he declared that

The question of the Saar is the only territorial question which separates us from France to-day. Once it has been solved there remains no visible reasonable ground why two great nations should continue to quarrel to all eternity.<sup>50</sup>

However, Hitler's pose of moderation and satisfaction did not last long. On March 10, General Hermann Goering publicly announced the existence of the German Air Force. The report did not especially surprise anyone and was subsequently overshadowed by Hitler's proclamation six days later. The German law of March 16, 1935, was succinct and daring; it proclaimed "universal liability to defense duty" and announced that the peacetime strength of the army would be twelve corps and thirty-six divisions. In an accompanying statement to the German people, Hitler surveyed diplomatic history since the Treaty of Versailles and concluded that the German government had more than fulfilled its obligations to disarm and that Britain and France were the parties actually guilty of breaking the treaty. He said that his announcement

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<sup>49</sup> SIA, 1935, pp. 109-110.

<sup>50</sup> DIA, 1935, p. 30.

was necessary

in order to give the German people the conviction and other States the knowledge that the safeguarding of the honor and security of the German Reich henceforth will be again entrusted to the sole charge of the German nation.

He assured the world, however, that Germany would never "proceed beyond the safeguarding of German honour and the freedom of the Reich."<sup>51</sup>

Hitler's bold breach of the military restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles produced an anti-German front. On April 11, representatives of Italy, France, and Britain met in Stresa to decide what could be done about Hitler. Their final resolution contained all the customary platitudes but accomplished nothing more than turning the problem over to the League. Britain and Italy reaffirmed their intention to fulfill all their obligations under the Treaty of Locarno. With France, they declared that the object of their policy was "the collective maintenance of peace within the framework of the League of Nations" and opposition "by all practicable means, [to] any unilateral repudiation of treaties which may endanger the peace of Europe."<sup>52</sup>

Furthermore, the Stresa powers formulated an indictment of Germany which was then adopted by the Council of the League of Nations. They recognized that the Military Law of March 16 violated the principle of international law which required "the scrupulous respect of all treaty obligations." Therefore, a nation could not free itself from treaty obligations or modify a treaty without the consent of the other contracting parties. The resolution concluded with a request that a committee be appointed

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., pp. 58-64.

<sup>52</sup>SIA, 1935, pp. 156-161.

to propose . . . measures to render the Covenant more effective in the reorganization of collective security and to define in particular the economic and financial measures which might be applied, should in the future a State, whether a Member of the League of Nations or not, endanger peace by the unilateral repudiation of its international obligations.<sup>53</sup>

The value of this moral condemnation of Hitler's action was certainly questionable, yet the Stresa front did appear to draw Italy into the anti-German association that France wanted to mold. Germany was diplomatically isolated except for a nonaggression pact with Poland. The last great power that could contribute to France's anti-German concert was the Soviet Union.

On May 2, 1935, the Franco-Soviet Treaty of Mutual Assistance was signed. The two nations agreed on immediate consultation if it appeared that either might be threatened by aggression. In the case of unprovoked aggression when the League failed to take action, they agreed to come to each other's immediate aid and assistance. The language of the treaty referred only to an "Etat européen" as the potential aggressor, but Germany was clearly the European state that worried both France and the Soviet Union. Czechoslovakia became the third member of the alliance against Germany through a Pact of Mutual Assistance with the Soviet Union signed on May 16, 1935. The military protocol that accompanied the Czech-Soviet Pact stipulated that the treaty would go into effect only if France also gave assistance.<sup>54</sup>

In 1919 Woodrow Wilson had promised that France would "never again feel that hers was a lonely peril [and] would never again have to ask

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<sup>53</sup>DIA, 1935, pp. 98-99.

<sup>54</sup>William E. Scott, Alliance Against Hitler: The Origins of the Franco-Soviet Pact (Durham, North Carolina, 1962), pp. 269-275.

the question who would come to her assistance" as she stood "at the frontier of freedom."<sup>55</sup> Yet in spite of all the paraphernalia of collective security, France was still alone on the Rhine in 1935. Ironically, the impressive list of treaties amassed from 1919 to 1935 had the effect of limiting France's freedom to act against aggression since each treaty added loopholes and delays to the system of collective security. Germany was thus able to move against the legal flaws in France's shield without triggering the defense mechanism.

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<sup>55</sup>Ray Stannard Baker and William E. Dodd, eds., The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson: War and Peace (New York, 1927), vol. I, pp. 392, 406.

## CHAPTER II

### THE WAY OF A SOMNAMBULIST

The Stresa Conference, which aligned Great Britain, Italy, and France against Germany, appeared ominous to many members of the German government, but Hitler was undaunted. He gave his response to the Stresa Conference and the League before the Reichstag on May 21, 1935. The general tone of the speech was peaceful, but there were several points that warned France of future trouble. In a summary, he formulated the basic German views as follows:

The German Government reject the Geneva resolution of April 17. . . . The Versailles dictate was unilaterally broken, and thereby rendered invalid as regards the points at issue, by those Powers who could not decide to carry out in their turn the disarmament which was imposed on Germany and which should have followed in their case by virtue of the Treaty. . . . The German Government . . . have on their part renounced those articles of the Versailles Treaty which, because of the one-sided burden these laid on Germany contrary to the provisions of the Treaty, have constituted a discrimination against Germany for an unlimited period of time.

Hitler offered to "uphold and fulfill all obligations arising out of the Locarno Treaty, so long as the other partners are on their side ready to stand by that pact." He concluded his promise to respect the demilitarization of the Rhineland with a warning to France:

In respecting the demilitarized zone the German Government consider their action as a contribution to the appeasement of Europe, which contribution is of an unheard-of-hardness for a sovereign State. But they feel bound to point out that the continual increase of troops on the other side can in no way be regarded as a complement to these endeavours.

He acknowledged the necessity of "the law of perpetual evolution by



keeping open the way to treaty revision" and warned that "the suppression of every necessary change" would become "the preparation for future explosions." As an inducement for British friendship, he offered "to supplement the Locarno Treaty with an air agreement" and pledged that "Germany has not the intention or the necessity or the means to participate in any new naval rivalry." He also offered to participate in any limitation or abolition of armament if the plan gave Germany equality with Britain and France.<sup>1</sup>

Next, Hitler employed the tactic of dividing his opponents by complaining to the British government about the incompatibility of the Franco-Soviet Pact and the Treaty of Locarno. The German government felt that it must consider "whether the new treaty was in harmony with the obligations towards Germany" which France had assumed in the Treaty of Locarno, since the Franco-Soviet Pact, according to the German interpretation, referred only to the case of armed conflict with Germany. Thereby France claimed the right to take military action against Germany without a recommendation from the Council of the League. Military action taken by France under these conditions would constitute a flagrant violation of the Treaty of Locarno. The German government hoped that all the other signatory powers would recognize that the Treaty of Locarno could not be modified in such a manner because it was "so important for relations between Western European Powers that no doubt, however slight, and no uncertainty, must be allowed to arise as to the interpretations of its clauses."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>DIA, 1935, pp. 171-175.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 264-267.

On June 25, the French government gave its response to the German memorandum and emphasized that

The Rhine Pact, as an element of collective security, is so much an essential basis of the general policy of France that no French Government would have risked, by their own action, the introduction of an element of doubt with regard to it.

In fact, during the period of negotiations with the Soviet Union, the French government had been preoccupied with avoiding anything which might have invalidated even indirectly the Treaty of Locarno. The Franco-Soviet Pact was "perfectly consistent with the obligations resulting from the Treaty of Locarno." It was not true that France claimed the right to decide who was the aggressor in the event of a conflict between the Soviet Union and Germany. France would not have signed the Franco-Soviet Treaty without first being certain that it was not inconsistent with the Treaty of Locarno because "the French Government's anxiety in no way to invalidate the application of the Locarno Treaty is the guiding principle of their whole policy."<sup>3</sup> During July, the British, Italian, and Belgian governments informed Germany that they were in agreement with the French and that they were satisfied that nothing in the Franco-Soviet Pact conflicted with the Treaty of Locarno.<sup>4</sup>

For the next six months, Hitler said little publicly about the Franco-Soviet Pact and the demilitarization of the Rhineland. Sufficient difficulties were developing between the Stresa powers to make his waiting worthwhile. Furthermore, he used the opportunity to approach Britain directly for a naval agreement which would remove some

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 267-270.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 270-272.

of Germany's legal restrictions under the Treaty of Versailles. The French were irritated by what they considered a betrayal by Britain and refused to participate in any legal revision of the treaty. Nevertheless, the British were eager to take advantage of Hitler's offer to limit the size of the Germany navy to thirty-five percent of the British fleet. Actually, Germany was no longer under any binding limitation, since achieving one-third of the strength of the British navy would tax German productive capacity for several years. Therefore, the naval agreement was not so important in avoiding an arms race as it was detrimental to the overall state of Anglo-French relations, since it provoked resentment and mistrust from France just before the League was to face its greatest challenge to date, the Italian invasion of Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup>

The necessity of responding to Italian aggression posed a quandary for the French. They could either go along with the majority of nations in the League who were willing to impose sanctions against Italy, or they could try to maintain Italian support against Hitler by somehow keeping the League from acting. As Foreign Minister, Laval attempted to follow both courses and succeeded only in damaging the prestige of the League while offending Italy. If France had been willing at this point to support the League in necessary military action, the example certainly would have helped later in persuading the League to act against Hitler. After the League Assembly agreed in October that Italy had resorted to aggressive war and voted to apply sanctions under Article 16 of the Covenant, it became increasingly obvious that it was necessary to do something more about the Ethiopian problem. Laval persuaded the

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<sup>5</sup>SIA, 1935, pp. 178-193.

British Foreign Minister, Samuel Hoare, to adopt a plan which would have given two-thirds of Ethiopia to Mussolini. Unfortunately for Laval and Hoare, the details of their scheme were published prematurely in the Paris papers. The hostile reaction of the British public was so intense that Hoare was forced to resign, and any hope for the Hoare-Laval plan was abandoned. Although the League decided to apply limited economic sanctions against Italy, oil, the most necessary product for the war effort, was not placed on the embargo list. French hesitancy was mostly responsible for the failure of the League to deal effectively with the Italian invasion of Ethiopia; the consequences of inaction were grave for both France and world peace. The League of Nations had shown that the sanctions it was able to apply could not prevent aggression. In depriving Ethiopia of any outside assistance, France had failed to live up to the doctrine of collective security which had been the cornerstone of its foreign policy since the end of World War I. Whatever solidarity against Hitler might have existed at Stresa, it was gone as far as Italy was concerned. Relations between France and Britain were strained, and large sections of public opinion in each nation blamed the other's selfishness for the impotence at Geneva.<sup>6</sup>

While public attention was focused on Ethiopia, German military preparations were initiated in the Rhineland, and by the fall of 1935 several French diplomatic and military sources had sounded the alarm. On October 21, General Maurice Gamelin, the Army Chief of Staff, suggested to the Foreign Office that there was sufficient evidence to indicate that the remilitarization of the Rhineland would come before the

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<sup>6</sup>René Albrecht-Carrié, France, Europe, and the Two World Wars (Geneva, 1960), pp. 284-291.

autumn of 1936.<sup>7</sup> On November 21, André François-Poncet, the French ambassador in Berlin, held a conference with Hitler during which he had planned to give the Führer assurances that the Franco-Soviet Treaty was not in conflict with the Treaties of Versailles or Locarno. Instead, François-Poncet reported that Hitler's "violence in criticizing the Franco-Soviet Pact left me with no doubt as to his future intentions" for the remilitarization of the Rhineland. In a long dispatch to Paris on November 26, François-Poncet asked what would happen when the Rhineland was remilitarized and suggested that it would be best to ask Hitler openly what he intended. Then it would be possible to threaten armed retaliation or permit the Germans to send only a few troops in return for their pledge not to build fortifications. However, the ambassador's suggestions were rejected, probably because the French feared that if they raised the possibility of some revision, the entire structure of the Locarno Treaty might crumble, relieving Britain and Italy of their responsibilities.<sup>8</sup> On December 26, Gamelin again warned the Foreign Office about German preparations in the Rhineland. He reported a marked increase in the construction of barracks and the evacuation of barracks that had been used by the civil government.<sup>9</sup> By the beginning of 1936, it was apparent that the possibility of the remilitarization of the Rhineland could not be overlooked any longer.

The British reaction to these developments was of great concern for France, but French unwillingness to discuss the possibility of

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<sup>7</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, pp. 194-195.

<sup>8</sup>François-Poncet, The Faithful Years, pp. 188-189.

<sup>9</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, p. 195.

remilitarization in a truly straightforward manner with the British inhibited their efforts to formulate a unified policy. On January 10, Charles Corbin, the French ambassador in London, reported that British officials were only somewhat uneasy about the daily attack by German newspapers against the demilitarized zone and the Franco-Soviet Pact.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in Corbin's opinion, it was impossible to persuade the British to examine seriously the German situation in the Rhineland before the Italian-Ethiopian conflict was resolved.<sup>11</sup> The next day, Corbin was instructed to inform the British that two German army corps had been assigned to the Rhineland and that a full scale occupation might occur as early as January 30 in order to coincide with the anniversary of Hitler's coming to power.<sup>12</sup>

In a note for the instruction of its ambassadors in Europe, the French Foreign Office summarized the reports that had been received about the remilitarization of the Rhineland since François-Poncet's meeting with Hitler on November 21. There were also reports from the Swiss chief of staff which indicated that the reoccupation of the Rhineland might come as early as the end of January.<sup>13</sup> Brigadier General Georges Renondeau, the French military attaché in Berlin, as well as François-Poncet, thought that the coup in the Rhineland would come by

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<sup>10</sup>Telegram, Corbin to Laval, London, January 10, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 29, p. 40.

<sup>11</sup>Dispatch, Corbin to Laval, London, January 10, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 32, pp. 44-48.

<sup>12</sup>Telegram, Laval to Corbin, Paris, January 11, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 36, p. 52.

<sup>13</sup>Telegram, Clauzel to Laval, Bern, January 10, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 27, pp. 37-38.

surprise and perhaps when the Germans were giving the appearance of engaging in conciliatory negotiations. It was probable, he said, that the Germans were waiting until the ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact presented a usable pretext. In any case, the reoccupation of the Rhineland would not be deferred past the beginning of 1937. Even without an overt violation of the Rhineland, there was every reason to believe that a camouflaged remilitarization would take place through the gradual infiltration of the police by military units.<sup>14</sup> Though General Renondeau believed that the German public campaigns against the demilitarized zone indicated that the Rhineland was marked for aggression, he thought that the issue was not yet settled in Berlin and that the Germans would wait until France was occupied with foreign and domestic distractions. The weakness of the French reaction to the violations already committed by Germany had doubtless given the impression that any recriminations would be nothing more than verbal.<sup>15</sup>

In view of these warnings, the French Foreign Office attempted to begin its contingency planning by considering several difficult questions. Would it be imprudent to maintain contact with the British? There was a distinct danger that British involvement would cause vacillation at the critical moment when the French government needed to act quickly. However, if the French government considered that the German action would be serious enough to justify precautionary military measures which might cause Berlin to reflect and facilitate negotiations,

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<sup>14</sup>Note for the Direction of Europe, Demilitarized Zone, Paris, January 11, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 37, pp. 52-54.

<sup>15</sup>Dispatch, Renondeau to Fabry, Berlin, January 15, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 63, pp. 91-93.

it would be helpful to inform London. After the most recent campaign in the German press, would it be advisable for the French ambassador to give a precise warning to the Germans? Certainly, François-Poncet could advise the Germans that their action would be denounced at Geneva, but if the French government decided to take military measures it would not be helpful to warn Berlin.<sup>16</sup> The answers to these questions were far from clear.

The War Office proved as reluctant as the Foreign Office to reach a meaningful decision. The frequency of reports of an imminent German move in the Rhineland finally prodded Gamelin to write a statement summarizing the potential threat for the January 18 meeting of the Supreme Military Committee. He estimated the total German military strength at 790,000 troops, including the S.S., the Labor Service, and the militarized police.<sup>17</sup> Gamelin calculated that Britain and Poland were the only powers that France could rely on to organize any resistance to Hitler, but he pointed out that the British could not give as much help to France on land as they had in 1914. The purpose of German military action in the Rhineland was to neutralize the French army by erecting fortifications along the border, thereby rendering France incapable of intervening to defend the Little Entente. Despite the gravity of the situation, the Supreme Military Committee concluded its meeting with the decision merely to give further study to the eventuality of German

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<sup>16</sup>Note for the direction of political affairs, "Eventuality of a German initiative in the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland", Paris, January 14, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 53, pp. 78-79.

<sup>17</sup>Note from the General Staff of the Army for the Supreme Military Committee, Paris, January 18, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 82, pp. 116-120.



reoccupation of the Rhineland.<sup>18</sup> The military leaders of France agreed that the remilitarization of the Rhineland would be intolerable and would render their military planning useless, yet they did nothing more than mark time and engage in further studies.

In the meantime, a new government came to power in France. However, it was no more prepared than its predecessor to take the decisive action necessary. The Laval government, which had survived a vote of confidence in December, was ended by the resignation of the Radical ministers on January 22. They were dissatisfied with Laval's deviousness and pro-Italian policies, and they demanded that the Franco-Soviet Pact, which Laval had delayed, be ratified. Only a caretaker government was thought to be needed to rule until the general elections in April. Unfortunately, the new government proved to be more concerned about the forthcoming elections than preparing to oppose Hitler in the Rhineland.

Perhaps the new government was slightly to the right of center in

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<sup>18</sup>Report of the meeting of the Supreme Military Committee, Paris, January 18, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 83, pp. 121-124.

political composition, but it lacked a firm ideological basis.<sup>19</sup> Albert Sarraut, who agreed to preside over the new government, was an experienced politician but not a heroic leader. As a Left Democrat, he served in twenty-five ministries before World War II. He and his brother owned one of the most influential Radical papers in France, La Dépêche of Toulouse. Probably, he was chosen as premier because he did not offend either the Right or the Left. In order to bring the support of conservatives, Pierre-Etienne Flandin, a Left Republican, was chosen as Foreign Minister. He was rather tall for a Frenchman, and his character and appearance was often described as more British than French. He was regarded as pro-British in his approach to French foreign policy, and had many personal friends in London. Although very intelligent and successful as a politician, he was a fatalist. Eden said that he was "more given to mourn than to reproach," and this particular characteristic was certainly not suited to dealing with Hitler. One of the ministers most

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<sup>19</sup>The members of the government which took office on January 24, 1936, were as follows: Ministers - Albert Sarraut (S\*), Left Democrat, Premier and Interior; Yvon Delbos (D), Radical Socialist, Justice; Joseph Paul-Boncour (S), Not registered, State, for the League of Nations; Pierre-Etienne Flandin (D), Left Republican, Foreign Affairs; Marcel Régnier (S), Left Democrat, Finance; Général Joseph Maurin, War; François Piétri (D), Left Republican, Navy; Marcel Déat (D), Socialist Union, Air; Henri Guernut (D), Radical Socialist, National Education; Camille Chautemps (S), Left Democrat, Public Transportation; Georges Bonnet (D), Radical Socialist, Commerce and Industry; Paul Thellier (D), Left Republican, Agriculture; Jacques Stern (D), Left Republican, Colonies; L.-O. Frossard (D), Not registered, Public Works; René Besse (D), Left Independent, Pensions; Georges Mandel (D), Independent Group, Mail, Telegraph, and Telephone, and Alsace-Lorraine; Louis Nicolle (D), Republican and Socialist Party, Public Sanitation and Physical Education; Louis Chappedelaine (D), Left Radical, Mercant Marine. Under-Secretaries of State - Jean Zay (D), Radical Socialist, State; André Beauquitte (D), Left Republican, Interior; Pierre Mazé (D), Radical Socialist, Public Transportation; Jules Julien (D), Radical Socialist, Education; Maxence Bibié (D), Socialist Union, Public Works. \*S indicates membership in the Senate; D indicates membership in the Chamber of Deputies.

committed to a firm policy against Germany was Georges Mandel, the Minister of Communications. As a protégé of Clemenceau, he was one of the most unyielding members of the government and provided the strength of character that seemed to be lacking in many of his colleagues. Joseph Paul-Boncour, the delegate to the League, began his career in government in 1899. As a scholar, he had written on a variety of subjects, including politics, economics, art, and the theatre. He had left the Socialist Party in 1931, but he remained convinced that Germany had to be opposed and that the Rhineland crisis was the right time to stop Hitler. Marcel Déat, the Minister of Air, had earned a distinguished service record during World War I and was a college professor at Reims before being elected to the Chamber of Deputies in 1926. During the Rhineland crisis, he did not want to fight unless France was invaded; he subsequently opposed declaring war when Poland was attacked and became a Nazi collaborator in order to undermine the Vichy government. General Joseph Maurin, the Minister of War, advocated a defensive policy and opposed the creation of an armored force. Even after World War II, he remained phlegmatic and really never attempted to defend his conduct during the Rhineland crisis. Although the Sarraut government had come to power on a brief wave of hostility to Laval's appeasement of Italy, it lacked sufficient unity to carry through an unpopular decision that might have brought war.

The funeral of King George V at the end of January, 1936, provided the opportunity for French officials to sound out the reaction of their British counterparts to the German threat in the Rhineland. The crucial issue in these discussions was the impression that Flandin conveyed. Were the British warned to expect that France would use force to

maintain the demilitarized zone? Flandin subsequently declared that he was certain that the German government was planning to take military action in the Rhineland and that he was resolved to discover the intentions of the British government in such a case. As he stated in his memoirs,

I posed the question directly to the Prime Minister. He replied with this counter-question: what has the French government decided to do? I could do nothing more than give my personal opinion: it will be resisted, I replied. But on my return to Paris, I added, I would demand that the government state its position, and I would relay it to M. Eden at our coming meeting at Geneva in February.<sup>20</sup>

Eden's account of the conversation, on the other hand, reveals the British attitude in greater detail:

I replied that the French attitude to a violation of the Rhineland was clearly a matter for the judgement of the French Government in the first instance. How much importance, I asked, did they attach to the demilitarized zone? Did they wish, for their part, to maintain it at all costs, or would the French Government prefer to bargain with the German Government while the existence of the zone still had value in German eyes? Flandin replied that these were just the subjects which he thought our Governments should carefully consider and on which they should then consult. This was hardly the attitude or language of a man determined to fight for the Rhineland. Flandin told me that he expected both the Chamber and Senate to ratify the Franco-Soviet Pact before the general election, which would take place at the end of April or the beginning of May. He thought that the present situation, in which the Pact was signed but unratified, was most unsatisfactory. Again he wanted to know whether I had any advice to give him. I replied that M. Flandin would know as well as I that the German Government had always shown resentment of the Pact, but it was scarcely possible for His Majesty's Government to advise the French Government on ratification, which was essentially a question of French policy. Flandin appeared to think that since Germany not only knew of the Pact's signature, but also seemed to expect its ratification, the event would not create any undue stir. . . . I thought it desirable that the French Government, as the power directly concerned, should make up their mind about the Rhineland. If they wished to negotiate

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<sup>20</sup>Flandin, Politique française, pp. 194-195.

with Hitler, they should do so; if they intended to repel a German invasion of the zone, they should lay their military plans. Any forcible action would depend on France, whose large army was still, on paper and in fact, far superior to that of Germany in experience and equipment. From my talk with Flandin, I had the impression that, while not prepared to use force to defend the zone, he was equally reluctant to negotiate about it.<sup>21</sup>

Harold Macmillan also presents a very interesting account of Flandin's attitude toward the British:

Flandin certainly talked very big, and declared with apparent sincerity that if England would give the lead, all Europe would follow. Now was the last chance. If Germany was not stopped now, there would be no hope of holding her later. I was impressed by the man and his large and powerful figure. But I do remember even then a feeling that there was something wrong about him. He protested too much. He even tried a degree of blackmail, for he argued that if England would not now come out and stop Germany, France would be forced to adopt a pro-German policy. . . . I have the feeling that Flandin was not unwilling to escape by putting the blame on us. At any rate there was no sign that the French would act.<sup>22</sup>

Whatever attitude Flandin may have thought he conveyed to the British, they clearly did not gain the impression that there was any reason for them to worry that France would invade the Rhineland in order to prevent German remilitarization. Indeed, the disparity between the British and French accounts clearly indicated the difficulties that were symptomatic of their relations.

Upon returning to Paris, the Foreign Minister asked the Supreme Military Committee what military measures were possible for immediate

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<sup>21</sup>Anthony Eden, Facing the Dictators (Boston, 1962), pp. 373-374.

<sup>22</sup>Harold Macmillan, Winds of Change, 1914-1939 (New York, 1966), p. 428.

opposition to the reoccupation of the Rhineland.<sup>23</sup> According to Flandin's account,<sup>24</sup> Maurin, the Minister of War, explained that the French Army was "entirely modelled to play a defensive role, and that, it had made no preparations and still less was it ready for a military intervention of the type which I was suggesting." When Flandin asked if it would be possible to blockade the German ports of Bremen and Hamburg in order to bring pressure on the Germans, Piétri, the Minister of the Navy, replied that it would be impossible without the cooperation of the British fleet. Déat, the Minister of the Air Force, put forward the view that aerial bombardment would constitute "an indisputable act of war, with all the risks to which civilians would be exposed." At this point, Flandin observed that

I was all the more put out of countenance by the fact that I was counting on a quick reaction by our military men in the face of the threat which the reoccupation of the Rhineland by the German Army would constitute for French security; and, a fact unique, perhaps, in the history of France because the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who was generally inclined toward conciliatory negotiations, was assuming the character of a bellicose Minister in front of the Service Ministers, who were not thinking at all of fighting for the Rhineland.

Gamelin intervened to say that since "the Army General Staff was only an executive body, it was the duty of the Government to make a

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<sup>23</sup>Under the Sarraut government, the members of the Supreme Military Committee were the Ministers of the three armed services and their Chiefs of the General Staffs.

<sup>24</sup>Flandin, Politique française, pp. 195-196. There was no account of the meeting of the Supreme Military Committee to which Flandin referred in DDF. Gamelin, who was allegedly present, did not mention it in his memoirs. However, Paul Reynaud believed that the meeting did actually take place and that therefore, Gamelin's "silence is all the more worthy of attention." (In the Thick of the Fight, p. 121.) Since Flandin did not give the exact date, it is possible that he was referring to the cabinet meeting on February 27. Nevertheless, it can be verified that the attitude of the military was as Flandin characterized it later in February.

decision." Of course he was right; however, the military had the responsibility of giving information and advice to the government. Their timid response denied the civilian members of the government the support needed to inspire a firm response. Further, Flandin said that he reported the meeting of the Supreme Military Committee to the Council of Ministers and that he was authorized to tell Eden that the French would place their military forces at the disposal of the League in order to oppose the violation of treaties. At Geneva, when Flandin told Eden of the French decision and asked for the assistance of the British government, Eden replied that he would consult with his Cabinet and relay their answer through the usual channels.<sup>25</sup> However, the response never came.<sup>26</sup>

Unknown to the French, Eden had already decided on the British attitude. He was convinced that the French would not fight and were only looking for someone to blame for their inaction. Therefore, he wired George Clerk, the British ambassador in Paris, to warn him against discussing hypothetical cases with Flandin. Clerk was instructed that since the demilitarized zone was designed for French and Belgian security, it was for those two governments to decide how important it was to them. Eden's instructions continued:

In the event of M. Flandin returning to the subject you should make it clear to him that, in the first instance, we expect to be told the views and intentions of his own government, and you should not give him any encouragement to hope

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<sup>25</sup>There is some doubt about the date of the meeting between Flandin and Eden at Geneva. Flandin's memoirs indicated that it was before the Franco-Soviet Treaty was ratified, but the only similar meeting Eden mentioned was on March 3, after the ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact.

<sup>26</sup>Flandin, Politique française, pp. 195-196.

that His Majesty's Government would be prepared to discuss the matter on the basis of a statement of the British attitude.

Eden's reluctance to commit Britain to maintaining the status quo in the Rhineland was not prompted by a lack of concern. He was fully aware of the significance of a possible German reoccupation. After calling for reports from the General Staff and the Air Staff, Eden explained in a note to the cabinet that

. . . the disappearance of the demilitarized zone will not merely change local military values but is likely to lead to far-reaching political repercussions of a kind which will further weaken France's influence in Eastern and Central Europe, leaving a gap which may eventually be filled either by Germany or by Russia.

Yet, aware as he was of the crucial significance of the Rhineland, he was not ready to commit Britain to the aid of France. "Taking one thing with another," Eden concluded,

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 a bargaining value.<sup>27</sup>

Unfortunately, the French were not informed that they could expect nothing from the British, nor did Eden take the initiative in opening negotiations with the German government.

By the end of January, 1936, the French government was deluged with intelligence reports about German activities in the Rhineland. Jean Dabler, the French consul general in Cologne, complained that his warnings to the War Office had gone unheeded for the last three months of 1935. On January 31, he reported that German preparations for the

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<sup>27</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 375-376.



remilitarization of the Rhineland were virtually complete.<sup>28</sup> Yet throughout February, the Minister of War continued to display the timidity that Flandin reported when he returned from the funeral of George V. On February 12, Maurin wrote to Flandin that when the Rhineland was reoccupied by the Germans, France should immediately complain to the League. As far as military plans were concerned, he recommended "precautionary measures" and suggested that the troops on the border be placed on alert. He said that the military preparations should be kept to a minimum in order to avoid the appearance of welcoming war. "To use our right to occupy the demilitarized zone would risk being against French interests," Maurin opined. "We would risk appearing as an aggressor and thus find ourselves alone against Germany." He recommended that Britain be informed and drawn into the French plans along with the other Locarno powers.<sup>29</sup>

It was Maurin's view that entering into negotiations with the Germans was dangerous and should be avoided. If it was impossible to avoid negotiating, the provisions of the Treaties of Versailles and Locarno which concerned the Rhineland had to be strictly maintained.<sup>30</sup> Maurin did not explain how the demilitarization of the Rhineland could

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<sup>28</sup>Note from M. Dobler on the eventual military reoccupation of the Rhineland by German troops, Paris, February 1, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 126, pp. 177-178. For some unexplained reason, Renondeau did not give his observations on the report until March 4. Dispatch, Renondeau to Maurin, Berlin, March 4, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 277, pp. 390-393. The text of Dobler's report is given in Dispatch, Dobler to Flandin, Paris, January 31, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 277, Annex I, pp. 390-392.

<sup>29</sup>Dispatch, Maurin to Flandin, Paris, February 12, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 170, pp. 245-247.

<sup>30</sup>Dispatch, Maurin to Flandin, Paris, February 17, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 196, pp. 290-293.

be prevented if the French were going to wait for British help, and Flandin was extremely displeased with the War Minister's response. He even suspected at this point that perhaps the military might welcome the reoccupation of the Rhineland since it could be used to justify an increase in military spending. Although Flandin acknowledged that there was nothing in Maurin's reports to indicate specific measures which would intimidate Hitler or delay the remilitarization, French ambassadors had already been instructed to inform their host governments that France would not accept the unilateral repudiation of treaties. At this time, it was the opinion of the Foreign Office that German violations must be reported to the League which would then decide if military action was necessary. Flandin said only that France might not necessarily have the right to occupy the Rhineland as Maurin had said.<sup>31</sup>

In the meantime, the French Chamber of Deputies was continuing its debate on the ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact. French opposition to the pact came mostly from the Right. They were concerned about the risks that the commitment might bring for France, the influence of the Third International within France, the effect on their chances for re-election, and the dangers of further provoking Hitler. Philippe Henriot, a Radical and Jacques Doriot, a former Communist who later organized the Popular French Party, developed the argument that the alliance was merely part of the Soviet scheme to draw France into a world

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<sup>31</sup>Department note, Demilitarized zone, "Observations on the letter from the War Office on February 17, 1936," Paris, February 24, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 223, pp. 317-318; Telegram, Flandin to Ambassadors in Brussels, Rome, Warsaw, Washington, Prague, Belgrade, and Bucharest, Paris, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 217, p. 313.

Communist revolution.<sup>32</sup> Xavier Vallat, a leader of the Republican Federation, minimized the assistance that France might expect from the Soviets owing to geography and the doubtful condition of the Soviet army. He said that the pact was useless and dangerous since it would give Hitler the impression that he was encircled and tempt him to remilitarize the Rhineland and take over Austria.<sup>33</sup> The opponents of the pact also emphasized that the French army was defensive in character and might not be capable of fulfilling the obligations it had in Eastern Europe. The Right was concerned about the threat of the Popular Front in the coming elections. It would be difficult for them to campaign against the Communist party after they had just proclaimed friendship for the Soviets.

Although support for the Franco-Soviet Pact came mostly from Radical Socialists and Socialists such as Édouard Herriot and Paul-Boncour, several prominent conservative Left Democrats and Left Republicans such as Flandin, Mandel, Piétri, and Paul Reynaud also voted in favor of the alliance. Henri Torrès, the Chamber reporter and a Left Independent, described the Franco-Soviet Pact as the logical conclusion of the course that French foreign policy had been following since World War I. He said that the attack in the German press against the Franco-Soviet Treaty was a bluff, since they were even saying that French talks with the British during January were in violation of the Locarno agreements. The truth was that Germany wanted to localize conflicts and thus

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<sup>32</sup>Philippe Henriot, February 18, 1936, Débats, 1936, pp. 459-462.

<sup>33</sup>Xavier Vallat, *ibid.*, pp. 452-455.

undermine collective security.<sup>34</sup> Herriot emphatically denied that the Franco-Soviet Pact was in conflict with the Treaty of Locarno. He pointed out that the Germans had given tacit recognition to that fact, with certain reservations, in their note of May 25, 1935, offering their assurances that they would not attack the Soviet Union.<sup>35</sup> The Germans replied to Herriot's speech the following day and reaffirmed their contention that the Franco-Soviet Pact would constitute a flagrant violation of the Treaty of Locarno.<sup>36</sup>

Considering the indecision that had taken hold of the government, Flandin presented a remarkably strong defense of the Franco-Soviet Pact before the Chamber of Deputies. He argued that the treaty could not be criticized on the grounds that it did not follow the course which French foreign policy had taken for the past fifteen years, that it was concluded to isolate Germany, or that it did not complement the League. Nevertheless, the French government was prepared to present the question of divergent interpretations to the Permanent Court of International Justice.<sup>37</sup> This offer represented a concession from the French, since they had previously insisted that there was no reason to consider the two pacts incompatible.

At the height of the debate, Hitler attempted to influence the Deputies through an interview which he gave to Bertrand de Jouvenel, a reporter for Le Matin. The sensational interview was a masterpiece of

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<sup>34</sup>Henry Torrès, February 11, 1936, *ibid.*, pp. 349-354.

<sup>35</sup>Edouard Herriot, February 20, 1936, *ibid.*, pp. 494-499.

<sup>36</sup>DIA, 1936, p. 20.

<sup>37</sup>Pierre-Etienne Flandin, February 25, 1936, Débats, 1936, pp. 578-584.

Hitlerian deviousness. "I wish to prove to my people," the Führer declared,

that the idea of hereditary enmity between France and Germany is an absurdity. The German people has understood this. . . . When I wrote [Mein Kampf], I was in prison. It was the time when the French troops were occupying the Ruhr. It was at the moment of greatest tension between our two countries. . . . Yes we were enemies, and I stood for my country, as is fitting, against yours; just as I stood for my country for four and a half years in the trenches. I should despise myself if I were not first of all a German in the moment of conflict. But to-day there is no longer any cause for a conflict.

As a politician, he said he could best revise his book through foreign policy. A rapprochement between France and Germany would indeed be a correction that was worthy of being made. When Jouvenel asked about the effect of the Franco-Soviet Pact, Hitler began lecturing on the deplorable situation that would be created. "Do you realize in France what you are doing?" he asked.

You are allowing yourselves to be caught in the diplomatic toils of a Power whose only aim is to stir up the great European peoples into a disorder from which it alone will benefit. It should never be forgotten that Soviet Russia is a political factor which has at its disposal an explosive revolutionary idea and gigantic armaments. As a German, it is my duty to take account of such a situation. Bolshevism has no prospect of infecting us, but there are other great nations which are less immune to the bacillus of Bolshevism than we.<sup>38</sup>

Unfortunately for Hitler's plans, the French government had the publication of the article delayed until February 28, and his warning played no part in the debates in the Chamber. For on the previous day, the Franco-Soviet Pact had been ratified by a vote of 353 to 164, with 45

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<sup>38</sup>DIA, 1936, pp. 20-22.

abstentions.<sup>39</sup>

Regrettably, the General Staff did not show as much courage as the Deputies. In a secret note to the Foreign Office on February 25, they recommended that the ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact be deferred, and rather than demanding some military preparation to counter Hitler's plans, they recommended the submission of the Rhineland question to The Hague and the Council of the League of Nations.<sup>40</sup>

Annoyed with the Army's suggestion, Sarraut finally called a cabinet meeting in order to give some direction to drifting French policy on February 27, the day the Franco-Soviet Pact was ratified. When the possibility of German troops entering the Rhineland was raised at the meeting, Maurin insisted that the organization of the army during peacetime would only permit a strictly defensive disposition of troops. Any offensive operations would require calling up reserves and industrial mobilization. Gamelin agreed with his superior's evaluation of the peacetime potential of the French army: "Our forces on active duty in France," he admitted, "are not even equal to half of those at the disposal of the Germans."<sup>41</sup> After considering this military advice, the Council decided to inform the British and Belgian governments that France would not proceed with any action alone. In the case of a flagrant violation of the Rhineland, France planned to consult with the

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<sup>39</sup>Telegram, François-Poncet to Flandin, Berlin, March 9, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 349, pp. 458-460.

<sup>40</sup>Note relating to the Franco-Soviet Pact, February 25, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 227, pp. 322-323; Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, pp. 198-199. According to the editors of DDF, it was not possible to determine the origin or the destination of the note; however, Gamelin indicated that the note was drafted by the General Staff for the Foreign Office.

<sup>41</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, p. 199.

Locarno powers and take preparatory military measures for collective action which would be determined by the Council of the League and the Locarno powers.<sup>42</sup> Apparently, the French government did not intend to abandon completely the right to occupy the Rhineland, since that possibility was later considered. Indicating that France would consult with the Locarno powers while preparing to take collective action was not the same as admitting that France did not have the right to take military action, nor was France promising that military power would not be used.

Nevertheless, this communication must have been welcomed by Eden when Flandin gave him a copy at Geneva on March 3. Flandin proposed that the British government agree to maintain the demilitarized zone in return for French support in strengthening the embargo against Italy. If Italy left the League and made an agreement with Germany, there would be serious consequences for France, and the French government wanted assurances from Britain before making any decision about the embargo.<sup>43</sup> Eden replied that he would present the French views to his cabinet and then respond. However, the British reply never came. Although the French had predicted the reoccupation of the Rhineland as early as the Stresa conference, Eden was not overly concerned that France would use force, since he did not know of any French preparations.<sup>44</sup>

While the French were faltering, the final orders for the

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<sup>42</sup>Note from the Cabinet of Ministers, Paris, February 27, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 241, p. 339.

<sup>43</sup>Dispatch, Flandin to Corbin, Paris, March 5, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 283, pp. 396-398.

<sup>44</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 378-379, 394; Flandin, Politique française, p. 196.

remilitarization of the Rhineland had been given on March 2, the same day that François-Poncet asked for an appointment with Hitler to discuss the friendly overture which the Führer had made in the interview with Jouvenel. The French ambassador found Hitler "nervous, lacking in self-assurance, reserved, and using mediocre arguments with a sort of impatience and an odd flow of speech." Hitler, who was "visibly disturbed and embarrassed by the visit," demanded "time for reflection" and insisted that the visit be kept secret.<sup>45</sup> Although he later bragged, "I go my way with the assurance of a somnabulist, the way providence has sent me," his plans to occupy the Rhineland had been initiated more than ten months before the final order was given.<sup>46</sup>

On May 21, 1935, he had given assurances that the Treaties of Versailles and Locarno would be observed, yet he had already issued the first directive for the remilitarization of the Rhineland three weeks earlier on May 2. A memorandum from Colonel General Werner von Blomberg, the Reich War Minister, revealed that the occupation had been discussed at the last staff talks of the armed forces before the Franco-Soviet Pact was concluded. In May, 1935, Blomberg had warned that the operation would proceed "without regard to the present inadequate state of our armaments." Further, he had ordered "strictest secrecy" so that the operation might be "executed by a surprise blow at lightning

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<sup>45</sup>Dispatch, François-Poncet to Flandin, Berlin, March 3, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 272, pp. 381-385; Telegram, François-Poncet to Flandin, Berlin, March 2, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 265, pp. 373-375; François-Poncet, The Faithful Years, pp. 190-191.

<sup>46</sup>London Times, March 16, 1936, p. 12.



speed."<sup>47</sup>

The plans for the reoccupation were again discussed at the tenth meeting of the Working Committee of the Reich Defense Council of June 26, 1935. Colonel Alfred Jodl, the Head of the Home Defense Department, had listed the preparations which would be needed. He cautioned that in the demilitarized zone "the principle that 'concealment is more important than results' must be applied at present."<sup>48</sup> Surely, there can be no doubt that by the early summer of 1935 the Germans had already decided to reoccupy the Rhineland.

Still, Hitler had to wait for just the right moment. In February, 1936, his views on the timing of the coup were the subject of an extremely interesting conversation with Ulrich von Hassell, the German ambassador in Rome. According to Hassell's memorandum, Hitler thought that from a military point of view the remilitarization of the Rhineland was absolutely necessary. Hitler confided that

Until now he had always envisaged the spring of 1937 as the right moment. Political developments, however, made one wonder whether the psychological moment had not arrived now. Admittedly, the fact that we would be considerably stronger in 1937, was an argument for postponement. . . . At the moment, however, Russia was only intent on having peace in the West. England was in a bad state militarily, and much hampered by other problems; France was distracted by internal politics. In both countries there was strong opposition to the Russian Pact, which was to our advantage. He did not think that such a step on Germany's part would be answered by military action - though perhaps by economic sanctions; but these had meanwhile become thoroughly unpopular amongst the followers, who served as whipping boys, of Great Powers.

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<sup>47</sup> Reich Minister of Defense to the Chief of Army High Command, Chief of Navy High Command, Reich Minister for Air, May 21, 1935, Nazi Conspiracy and Aggression (Washington, 1946), vol. VII, Doc. C-139, pp. 951-952, (hereafter cited as NCA).

<sup>48</sup> Minutes of the Tenth Meeting of the Reich Defense Council, June 26, 1935, *ibid.*, Doc. EC-405, pp. 450-455.

Hitler summoned Hassell to Munich to discuss the possibility of persuading Mussolini to denounce the Locarno Pact, whereupon Germany would follow. In any case, Hitler said that Germany would renounce the Treaty of Locarno, but Italy could have the advantage of denouncing it first in order to avoid being placed "in an extremely difficult position."<sup>49</sup> Mussolini declined the opportunity, but he admitted that "for Italy, Stresa was finally dead." Hassell concluded that Italy would leave the League when the sanctions against it were strengthened and that Italy would not participate in any action against Germany.<sup>50</sup> At least Hitler could count on Italy not to interfere with his plans for the Rhineland; that was a great improvement from the opposition that Germany had faced the previous spring.

According to the testimony of the German leaders who were tried by the Allies at Nuremberg after World War II, the decision to occupy the Rhineland was not only difficult for Hitler but also opposed by the military. Paul Schmidt, who acted as an interpreter for Hitler, and Constantin von Neurath, the Foreign Minister, testified that in the Foreign Office and military circles there was "considerable fear" of retaliation, though, Neurath himself "felt confident that the Rhineland could be remilitarized without armed opposition from Britain and France."<sup>51</sup> Opposition from the military continued even after the

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<sup>49</sup>Memorandum by the Ambassador in Italy, February 14, 1936, Documents on German Foreign Policy (Washington, 1949), Series C, vol. IV, Doc. No. 564, pp. 1142-1144, (hereafter cited as DGFP).

<sup>50</sup>Political Report from the Ambassador in Italy to the Foreign Ministry, February 22, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 579, pp. 1172-1177.

<sup>51</sup>Schmidt testimony, March 26, 1946, Trial of the Major War Criminals Before the International Military Tribunal (Nuremberg, 1947-1949), vol. X, pp. 218-219, (hereafter cited as TMWC).

decision had been made. General Fritz von Manstein, the chief of the Operations Department in the army, testified that when Hitler gave the final order for the remilitarization, Blomberg and General Werner von Fritsch, the Commander in Chief of the Army, objected and warned Hitler "against such a one-sided solution." Later in a private conversation with Manstein, Hitler complained that Blomberg had suggested that the German troops in the Rhineland be withdrawn when France mobilized thirteen divisions.<sup>52</sup> For Hitler, the lack of confidence shown by the military leaders became a source of suspicion. In a conversation with Field Marshal Gert von Rundstedt in February, 1938, Hitler

complained very bitterly about the supreme military leaders. He said that he alone had been the one who forced rearmament through. The supreme military leaders had always resisted and said it was going too fast. In the occupation of the Rhineland, he charged them with a certain cowardice when they asked for withdrawal of the troops behind the Rhineland since France was not adopting a threatening attitude.<sup>53</sup>

Of all the defendants at Nuremberg, General Hermann Goering, the Air Minister, was the only one who still maintained that Germany was completely right in occupying the Rhineland, since France had changed the balance of Locarno. He argued that Germany as a sovereign state had the right to free itself from the dishonorable commitment not to protect a part of the Reich.<sup>54</sup> Yet, Hitler himself was far from confident that his enterprise, justified or not, would succeed. According to Schmidt's memoirs,

More than once, even during the war, I heard Hitler say: 'The forty-eight hours after the march into the Rhineland were the

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<sup>52</sup>Manstein testimony, August 9, 1946, *ibid.*, vol. XX, pp. 603-604.

<sup>53</sup>Rundstedt testimony, August 12, 1946, *ibid.*, vol. XXI, p. 22.

<sup>54</sup>Goering testimony, March 14, 1946, *ibid.*, vol. IX, p. 285.

most nerve-racking in my life.' He always added: 'If the French had then marched into the Rhineland, we would have had to withdraw with our tails between our legs, for the military resources at our disposal would have been wholly inadequate for even a moderate resistance.'<sup>55</sup>

Jodl described the mood in Berlin as "the uneasy feeling of a gambler whose entire fortune is at stake."<sup>56</sup>

The final orders for the remilitarization of the Rhineland were issued on March 2:

Re-forming his divisional staffs, the C-in-C of the Army is to move forward sections consisting mainly of the VI, IX, and V Army Corps into the demilitarized zone in such a way that they will be transferred to permanent garrisons on the Rhine and east of it. Apart from that, one Infantry Battalion shall be transferred to Aachen, one to Trier, and one to Saarbruecken. The Regional police Inspectors West, South West, and South will come entirely under the orders of the C-in-C of the Army for the purpose of incorporating them into the army. The Reich Air Minister and C-in-C of the Air Force will transfer one fighter squadron each to the area around Cologne and Coblenz, and sections of the AAA into or near such towns on the Lower and Middle Rhine where the most important Rhine bridges are.<sup>57</sup>

Major General Wilhelm Keitel, the Chief of the Wehrmachtsamt in the Reich War Ministry, also approved "inconspicuous air reconnaissance" and U-boat reconnaissance "out of sight of land."<sup>58</sup>

Although Hitler had embarked upon his greatest gamble to date, Britain and Belgium were still fairly confident that they would not be dragged into war by the crisis. Since the French had consulted Britain,

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<sup>55</sup>Paul Schmidt, Hitler's Interpreter (New York, 1951), p. 41.

<sup>56</sup>Jodl testimony, June 4, 1946, TMWC, vol. XV, p. 351.

<sup>57</sup>Blomberg to C-in-C of the Army, C-in-C of the Navy, and Air Minister and C-in-C of the Air Force, NCA, vol. VI, Doc. C-459, pp. 974-976.

<sup>58</sup>Reich Minister of War and C-in-C of the Armed Forces to C-in-C of the Navy, March 6, 1936, ibid., Doc. C-194, p. 1019.

they made a mistake in not being much more insistent. As the delays caused by Britain actually developed, it became apparent that France could have handled the German coup much better alone. The situation between France and Britain was unfortunate for the French, since they had agreed to consult the British after the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the British had not agreed to maintain the demilitarized zone or to compensate for its loss to French security. Although the French government clearly had adequate time to decide exactly what should be done when German troops entered the Rhineland, it failed to come to a decision before the crisis actually developed. If Hitler had discovered that the French were prepared to counter his action, he would have delayed his plan. There is no evidence to indicate that he actually knew France would not fight; in fact, the testimony of everyone who saw him during the first week of March indicated that he was extremely worried. Though the French unquestionably knew that they would have to decide what to do when German troops entered the Rhineland, they refused to face the situation. If the French did not want to do anything more than appeal to the League of Nations, then that action should have been taken before Hitler made his announcement, since France had the right to complain if there was any military activity suspected in the Rhineland. The French military had not informed the civilian members of the government that they required several days and mobilization to respond to the German army. Considering that the remilitarization of the Rhineland had clearly been foreseen, it was inexcusable that "In Paris,

the denunciation of Locarno and the entrance of troops into the demilitarized zone fell like a thunderbolt."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>59</sup>François-Poncet, The Faithful Years, p. 194.

### CHAPTER III

#### ABOVE ALL, NOT WAR!

At dawn on Saturday, March 7, the German army officially occupied the Rhineland for the first time since 1918. The first news of the move arrived in Paris at 9:45 A.M. in the form of a phone call from the French military attaché in Berlin. He relayed the reports of three sources, the first two being police informants who warned of an imminent occupation on March 12 or April 1. The third, a correspondent for a Paris paper, reported that German troops were already entering the Rhineland, but there was no further information.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the first word of the remilitarization of the Rhineland arrived in Paris at least three hours after the movement of German troops had already begun and from a wholly unofficial source at that.

The actual number of German troops which entered the Rhineland is difficult to establish since there were widely differing estimates. Although it could only be established from published German documents that "sections consisting mainly of the VI, IX, and V Army Corps" and three other battalions were sent into the Rhineland, the actual strength of the German force probably approximated 30,000 troops. According to the Nuremberg testimony of Jodl, Neurath, and Manstein, the occupation was merely symbolic and consisted of only one division, with three

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<sup>1</sup>Note for the Chief of Staff of the Army, Berlin, March 7, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 297, p. 409.

battalions crossing the Rhine.<sup>2</sup> Goering testified that the Luftwaffe entered only a few cities on the right bank of the Rhine and could not have participated in the occupation of the left bank since there were not adequate ground preparations.<sup>3</sup>

Publicly, Hitler tried to play down the German strength in the Rhineland in order not to alarm the people in France and Britain. However, for the information of foreign governments, every effort was made to exaggerate the actual number of Germans employed. Keitel directed that foreign military attachés be told that

The Rhineland will be occupied in the course of March 7 and 8 by nineteen battalions and thirteen artillery units from the centre of Germany. The operation will be completed on March 8. The major part of the troops will be stationed on the Rhine and in the Rhine Valley between the Black Forest and the Rhine. Aachen, Trier, and Saarbrücken will have small garrisons.

The Luftwaffe was to give the following response to the inquiries of the air attaches:

On the Rhine two groups of fighter aircraft have arrived today at their new peacetime stations at Cologne, Dusseldorf, Frankfurt on Main and Mannheim. Two anti-aircraft battalions will take up their permanent stations at Cologne and Mannheim.<sup>4</sup>

Bernard von Buelow, the State Secretary of the Foreign Ministry, was the first to ask the Luftwaffe, "What is the strength of a 'group'?" He was informed that in the case of the Rhineland occupation the two

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<sup>2</sup>Jodl testimony, June 4, 1946, TMWC, vol. XV, p. 352; Neurath testimony, June 24, 1946, TMWC, vol. XVI, p. 625; Manstein testimony, August 9, 1946, TMWC, vol XX, p. 604.

<sup>3</sup>Goering testimony, March 14, 1946, *ibid.*, vol. IX, p. 285.

<sup>4</sup>Reich War Minister and Commander in Chief of the Wehrmacht to the Foreign Minister and the Reich Minister of Propaganda, March 7, 1936, DGFP, Series C, vol. V, Doc. No. 23, pp. 44-45.



groups consisted of twenty-seven fighter planes and about two hundred men with no reserves.<sup>5</sup>

The German bluff was effective; French estimates of the number of Germans in the Rhineland continued to grow long after their peak had been reached. The first estimate from the French military attaché was that 30,000 German troops, the equivalent of three divisions, had entered the Rhineland.<sup>6</sup> On March 8, Flandin said French intelligence indicated that German troops in the Rhineland had already doubled the number announced by Berlin.<sup>7</sup> On March 11, Gamelin reported that German strength in the Rhineland had reached a shocking total of 295,000 but admitted that only the 30,000 men in the Wehrmacht had any real military value. His exaggerated figures included 30,000 from the Landespolizei (State Police), 30,000 from the Arbeitsdienst (Labor Service), 30,000 from the NSKK (the motorcycle corps of the SA), 25,000 from the SS, and 150,000 from the SA. Probably only the Wehrmacht constituted a real military threat, though it is possible that those members of the Landespolizei who had some military training could have offered some effective resistance to the French.<sup>8</sup>

The formal announcement of the Rhineland coup was made simultaneously by Neurath in Berlin and the German ambassadors in European capitals. The official memorandum released by the German government

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 45, fn. 2.

<sup>6</sup>Telegram, François-Poncet to Flandin, Berlin, March 7, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 300, pp. 412-413.

<sup>7</sup>Telegram, Flandin to Corbin, Paris, March 8, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 317, pp. 427-428.

<sup>8</sup>Note for the Chief of Staff of the Army, Paris, March 11, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 392, pp. 504-506.

reiterated German objections to the Franco-Soviet Pact and proclaimed that

In the interest of a nation's primitive right to secure its frontiers and to ensure its possibilities of defense, the German Reich Government have therefore today restored the full and unrestricted sovereignty of Germany in the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland.

The memorandum was concluded with proposals to serve as the basis for new agreements and "establish beyond doubt the purely defensive character of this action." The German government offered to negotiate with France and Belgium a new demilitarized zone on both sides of the border. It further offered nonaggression pacts with France, Belgium, and the countries in Eastern Europe. Finally, Germany was prepared to conclude air pacts with the Western powers and to return to the League of Nations.<sup>9</sup> As François-Poncet observed, Hitler's tactics "all along the line were the same he had employed previously with happy results. He struck his adversary in the face and as he did so declared: 'I bring you proposals for peace!'"<sup>10</sup> The French ambassador protested the "forceful manner" of the German action and demanded to know how Germany intended to express its sovereignty. Neurath responded that Germany planned to send only small symbolic detachments and did not intend to establish fortified garrisons.<sup>11</sup>

At noon, Hitler followed with a speech to the Reichstag in which he announced that he had restored the "equal rights . . . and principles

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<sup>9</sup>Foreign Minister to the Missions in Great Britain, France, Italy, and Belgium, March 5, 1936, DGFP, Series C, vol. V, Doc. No. 3, pp. 11-19.

<sup>10</sup>François-Poncet, The Faithful Years, p. 193.

<sup>11</sup>Telegram, François-Poncet to Flandin, Berlin, March 7, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 298, pp. 410-411.

of honour" to Germany and that the German people would have the opportunity to ratify his foreign policy in a plebiscite on March 29. The one and one-half hour speech followed the long familiar formula involving the injustice of the Treaty of Versailles, Germany's fundamental need for equality, the menace of Communism, and peaceful offers to France.<sup>12</sup>

By mid-morning, the dilatory French government was resigned to facing the German fait accompli. Hitler had taken the gamble; would France act in defense of its security? At ten o'clock, Sarraut called for a meeting at the Ministry of Interior. Mandel, the Minister of Communications, Paul-Boncour, the delegate to the League, and Gamelin, the Army Chief of Staff, were present for the entire meeting, and Flandin appeared briefly. According to Gamelin's recollections, Paul-Boncour and Mandel were ready to reply by assembling the necessary military means for imposing the will of France, the former going so far as to exclaim, "I would like to see you as soon as possible in Mainz." To this bold charge Gamelin replied, "Nothing would give me greater pleasure, but you must give me the resources;" he requested authority only to take "preliminary measures of precaution," which involved deployment of the covering troops, recalling those on leave, and alerting the railroads. To Sarraut's query as to what would be the situation if France faced Germany alone without allies, Gamelin answered,

In the beginning, in actual conditions, we would have the preponderance, but in a long war, the superiority of numbers and industrial possibilities would play forcefully for our adversaries.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>DIA, 1936, pp. 35-41.

<sup>13</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, p. 201.

Thus, the French government missed its earliest opportunity to call a full cabinet meeting and make a firm decision. The only result of the morning meeting was the initiation of preparatory measures for mobilization and consultation with the other signatories of Locarno. Hitler's previously tested tactic of making announcements on Saturday had the desired benefit of catching members of both the French and British governments away for the weekend. The French held their first official cabinet meeting on Sunday, and the British waited until Monday.

Flandin spent Saturday afternoon in conferences with the ambassadors of Britain, Belgium, and Italy. Of this meeting, Clerk, the British ambassador, reported to Eden that France did not wish to act alone, but wanted to bring the matter before the Council of the League with the other Locarno powers. Clerk related that although the French had not made a definite decision, they were thinking of asking the League to condemn Germany's action "in terms like those used the previous April to condemn her rearmament."<sup>14</sup> However, when Flandin wrote to the French ambassador in London, he maintained that he had taken a bolder stand and that Clerk had been told that "France could not accept any decision which in the first place practically called for the abandonment of the demilitarized zone of the Rhine."<sup>15</sup> Flandin's reasoning appears particularly questionable at this point, for there was no reason to believe that a condemnation from the League would be any more effective than it had been the year before; it is difficult to imagine why Flandin thought that turning the League would preserve the demilitarized zone any more

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<sup>14</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, p. 386.

<sup>15</sup>Telegram, Flandin to Corbin, Paris, March 8, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 317, pp. 427-428.

than relying on the League earlier had saved the military restrictions of the Treaty of Versailles.

The principal members of the Sarraut government and their military advisors met for the second time on March 7 at six P.M. The Ministers of Foreign Affairs, War, Navy, Air, and Communications and the Chiefs of Staffs of the Army, Navy, and Air Force were present.<sup>16</sup> According to Gamelin's report there were "new theoretical discussions, but no one seemed oriented, at least immediately, toward forceful solutions, . . . and for the moment, the decision about calling the reserves was not taken." Gamelin indicated that he sought the opinions of all factions "in order to best determine what measures should be employed to complete the preparations for mobilization."<sup>17</sup> Since there was never any suggestion Germany would cross the frontier, Gamelin's concern about preparing for mobilization might indicate that the government was closer to military intervention than he willingly admitted.

At eight P.M., Flandin released a statement which contained nothing of importance. The first few paragraphs were devoted to exposing the duplicity of Hitler in pretending to be interested in a Franco-German rapprochement while preparing for the remilitarization of the Rhineland. The French asked of what value were German grievances if they would not risk submitting them to arbitration. Calling for a meeting of the Council of the League of Nations was the only specific action announced. Though the memorandum did not completely reject the German offer for negotiations, Flandin pointed out that any reconciliation based upon

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<sup>16</sup>Le Temps, March 9, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>17</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, p. 202.

Germany's unilateral denunciation of freely concluded treaties would be virtually impossible.<sup>18</sup>

The reaction of Great Britain was of crucial importance to the French. The first report from Corbin, the French ambassador in London, indicated the same sort of delaying tactic that had characterized the British attitude since the Stresa Conference. Eden thought that any action "leading to an irreparable engagement" should be postponed until the interested governments could consult together. He added that while Britain did not wish to hinder any measures which were judged necessary for French security, there could be no British decision until Monday. Corbin warned that there were elements in Hitler's proposals which were designed to seduce the British public and that there was no reason to follow a new mirage of negotiations which were preceded by a coup de main and the violation of treaties.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, silence from the British government would not help in directing public opinion toward resistance.<sup>20</sup> Corbin was instructed to insist that the signatories of Locarno meet in Paris by Monday.<sup>21</sup> However, Eden delayed the meeting as long as he could in order to further postpone action and excused himself on the grounds that the British public would not favor a meeting in Paris before the League had an opportunity to meet. He refused to come on Monday because he had to appear in Parliament; Tuesday was the

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<sup>18</sup>Le Temps, March 9, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>19</sup>Telegram, Corbin to Flandin, London, March 7, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 301, pp. 413-414.

<sup>20</sup>Telegram, Corbin to Flandin, London, March 7, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 316, pp. 426-427.

<sup>21</sup>Telegram, Corbin to Flandin, London, March 7, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 317, pp. 427-428.

first day he would come to Paris. Corbin thought that Eden wanted to plan the meeting so that he could spend the shortest time possible in Paris before leaving for Geneva.<sup>22</sup>

Belgium, the only Locarno power which was perhaps even more threatened than France, was also inclined toward League action. Although deeply disturbed, Paul van Zeeland, the Belgian Prime Minister, held the view that any serious military response would seem disproportionate in comparison to the reports of the small German forces involved. According to his interpretation, the remilitarization of the Rhineland did not constitute the "assembling of forces" which made immediate action necessary.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, neither Britain nor Belgium gave the support that the faltering French government wanted. Yet the Rhineland had always been essentially a French concern, and the decision to take military action alone against Germany could have best been made by the French alone on March 8. As time passed, France became more deeply committed to the British desire to avoid a confrontation. Since the German government had proudly announced the restoration of sovereignty in the Rhineland, waiting for the League to certify that a violation had occurred was superfluous and wasted valuable time. Yet the French government continued to hesitate.

At eight A.M. on March 8, Gamelin received the Minister of War in his office. Maurin thought that it would be necessary at the very least

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<sup>22</sup>Telegram, Corbin to Flandin, London, March 8, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 322, pp. 431-432.

<sup>23</sup>Telegram, LaRoche to Flandin, Brussels, March 7, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 302, pp. 414-415.

to recall the last contingent of soldiers that had been discharged, and authorized Gamelin to begin assembling troops already on active duty for railroad movement to the frontier. Since Gamelin's presence was not needed for the Council meeting that day, he spent the morning in conference with his staff and other military leaders.<sup>24</sup>

The main topic of their discussions was war with Germany. Gamelin opined that the land front would stabilize quickly, and then the Air Force would provide the only effective offense against Germany. Georges Durand-Viel, the Chief of Staff of the Navy, cautioned that after Germany was declared the aggressor by the League, the government would ask if the military was prepared to drive the Germans out, and they needed to have their answers and requirements ready. Gamelin was convinced that French intervention would mean war and that France could not enter the Rhineland without the other Locarno powers. Durand-Viel objected that England would not actually go to war for France and that there could not be any thought of coordinated action until the Italo-Ethiopian conflict was liquidated. Gamelin insisted that it would be necessary to send a general to Geneva where the technical questions of France's rights under the Treaty of Locarno would be discussed. He thought that it was necessary to "verify that British and Italian troops will come immediately into France and that we ourselves can go into Belgium." General Maurice Pujol of the Air Force suggested that it was more realistic to expect bombers rather than troops from Britain or or even Italy.<sup>25</sup> The military leaders were continuing plans for

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<sup>24</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, p. 202.

<sup>25</sup>Report from Abrail, Paris, March 8, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 334, pp. 444-446.



mobilization and an invasion of Germany with the supposition that they could wait until there was foreign assistance. Their expectation of foreign intervention was completely unrealistic, and their insistence on British help and total mobilization were key factors in causing the French government to hesitate and falter.

Meanwhile, the Council of Ministers convened its first official meeting after the German coup at 10 A.M. on March 8. Paul-Boncour, Flandin, and Zay are responsible for the only first-hand accounts of this important conference. Although their recollections varied, there is a general consensus that the meeting was the turning point in the decision to take the violation before the League and subsequently not to act against the Germans. The Foreign Minister was most critical of the lack of preparation, learning to his "profound amagement, that all that had been done was to move the troops which were to guard the Maginot Line into position and to send two divisions which had been stationed in the Rhône back to the Eastern border." He explained to the Council that he had informed the Secretary General of the League, "without losing one hour," that France wanted the Council to meet as soon as possible. He commented that informing the League was "unfortunately" an obligation that the British government thought was essential under the Treaty of Locarno.<sup>26</sup> For military intervention, Flandin thought that it would be necessary "to put a force of corresponding numbers in the field in order to go against Germany, . . . . certainly not more than 50,000." However, Maurin pointed out that for military intervention in

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<sup>26</sup>However, the French documents revealed that Flandin waited until 6:15 P.M. on March 8 to notify the League. Telegram, Flandin to Avenol, Paris, March 8, 1936, *ibid.*, Doc. No. 321, pp. 430-431.

the Rhineland the General Staff required general mobilization. Yet, according to Flandin, Maurin never demanded total mobilization. Flandin was convinced that mobilization was rejected because certain of his colleagues "were more concerned with elections than foreign policy. . . . In politics on the eve of an election, who wished to be the party of war." In retrospect, Flandin maintained that Sarraut, Mandel, Paul-Boncour, and himself were the only ones who favored immediate military action. "The Council advised waiting for domestic and foreign reactions before taking a decision."<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, the account by Paul-Boncour, who represented France at the League, paints Flandin as far more conciliatory and less resolute. According to his testimony, it was Paul-Boncour himself who urged bold action, declaring that France did not need to consult anyone "--not our Allies, not the League of Nations; we should have acted first." He concluded that "if total mobilization seemed necessary to the general staff and to the Minister of War, they had not foreseen anything else." Flandin presented his case for mobilization as if "his arm was in a sling after a serious accident," and ended with "I see, Monsieur President, that I must not insist." Paul-Boncour stated that

M. Sarraut, M. Mandel, M. Flandin, and I declared very clearly as partisans of military action; two other of our colleagues, MM. Guernut and Stern, approved of us; and the others testified by their declarations, by their reservations, or by their silence that they would be hostile, or that they saw grave inconveniences.<sup>28</sup>

Zay generally agrees with Paul-Boncour that Flandin was far from

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<sup>27</sup>Flandin, Politique française, pp. 198-199.

<sup>28</sup>Joseph Paul-Boncour, Entre deux guerres (New York, 1946), vol. III, pp. 30-36.

the champion of resolute action. Flandin, writes the Under-Secretary,

detailed all the possible action, from the most energetic to the most theoretical, from mobilization and entry into the Rhineland to a mere diplomatic protest by appealing to the League of Nations, without himself making any choice from among them.

Then, there was "a surprised silence," and the Service Ministers were asked their opinion. Maurin answered "in a stifled voice: 'The Foreign Minister talks of mobilization, of entering the Rhine. There are risks attached to this. . . . The present state of the French Army will not allow us to run risks.'" When asked about the reaction of foreign countries, Flandin "stressed the reserve of Britain and of Belgium, who were ready to collaborate with us in diplomatic action, but would not in any case agree to send their troops to support our own in an entry into the Rhineland." Zay testified that only Sarraut, Guernut, Deblos, and Mandel "spoke in favor of energetic action."<sup>29</sup>

Notwithstanding the discrepancies in the three accounts of the March 8 cabinet meeting, it remains clear that Flandin was remiss in presenting the case for intervention. If the military required total mobilization and eight days to respond to the remilitarization of the Rhineland, it should have been made clear before March 8 to the other members, who were apparently surprised at the military unpreparedness. It was impossible to imagine why France, whose army had the best reputation in Europe, needed eight days to do anything, while Germany, whose army was in a period of reorganization, could remilitarize the Rhineland in two days. For some reason which has not been revealed in the documents thus far published, French military intelligence had greatly

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<sup>29</sup>Jean Zay, Souvenirs et Solitude (Paris, 1945), pp. 65-67.

overestimated the response that was required. Probably a small French force that could have occupied the bridges on the Rhine or an expedition into the Saar would have caused the Germans to retreat.

After the Council meeting, an official communication was released. It stated briefly that Flandin had presented the latest intelligence, that the Council had judged the German memorandum to be unacceptable, and that a decision to submit the issue to the League and to consult with the other signatories of Locarno had been reached. The Minister of War announced that troop movements were confined to the frontier and that there was not yet any question of involving troops in the interior, indicating publicly that a decision to act against Germany had not been reached. It was also announced that the Navy and Air Force were preparing "measures complementary to the circumstances."<sup>30</sup>

The government's activities were completed on March 8 with a radio speech by Sarraut. According to Flandin, who wrote the speech, the purpose was "to galvanize French opinion and to impress foreign opinion." He thought that Sarraut approved the bellicose tone because "he sincerely wanted to find in the French people the resonance which would permit him to engage our military forces, that is to risk war."<sup>31</sup> The first part of the speech indicated the reasonable and conciliatory position that France had taken toward Germany. However, when Sarraut came to the German memorandum of March 7, the tone of the speech changed to defiance.

It is true that, in the document submitted yesterday to the French ambassador, the German government proposed, having

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<sup>30</sup> Le Temps, March 9, 1936, p. 8.

<sup>31</sup> Flandin, Politique française, p. 201.

violated their engagements, to contract anew. I will not examine their proposition for two reasons. First, because in a double example during the space of the last year, the German government, having given us the unilateral repudiation of solemn engagements, will not give us confidence in its new position. The second reason is still clearer: in defiance of the most certain rights, the German government has sent considerable forces into the demilitarized zone, and without having previously indicated its intention to rid itself of its obligations, without even having looked into entering negotiations on the subject. . . . There can be no more peace in Europe, there can be no more international relations if this method is generalized. . . . Speaking in the name of the French government, I declare that we intend to see this essential guarantee of French security maintained. . . . We are not disposed to leave Strasbourg placed under the fire of German cannons.<sup>32</sup>

Despite these defiant words, the French public did not rally to support any sort of action against Germany.

Even before Sarraut's speech, most editors remained calm, and no one unequivocally demanded military intervention. A survey of the opinion of the French press in Le Temps on March 8 gave little encouragement to those who wanted support for military action. Most papers observed objectively that the remilitarization was certainly a test of collective security and that economic sanctions or general mobilization could be invoked. Right wing editors made a point of not emphasizing the threat to France. Le Matin, a paper of the extreme Right, suggested that Hitler, in reoccupying the Rhineland, had shown France the "communist peril." Georges Bidault, in L'Aube, applauded Hitler for offering "a new Locarno." In L'Echo de Paris, Pertinax, a major spokesman for anti-appeasement sentiment in France, merely called for economic sanctions against Hitler.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Le Temps, March 10, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup>"L'Opinion de la presse française," *ibid.*, March 10, 1936, p. 2.

Following Sarraut's speech there was little change in the opinions expressed in French papers. In fact, he was criticized by the Right. François le Grix, in L'Ami du peuple, was alarmed by Sarraut's refusal to consider negotiations. He favored abandoning the treaty with the Soviets and opposed any sort of sanctions against Germany since it would lead to war. In another Rightist paper, Le Jour, Léon Bailby warned that "the government when it speaks will do well to weigh its words." He also thought that economic sanctions would lead to war and that France would be alone even if the League decided to apply sanctions. Charles Maurras, in L'Action Française, observed that "We do not have to march against Hitler with the Soviets. We do not have to march with Hitler against the Soviets." His message was clear; France did not have to fight.<sup>34</sup>

On the other hand, the Left, which had favored cooperation with the Soviet Union and the League, did not offer much support to the government either. In Le Populaire, the most important Socialist paper, Oreste Rosenfeld blamed the weak posture taken by the League during the Italo-Ethiopian conflict for encouraging Hitler to act. He thought that it was unrealistic to believe that Germany would accept the demilitarization seventeen years after the end of the war. On March 12, Léon Blum, the chief spokesman of the Socialists and the future leader of the Popular Front, called upon the Socialist Party to set an example of "composure (sang-froid), calmness, firmness, and reason."<sup>35</sup>

The papers published in areas that had the most to fear from

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<sup>34</sup>Ibid., March 10, 1936, p. 2.

<sup>35</sup>Quoted in Joel Colton, Léon Blum (New York, 1966), p. 122.

Germany were no more encouraging to the government than the Paris dailies. The editors of Le Journal d' Alsace et de Lorraine thought that Sarraut's speech would not help the negotiations since "this was not the hour for recriminations, but for retrospective and platonic considerations." Jean Knittel wrote in Les Dernières nouvelles de Strasbourg that "For us, the only choice which has any importance is to conserve the peace and to take measures in case the Fuhrer or his successors consider, on some fine day, that only war can safeguard the honor of Germany."<sup>36</sup>

The Rhineland crisis came at a time when the foreign policies of the French political parties were in a rather confused state. The Right had always been greatly concerned with French security and prestige, but their fear of Communism and an election victory by the Popular Front caused the Right to acquiesce to a serious threat to French security. The Left, which had supported sanctions against Italy, did not want to ruin their chances of being elected by becoming involved in a war with Germany. After World War II, Sarraut said that "no one wanted even the appearance of a dangerous foreign adventure."<sup>37</sup> Certainly, Maurras expressed the desire of many Frenchmen when he wrote that "There is only one public counsel to give the government of the Republic: Above all, not war!"<sup>38</sup>

In spite of the lack of resolution in Paris, Eden was still worried

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<sup>36</sup>"L'Opinion de la presse française," Le Temps, March 10, 1936, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup>Sarraut's testimony quoted in Edouard Bonnefous, Histoire de la troisième république (Paris, 1962), vol. V, p. 454.

<sup>38</sup>Charles Micaud, The French Right and Nazi Germany (Durham, N.C., 1943), p. 92.

that the French might take some drastic action. He gave his opinions in a note drafted for the Cabinet on March 7. He was certain that military action by France against Germany should be discouraged. It might be possible for the Locarno powers to call upon Hitler to evacuate the zone; however, this course should not be taken unless they were prepared to back their request with military force. He feared that the French public, if further irritated or frightened, might demand armed retaliation such as the reoccupation of the Saar. He calmly explained that "the reoccupation of the Rhineland had deprived us of a useful bargaining counter." Now it was clear that Hitler would repudiate any treaty "when it becomes inconvenient, and when Germany is sufficiently strong and the circumstances are otherwise favourable for doing so." As for tactics, he thought that Britain must agree to a formal condemnation of Germany by the League but resist any attempt to apply financial and economic sanctions.<sup>39</sup>

The first official statement from the British government was given by Eden in Commons on March 9. He emphasized that the Council of the League of Nations was the proper body to discuss the situation. The German offer for new negotiations was not completely rejected. Eden pointed out that

The abrogation of the Locarno Treaty and the occupation of the demilitarized zone have profoundly shaken confidence in any engagement into which the Government of Germany may in future enter. . . . One of the main foundations of the pact of Western Europe has been cut away, and if peace is to be secured there is a manifest duty to rebuild. It is in that spirit that we must approach the new proposals of the German Chancellor.

He was thankful to be able to say that there was "no reason to suppose

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<sup>39</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 387-388.



that the present German action implies a threat of hostilities." However, if there was an actual attack on France or Belgium, the British "notwithstanding the German repudiation of the Treaty, would regard themselves as in honour bound to come in the manner provided in the Treaty to the assistance of the country attacked."<sup>40</sup>

Finally, on March 10, the representatives of the four Locarno powers met in Paris to decide what they wanted to do in response to the German coup. Great Britain was represented by Eden, Lord Halifax, and Clerk; France by Flandin and Paul-Boncour; and Belgium by Van Zeeland. The Italian ambassador in Paris came as an observer, since Italy was still under League sanctions. Flandin opened the meeting with a forceful exposition of the French right to self-determination. He did not ask for the immediate assistance of Britain or Italy since "France was sure, with only its forces, to compel the German army to evacuate the territory which it had occupied in violation of treaties." He still maintained that the actions of Germany were "flagrant" and that the right to France to act was "incontestable." However, France, out of respect for British opinion, had already asked for a meeting of the Council of the League so that action could be taken with the shortest possible delay. He informed the conference that "At the same time, France has taken and is taking military measures preparing for the intervention which is thought to be indispensable." He clearly outlined the consequences that the fortification of the Rhineland would have if Germany remained unchecked. France would no longer be able to honor the obligations which it had contracted in the Covenant of the League

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<sup>40</sup>Anthony Eden, March 9, 1936, Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 5th Series, vol. CCCIX, col. 1806-1817.

in regard to Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Poland. In the future, France would be deprived of all possibility of exercising military pressure against Germany, and it would no longer be in a position to execute a mission of assistance in the case of unprovoked aggression. Not only the future security of France but also the territorial status quo of Europe was at stake. According to Flandin, France did not want to fail to meet the responsibility for European peace which it had accepted, "it was just that in taking these responsibilities, we benefited from the moral support of the powers guaranteeing the Treaty of Locarno."<sup>41</sup>

After Flandin's opening statement, Eden said that the Council of the League had to make all the decisions. Their meeting could only present the opportunity for a preliminary exchange of opinions. He commented that Flandin's statement was based on the "ill-founded" assumption that the League Council would endorse whatever decision the Locarno powers made. He thought that only the Locarno powers, not the other members of the League, could possibly have any responsibility to assist in military action. When asked whether the French government contemplated the Locarno Powers taking action by themselves, Flandin answered that it did, and then he prescribed a "successive series of sanctions, economic, financial, and military." Eden thought that the discussion was becoming more serious and he sought to determine French and Belgian intentions through a series of questions. When asked what Germany's attitude would be to the sanctions, both the Belgian and French Foreign Ministers said they were confident that Germany would yield. Flandin even added that the Italians could be persuaded to join

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<sup>41</sup>Flandin, Politique française, pp. 202-203.

if the sanctions against them were lifted. Halifax and Eden said that they did not think that economic and financial sanctions would be effective. Whereupon, "the French Ministers did not dissent, adding that it would be no use entering on this course unless we were ready to see it through to a successful end." When the British expressed surprise that the French public was ready to support military action, Flandin claimed that "even the most pacifist sections realized that everything was at stake."<sup>42</sup>

When Van Zeeland presented his prepared statement, he emphasized that Belgium would take any action that Britain and France joined. He supported the British in asking that France not "indulge in an isolated action." He did not share the French view that Germany had to evacuate the Rhineland before any negotiations could begin. Flandin still argued that "negotiations would end in nothing, or rather it would sanction a new abandonment; and this time, the abandonment would be decisive because it would generate a series of other abandonments."<sup>43</sup>

The meeting ended without any substantial accomplishment. In reflecting on the meeting, Eden admitted that the gravity of Flandin's statements exceeded anything that had been said before, yet he thought that the French were really looking for someone else to take the responsibility, "as the man who declares to spectators his intention of throwing himself over the cliff, hopefully glances at his coat-tails meanwhile."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 390-393.

<sup>43</sup>Flandin, Politique française, p. 204.

<sup>44</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 393-395.

The French lack of success in getting support against Germany was further confirmed in the communiqué issued by the Locarno powers after their meeting. It was announced that there would not be any resolutions or decisions made prior to the meeting of the Council of the League. The talks were suspended with the announcement that they would be continued in London on March 12 and that the League would meet there on March 14.<sup>45</sup>

In the afternoon, a statement of the government was read by Sarraut in the Chamber of Deputies and by Flandin in the Senate. Considerable attention was given to showing that the German coup was illegal, intolerable, and a threat to peace and collective security. However, since March 8 the government had retreated from Sarraut's refusal to negotiate. On March 10, the French government announced that it did not

reject negotiations which could consolidate the future peace and ameliorate Franco-German relations in the framework of a tranquil and peaceful Europe; but France cannot negotiate under the mastery of violence and the repudiation of signatures freely exchanged. . . . It remains ready to negotiate with Germany once the respect of international law has been newly assured.

In presenting the course for future action, the French practically gave up the right to independent action.

We are placing all our material and moral forces at the disposal of the League of Nations in order to avoid this irreparable disaster for European civilization, under the sole condition that we be accompanied in this fight for peace by those who are formally engaged by the Rhineland Pact and with the firm hope that all the signatories of the Covenant . . . would fight for the ideal to which they have declared their solidarity.<sup>46</sup>

After the government's statement, it was difficult to imagine that the

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<sup>45</sup> Le Temps, March 11, 1936, p. 8; March 12, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> Albert Sarraut, March 10, 1936, Débats, 1936, pp. 854-856.

French were still seriously entertaining any thought of moving alone against Germany.

Nevertheless, at the conclusion of the session in the Chamber of Deputies, Flandin asked Maurin to make a study "on the eventuality of taking pledges" in regard to the seizure of Sarrebruck and Kehl. Gamelin reported that his staff favored invading the Saar, but they were convinced that at least partial mobilization would be necessary.<sup>47</sup>

In the evening, Sarraut called what he described as "a secret Council of War."<sup>48</sup> The Service Ministers--Maurin, Déat, and Piétri--and their Chiefs of Staff--Gamelin, Pujo, and Durand-Viel--were invited "to decide the question of a military reply from France" and told to bring all the charts and plans that could be used. Sarraut was convinced that neither the British nor the Belgians would march, but he wanted to try one last time to see if there was the means of acting against Germany without total mobilization. Again, Maurin and Gamelin agreed that the elements of the French army on active duty could only take defensive action.<sup>49</sup> If the Germans resisted, Gamelin pointed out that the difficulties of taking a modern urban conglomerate were equal to attacking military fortifications. He suggested that the best route for an

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<sup>47</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, p. 204.

<sup>48</sup>There is some doubt about the date on which this meeting was held. In his post-war testimony, Sarraut was certain that it was held on March 9, but he also said that he called the meeting after he "no longer had any illusions about the evasive attitude of the cosignatories of Locarno." This would seem to indicate that the date was March 10 as given by Gamelin. Neither account gave any information about what attitude France should take when the Locarno powers met. This also would seem to indicate that the time was the evening of March 10 after the Locarno powers had met.

<sup>49</sup>Quoted in Bonnefous, Histoire de la troisième république, vol. V, pp. 454-455.

offensive action would be through Belgium--a plan which would certainly cause further delay and was not likely to have the support of the Belgian government. The representatives of the other armed services also emphasized the difficulties and the seriousness of France acting alone. If an invasion of Germany were attempted, Pujol and Durand-Viel added that the Air Force and Navy would also require total mobilization. Déat said, "We are prepared for war, but with the League of Nations." Piétri added, "It is necessary in every way to show that we have the right and that we do not appear as aggressors." In justifying the cautious stand taken by the military, Gamelin subsequently explained that "If we showed the obstacles to be overcome, it was not to discourage the taking of energetic resolutions, but in order to reveal what was called for."<sup>50</sup> Sarraut testified that it was after the declarations of the military that the decision "of acting not alone, but in accord with the cosignatories of Locarno" was taken. Three conclusions were then clear to him.

The first is the recognition that our soldiers on active duty could not stand against the very superior strength of the Germans. . . . The second is that our General Staff, even though alerted for a long time, was afflicted with ankylosis in the routines of the defensive, and did not dare to conceive or prepare . . . the effective instrument of immediate reply to Hitler's aggression. . . . And the third recognition, which became a precedent, is that our high military authorities, incapable of offensive movement or too timid to risk it, were already oriented toward a very simple, very serious, I was going to say, a lazy solution. . . .<sup>51</sup>

After the meeting, Sarraut instructed Gamelin to draw up a note which summarized their conclusions. His note concerning operations against Germany was finished on March 11 and submitted to Sarraut by

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<sup>50</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, pp. 204-208.

<sup>51</sup>Quoted in Bonnefous, Histoire de la troisième république, vol. V, p. 455.

Maurin. His first conclusion was the key to Germany's success; he thought that it was evident that all operations against Germany must be done with the League and Locarno powers in order not to give the impression of aggression by France. The easiest and safest operations were thought to be through the Saar or along the Moselle River, but these could only be initiated eight days after the decision was made. The German response to an invasion of the Rhineland could be an attack on Belgium, an aerial action against Paris, an attack by submarines, or simply the bombardment of French cities on the Rhine. Gamelin said that Maurin was convinced after his talk with Sarraut that the measures foreseen in the note would be taken, yet the decision never came.<sup>52</sup>

Consequently, by March 10, France had all but irretrievably lost the opportunity of forcing the German army from the Rhineland. There was never an actual decision to concede to the Germans, although the French arrived at the same position by default. Much of the responsibility for France's inaction must be assigned to the military. Gamelin protested that he and Maurin never demanded total mobilization and that they, therefore, should not be blamed for discouraging the government. However, since 1919, the French army had been led in accordance with the supposition that there would be nothing less than total war in Europe, and the French military did not seem to have anything to offer without total mobilization. Given the serious consequences of the remilitarization of the Rhineland, the military could be more easily absolved from blame if they had demanded total mobilization. Even though there had been considerable warning, the military did not inform the

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<sup>52</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, pp. 208-209.

government that they would require eight days and total mobilization to reply to the Germans. Simple lack of preparation and poor communications within the government must be considered as a factor contributing to French hesitation and inaction.

Furthermore, the lack of zeal on the part of the military leaders and their insistence that total mobilization was required for any offensive action had a depressing effect on the civilian members of the government. Still, there was some merit in Gamelin's assertion that the decision was for the government and not its soldiers to make. The French were further stymied by the legal safeguards they had constructed for themselves. There was no real reason to wait for the Council of the League of Nations to certify that a violation of the demilitarized zone had been committed, but the British could not be persuaded that there was a flagrant violation which required immediate action. While the British attitude was of primary importance in the considerations of the French government, the demilitarized zone existed because of French, not British, insistence; it was unrealistic to expect the British to involve themselves as deeply as the French. Although the Sarraut government had come to power during a brief flurry of anti-appeasement, the French people were truly not prepared to accept the inevitability of war with Germany. It was not surprising that politicians facing election were overly concerned about catering to public sentiment. That civilian members of the government were not prepared to ignore the advice of the military, the wishes of Belgium and Britain, and the will of the people was understandable, albeit, under the circumstances, unfortunate.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE MASK OF PEACE

When the meeting of the Locarno powers in Paris failed to reach any decision to act against Germany, it was all but inevitable that the Rhineland crisis would become nothing more than a series of pointless negotiations. Despite the legal correctness of the French position, Hitler was determined not to let the meetings of the Locarno powers and the Council of the League of Nations deprive the German point of view of publicity. On March 10, he granted an interview to Ward Price, a correspondent for the Daily Mail. He was mainly concerned with amplifying his peace proposals and covered many of the points that had been raised in his speech to the Reichstag on March 7. Britain was invited to come forward as the "honest broker" to aid in the solution of the problems between France and Germany. When questioned about the size of the forces in the Rhineland, Hitler interjected that "there can be no question of the concentration of armed forces for offensive purposes because Germany has no further claims to make from France." In regard to world public opinion, Hitler predicted that "the verdict of posterity . . . will not contest that it was more honourable and right to make an end of a state of tension which had become intolerable . . . ." <sup>1</sup>

Perhaps taking the request for an honest broker seriously, Eden

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<sup>1</sup>DIA, 1936, pp. 57-61.

sent for the German ambassador, Leopold von Hoesch, after the British Cabinet meeting on March 11. As a contribution to European peace, Eden asked that Germany withdraw all but a symbolic number of troops and agree not to build any fortifications while negotiations were in progress. The German reply, which Eden did not think was a "sufficient contribution," merely offered not to increase the number of German troops along the border on the condition that France and Belgium do the same. The issue of fortifications was not mentioned, but the German government refused to "enter into a discussion with regard to a lasting or provisional limitation of the German sovereignty in the Rhineland territory."<sup>2</sup> It was clear that Hitler was feeling less uneasy about his gamble and not much inclined to make concessions to the faltering Locarno powers as they met in London.

Going to London was a diplomatic setback for the French and, recognizing it as such, Flandin complained that "we found ourselves in a situation specifically hostile to our views." According to the observations of the French Foreign Minister, the British people were "literally enraptured" by the peace incentives Hitler had calculated for them and "France was treated as the habitual troublemaker for true peace."<sup>3</sup> Although Flandin was still trying to find some way to get the Germans out of the Rhineland, the London milieu had its effect on him also. Upon arriving, he told Winston Churchill that he intended to demand the mobilization of all British forces and that he had the support of all the nations in the Little Entente and other states. According to

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<sup>2</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 397-399; London Times, March 13, 1936, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup>Flandin, Politique française, p. 205.

Churchill, Flandin spoke valiantly:

The whole world and especially the small nations today turn their eyes towards England. If England will lead now, she can lead Europe. . . . It is your last chance. . . . France cannot guarantee Czechoslovakia any more because that will become geographically impossible. If you do not maintain the Treaty of Locarno, all that will remain to you is to await a rearmament by Germany, against which France can do nothing. If you do not stop Germany by force today, war is inevitable, even if you make a temporary friendship with Germany. As for myself, I do not believe that friendship is possible between France and Germany; the two countries will always be in tension. Nevertheless, if you abandon Locarno, I shall change my policy, for there will be nothing else to do.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of Flandin's warning, the British did not rally to the support of France.

During the afternoon and evening of March 12, the Foreign Ministers of the Locarno powers met to determine what views they would present to the Council of the League. Flandin had been instructed to demonstrate the consequences that weakness would have on other western nations. Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania, and Czechoslovakia supported France; but if Hitler was successful, they would alter their foreign policies accordingly. Anxiety was high in Austria, where the French ambassador had been told, "The next time, it will be our turn." Likewise, the Scandinavian countries, especially Denmark, were uneasy. According to the note drafted by the French Foreign Office, "The question this moment is whether Europe will be German or not."<sup>5</sup> Eden confessed to being surprised at the strength of the opening French statement. It seemed that Flandin specifically wanted to avoid the ambiguity and uncertainty

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<sup>4</sup>Winston Churchill, The Second World War, vol. I, The Gathering Storm (London, 1948), p. 195.

<sup>5</sup>Note for the Minister, Paris, March 12, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 407, p. 525.

that had made the Locarno agreements vulnerable to Hitler's action; therefore, he recommended that the Council of the League persuade Germany to withdraw its troops from the Rhineland while negotiations were in progress. Flandin wanted it known from the beginning that the new negotiations must end in a treaty with guarantees much more automatic than those in the Locarno Pact. As Eden understood Flandin's presentation, the French might recognize the right of Germany to have troops in the Rhineland at a later date, but they were not willing to negotiate toward accepting German fortifications. Eden thought that the French statement could lead to an agreement, and Van Zeeland took the responsibility of drafting a resolution which could be discussed.<sup>6</sup> At the end of the meeting, the Locarno powers issued a communiqué which recognized that the reoccupation of the demilitarized zone by Germany constituted a clear violation of Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles and of the Treaty of Locarno.<sup>7</sup>

On Friday, the representatives of the Locarno powers met twice. Apparently, Flandin was considering a retreat from the strong stand he had taken, since he telephoned Paris to ask what requests France should make if negotiations were started without the evacuation of the Rhineland.<sup>8</sup> However, by the time Van Zeeland presented his memorandum, Paul-Boncour, the French representative to the League, had arrived and did not seem pleased. In fact, he was staggered by how far the discussions had strayed from French public opinion, which he interpreted as

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<sup>6</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 399-400.

<sup>7</sup>London Times, March 13, 1936, p. 14.

<sup>8</sup>Report on the Meeting in the Office of General Georges, Paris, March 13, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 425, pp. 549-552.

requiring the complete withdrawal of German forces.<sup>9</sup> Eden argued that it would not be sensible to sacrifice lives to accomplish this, if France was planning to accept the principle of negotiating for the withdrawal of German forces and then allowing the return of full sovereignty. Again, Flandin presented the argument that economic and financial sanctions might still be effective, but the British would not agree. Finally, Flandin remarked that he must at least have some new guarantees so that he could have something to present to the French public.<sup>10</sup> Although the Locarno powers continued meeting, their failure to reach a definite decision before the Council of the League began meeting was another diplomatic setback for the French.

When the Council of the League finally met on March 14, the first day was spent in discussing the admission of a German representative and in hearing statements from the French and Belgian delegates. Flandin's statement emphasized that the French had the right "to take strong and decisive measures forthwith," but they had refrained in order not to further disturb the European situation. France was resolved to commit all its forces, "both material and moral, to help . . . overcome one of the most serious crisis in the history of peace and of its collective organization." He repeated that France was willing to let the Permanent Court at The Hague decide if the Treaty of Locarno and the

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<sup>9</sup>On March 12, Le Temps had featured a categorical denial that France would accept the limitation of the number of German troops in the Rhineland and no fortifications as a solution to the crisis. Le Temps, March 12, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 400-401. The memoirs of Flandin and Paul-Boncour give very few details of the meetings between the Locarno powers in London. Therefore, it is necessary to rely almost entirely upon a British account.

Franco-Soviet Pact were in conflict. He appeared to be still considering some sort of military action against Germany when he stressed that the authors of the Treaty of Versailles had not intended to make

any difference between an attack on national territory and a deliberate and large-scale violation of the zone. In asking that the violation should be recognized, the French government simply asks that the law should be applied. Once this has been done, it will be for the guarantors to furnish France and Belgium with the assistance provided for in the Treaty.<sup>11</sup>

Van Zeeland agreed with Flandin's statement, but he confined his remarks specifically to the problems which concerned Belgium. He delivered an eloquent plea in behalf of the small nation which was not directly concerned with the Franco-Soviet Pact.

You will realize that anxiety is being experienced by no country more acutely than by Belgium. No country is more affected by Germany's action than Belgium. . . . The demilitarization of the Rhineland constituted one of the essential elements of the system for our security, for, in proportion to the forces of the various countries, Belgium has the longest and most exposed common frontier with Germany.

For Belgium, the Locarno Pact still existed. Van Zeeland maintained that "The purpose of pacts of this kind is precisely to protect those of its signatories which remain faithful against those which may be unfaithful."<sup>12</sup>

After the meeting of the League Council, the ministers of the Locarno powers met briefly at the Foreign Office. Flandin reported that the French government could not agree to begin discussions on Van Zeeland's memorandum because it seemed to indicate the acceptance of German troops in the Rhineland and negotiation without some sort of

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<sup>11</sup>DIA, 1936, pp. 82-85.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., pp. 85-87.

compensation.<sup>13</sup> Apparently, Flandin did not present the full text of his government's reply to his question about what supplementary guarantees France would require if negotiations were begun without the full evacuation of the Rhineland. He was told that France must have the commitment of the total means of the Locarno powers for land, air, and naval action at its disposal and British and Italian detachments in France and Belgium as a supplementary guarantee "in order to materialize their solidarity and their will for cooperation."<sup>14</sup> Although Flandin ultimately was able to obtain acquiescence from Britain and Italy for an international force to occupy a part of the Rhineland within Germany, he merely said at this time that France rejected Van Zeeland's proposals and that he would prepare a paper which showed French requirements for security. Therefore, Eden's charge that Flandin had fallen into a confusing policy of saying one thing when speaking to the Locarno powers and quite another when speaking to his own government does seem to have some validity.<sup>15</sup>

While the Locarno powers were trying to decide what could be done about the German coup, Hitler started campaigning on March 12 at Karlsruhe in the Rhineland, where he told an enthusiastic audience that "nothing will induce us to renounce this regained sovereignty over the Rhineland zone."<sup>16</sup> His second campaign speech in Munich on March 15

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<sup>13</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, p. 401; London Times, March 16, 1936, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup>Report on the Meeting in the Office of General Georges, Paris, March 13, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, pp. 449-452.

<sup>15</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 401-404.

<sup>16</sup>London Times, March 13, 1936, p. 14.

dealt even more incisively with foreign affairs and the remilitarization of the Rhineland. He could not pass up the opportunity to flaunt his refusal to make some concession, as Eden had requested:

Many people come to me now and say, 'Herr Hitler, why do you not make a gesture?' They talk of gestures! But I have done something which is worth a thousand gestures. I have put forward a scheme which will ensure the peace of Europe for the next twenty-five years, by giving security to France, Belgium, and Holland. We will not suffer Germany to be all the time hauled before international Courts, particularly when we are definitely in the right.<sup>17</sup>

Although Hitler had never shown any particular interest in presenting his case to an international tribunal, the question of the participation of the German government in the discussions of the Council had arisen as early as March 9. At that time, the Secretary General had sent a copy of the French request for a meeting of the Council to the German government and added that he wanted to be told if the German government wished to participate. In a secret meeting on March 14, the Council decided to invite Germany to take part in the discussions. France, according to Flandin, demanded the "immediate verification of the violation" and then would not oppose hearing from Germany. In his opinion, inviting Germany was merely a means of gaining time, an integral part of Britain's plan.<sup>18</sup> On March 15, the German government replied that it was prepared to accept the invitation of the Council only if assured that the German representative would participate on equal terms with the members of the League and that negotiations on the German proposals would begin "forthwith." The Council replied that Germany could participate on the same terms as Belgium and France, but it could

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., March 16, 1936, p. 12.

<sup>18</sup> Flandin, Politique française, pp. 205-206.



not give any assurances about future negotiations.<sup>19</sup>

While waiting for the issue of German participation to be decided, the French and Belgian governments presented a resolution which asked the Council to find that Germany had committed a breach of the Treaties of Versailles and Locarno and to instruct the Secretary-General to notify the signatory powers of this finding without delay.<sup>20</sup>

The discussion of this draft resolution began on March 17 and consisted only of statements which agreed that the violation existed and that all nations must be concerned about developing a new basis for international confidence and security. In speaking for Russia, Maxim Litvinov gave the strongest criticism of Germany that was heard during the debate on the Franco-Belgian resolution. Not only did he reject Hitler's reasons for the remilitarization of the Rhineland, but he also completely rejected the sincerity of the German peace proposals. He condemned the offer of nonaggression pacts as an attempt at "the localization of war." To Litvinov, the German memorandum of March 7 represented "a new attempt to divide Europe into two or more parts, with the object of guaranteeing nonaggression for one part of Europe in order to acquire a free hand in dealing with other parts." In conclusion, Litvinov indicated that his government was ready to take part in all measures proposed to the Council by the Locarno powers.<sup>21</sup> The Chilean representative announced that unless the Council asked the Permanent

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<sup>19</sup>"Extraordinary Session of the Council, Denunciation by Germany of the Locarno Treaty," The Monthly Summary of the League of Nations (Geneva, 1936), vol. XVI, no. 3 (March, 1936), p. 77.

<sup>20</sup>London Times, March 17, 1936, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., March 18, 1936, p. 9.

Court for an advisory opinion before taking a vote, he would abstain.<sup>22</sup>

On March 18, the representatives of Britain, Italy, Poland, Spain, Argentina, Denmark, Romania, and Portugal spoke. For the French, Eden's statement was probably the most important and the most disappointing; his emphasis on conciliation certainly was in contrast to Litvinov's speech. While characterizing the remilitarization of the Rhineland as "a patent and incontestable breach of the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles," he stressed that recreating international confidence was really the object of the Council. Rather than asking that action be taken against Germany which would restore Hitler's respect for collective security, he said that "international confidence can only be restored if each nation that has the power to do so will make a constructive contribution to this end." Eden found two advantages in the situation. The first was that immediate action was not necessary: "We happily have time in which to endow our action with the prudence, as well as the determination, which the situation requires." Secondly, the situation brought an opportunity to "reconstruct international life on the basis of undertakings above the signatures of those assuming them."<sup>23</sup>

As the power which shared with Britain the responsibility for guaranteeing the Treaty of Locarno, Italy was still under League sanctions for its invasion of Ethiopia and not especially concerned about being cooperative. Although Dino Grandi, the Italian ambassador in Britain, affirmed his country's obligations under the Treaty of Locarno, he drew

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<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., March 19, 1936, p. 16.

the attention of the Council to the "contradiction which exists between the position of a country subjected to sanctions and the duties of a guarantor Power."<sup>24</sup> Italy was still participating in the discussions which the Locarno powers were holding while the Council was meeting, but Grandi assumed the role of an observer, rather than actually joining in the efforts to find a new settlement for European security.

While the discussion of the Franco-Belgian resolution was underway in the Council, Germany agreed to accept the invitation to give its views to the Council on an equal basis with the nations which were members. Accordingly, Joachim von Ribbentrop was sent as a special emissary from Hitler to lead the German delegation to the Council. Although Flandin had wanted the vote of the Council to be taken before hearing from Germany, Ribbentrop spoke on the morning of March 19 and the vote was taken in the afternoon. The German statement followed the same lines that Hitler had taken on March 7, citing the many peace proposals and sacrifices that had been made by Germany and stressing Germany's willingness to conclude a lasting settlement.<sup>25</sup>

When the vote on the Franco-Belgian resolution was taken, thirteen nations voted for the resolution, Chile abstained, Ecuador was absent, and Germany voted against the resolution. Thus, the Council had fulfilled its responsibility for judging Germany's action, but Hitler had never been impressed by League resolutions. Ribbentrop offered a formal protest which assured the Council that their decision would not be

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., March 20, 1936, p. 9.

ratified by history.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, the parallel discussions that the Locarno powers had been conducting were completed later the same evening. Since none of the participants wrote a detailed account, it is impossible to trace their daily progress. However, both Flandin and Eden have left their general impressions and descriptions of some specific incidents. As the French Foreign Minister recalled, he lost "any illusions" about the attitude of the British government at the time of a private conversation with the Prime Minister.<sup>27</sup> Although Stanley Baldwin explained that he understood little of foreign affairs, he believed that he could interpret the feelings of the British people and they wanted peace. Flandin responded that

France is not trying to draw Great Britain into war. She would assume, alone, all the charges and all the risks of the operation which would be no more than a simple police operation. And, having been informed in the interval, that the German troops had received orders to retreat if they came against French resistance . . . all that we ask is that we have freedom.

Despite the truth of Flandin's argument, Baldwin still insisted that if there was even one chance in a hundred that war would follow from the French police action, he did not have the right to commit the British who were "not in a state for going to war."<sup>28</sup> Flandin concluded that

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<sup>26</sup>Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>27</sup>The date of this conversation is unclear. It could have been after a dinner that Baldwin gave on March 14. There could be some reason to doubt Flandin's word in this case because Baldwin surely would have told Eden who does not mention it in his account.

<sup>28</sup>Eden partially verified this point by reporting that the government had been informed by the Chiefs of Staff on March 12 that if there was any risk of war, total mobilization would be necessary and that all forces would have to be withdrawn from the Mediterranean. Eden, Facing the Dictators, p. 400.

if he persisted, there would be a break between France and Great Britain, and he decided that a defensive alliance would be better since the Treaty of Locarno would probably be lost in the commotion resulting from a police action. Therefore, he was determined not to be "contented with a vague, imprecise guarantee, subject to the delays of the League of Nations." His refusal to compromise on the question of military agreements, according to Flandin, led to his threatening to leave for Paris several times, but he finally got the military commitment that he wanted from Britain.<sup>29</sup>

Eden's report of Flandin's behavior in London is somewhat different. Citing Flandin's duplicity on several occasions, he complained that the French Foreign Minister had adopted the policy of agreeing in private with one British delegate, then taking the opposite view in a conference. For example, Flandin was said to have admitted in a private conversation with Neville Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, that he recognized that Britain could not agree to sanctions against Germany. Then, two days later on March 18, he asked for sanctions against Germany and argued that France could not continue sanctions against Italy unless they were also applied to Germany. At this time, the British replied that the League did not have the responsibility of enforcing sanctions against Germany. When Flandin insisted that he was thinking of an economic sanction, such as refusing to allow German ships in the ports of Locarno powers, Eden countered that the text of the French proposals went far beyond financial sanctions.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Flandin, Politique française, pp. 207-208.

<sup>30</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, p. 400.

There is clearly a question of the vigor that Flandin used in attempting to get British approval of a police action against Germany. From Eden's admission, it appeared that Flandin did at least try, though perhaps not consistently. Churchill, who was not a member of the government at this time, but saw Flandin frequently, thought that the honor and bravery shown by the French Foreign Minister during the anxious week he spent in London more than compensated for his "subsequent lapses."<sup>31</sup> Although Flandin certainly shared the responsibility for the initial hesitation of the French government, after that mistake had been made he probably did as well as anyone could have in London.

The product of Flandin's efforts was a series of proposals which Eden submitted to the League in behalf of the Locarno powers and draft letters from Britain and Italy to France and Belgium. Although it was not even certain that the proposals would be approved by the four remaining Locarno governments, much less Germany, Flandin claimed that he could return to France with an accomplishment that was worthy of honor.<sup>32</sup>

The proposals from the Locarno governments indicated that they agreed that nothing had changed their commitment to the Treaty of Locarno. Germany was asked not to increase the number of troops, to suspend fortifications, to allow an international force to patrol a twenty-kilometer zone, and to submit the dispute to The Hague. If Germany accepted these restrictions, the Locarno powers were willing to discuss the twenty-five year nonaggression pacts proposed by Germany

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<sup>31</sup>Churchill, The Second World War, vol. I, pp. 197-198.

<sup>32</sup>Flandin, Politique française, p. 210.

and the revision of the status quo in the Rhineland. During the negotiations, the powers agreed to insist that fortifications be limited or prohibited in a zone which would be determined within Germany. They were also prepared to hold an international conference to discuss economic relations, arms limitation, German reentry into the League, and nonaggression pacts for Germany's eastern neighbors. Furthermore, in order to reaffirm their "scrupulous respect for all treaty obligations," they planned to instruct their General Staffs to begin "arranging the technical conditions in which the obligations which are binding upon them should be carried out in the case of an unprovoked aggression." From all the proposals made by the Locarno powers, these General Staff conversations were clearly the most important issue in France, Belgium, Britain, and Germany.<sup>33</sup>

In addition to these proposals, the Locarno powers had also attached two annexes to the draft agreement. A resolution proposed by the Locarno powers for the approval of the League Council asked that the proposals be recognized by the Council and enlisted its aid in accomplishing the recommendations that had been made. The second annex was a proposed letter from Britain and Italy which gave several assurances to France and Belgium if the proposed negotiations failed. The most important assurances were the promise to take "all practical measures available . . . for the purpose of ensuring the security" of France and Belgium "against unprovoked aggression" and the continuation of contact between their General Staffs.<sup>34</sup> The governments of Britain,

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<sup>33</sup>The Monthly Summary of the League of Nations, vol. XVI, no. 3, pp. 93-94.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., pp. 94-95.

France, and Belgium approved the entire set of proposals almost immediately, but the Italian government did nothing.

The failure of Italy to support these proposals had a very depressing effect on the Council of the League, which had adjourned after receiving the report from Eden. When the Council reconvened on March 24, it was obvious that Italy was planning to withhold its approval. In addition, Colonel Józef Beck, the Polish Foreign Minister, argued against such universal proposals from a limited group of European powers and reserved the opinion of his government. Facing these difficulties, the Council passed a resolution which thanked Eden for his communication of the proposals and declared that "any further action . . . should remain in abeyance for the present, in view of the conversations which are being carried on." The adoption of this resolution ended participation by the League and left the Locarno powers to find the best settlement they could.<sup>35</sup>

On March 20, Eden, Flandin, and Van Zeeland gave a report on their negotiations to their respective legislatures. In order to allay fears that Britain was too deeply committed to the defense of France, Eden explained that Britain was only

. . . joining in a reaffirmation of our Locarno obligations and . . . arranging for contacts between the General Staffs of the guarantor Powers and those of France and Belgium. I need hardly say that the sole object of these conversations would be to meet the possibility of any unprovoked aggression.

The main objective of the British government had been "to restore confidence in international law and create conditions in which an effort may

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<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 82; Le Temps, March 25, 1936, p. 1; March 26, 1936, p. 1.



be made to rebuild European stability," and for that purpose, it had been necessary "to bridge the gap in time which will . . . enable negotiations for the re-establishment of a system of security in Europe to be effectually undertaken and carried to a conclusion." If the proposed negotiations failed, Eden said that Britain and Italy would address letters to France and Belgium "indicating what their position in that event would be." Since Eden's statement was made on the motion for adjournment, no debate followed.<sup>36</sup>

In spite of Eden's assurances to the contrary, British commitments sounded more serious when they were reviewed in Brussels and Paris. Van Zeeland observed that it was the first time in history that the British government had said what it would do in the case of certain hypothetical situation before that situation was realized. Although he admitted that France and Belgium had made serious concessions for this commitment, he hoped that their proposals would be successful and that when the status of the Rhineland was revised, German troops would be withdrawn completely. If Germany refused to begin negotiations, he still hoped that Belgium would be in a more secure position, since the support of Britain and France had been reinforced.<sup>37</sup>

After voting in favor of the Franco-Belgian resolution in the League, Flandin had flown back to Paris on March 19 so that he could present his report before Eden released the results of their discussions to the League. The Council of Ministers met from nine to eleven-thirty and then released a statement which said that they approved "the account

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<sup>36</sup>Anthony Eden, March 20, 1936, Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 5th Series, vol. CCCX, col. 842-850.

<sup>37</sup>London Times, March 20, 1936, p. 11.

of the results of the negotiations."<sup>38</sup> Although Eden, worried about public reaction, had asked Flandin not to insist on the agreement with Britain, the French Foreign Minister tried to make this commitment sound as important as their military alliance before World War I.<sup>39</sup>

On the next day, Flandin explained the government's reasons for accepting the proposals of March 19. Although the restoration of the demilitarization of the Rhineland was preferable, that could have been realized only if the Locarno powers could have agreed to apply sufficient pressure on Berlin, and he was soon convinced that such an agreement could not be reached. To those who thought that the results of the negotiations were insufficient, Flandin said that the enforcement of economic sanctions instead of the use of military power would have been very difficult for an already vulnerable economy and would not have had the agreement of Britain and Belgium. If France had insisted on military action or economic sanctions, the support of the other Locarno powers would have been lost. "Therefore, we preferred to support a system of moderate propositions; an invitation was made to Germany: if she accepts, it will open . . . new perspectives for the consolidation of European peace." The restrictions Germany was asked to accept would "prove that the rule of international law had prevailed," and negotiations would not be opened with Germany "until she has expressly accepted all the preliminary conditions, which form an indivisible whole." Greatly exaggerating the results of his efforts in London, Flandin was able to find "great improvement" in French security.

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<sup>38</sup> Le Temps, March 20, 1936, p. 8; March 21, 1936, p. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Flandin, Politique française, pp. 209-210.

The four other signatory Powers have affirmed on March 19 that Locarno still exists. . . . Nothing has changed unless it is that, by reason of the German repudiation, henceforth and until the treaty has been regularly abrogated, the guarantees which the treaties provided in favor of Germany, France, and Belgium will apply to France and Belgium only.

While depreciating the danger inherent in the presence of German troops in the Rhineland, he referred to the British military commitment as if it were absolutely certain.

In so far as the entry of German forces into the demilitarized zone created, if not a threat, at least the possibility of a future threat, it was important that the action of the guarantors could be taken rapidly and thus more efficaciously. In full agreement with the Belgian delegation, the French delegation insisted upon drawing up at once agreements to ensure the application of the military guarantees, since in the absence of such agreements, there might be delay in furnishing the promised assistance when the occasion arose.

Flandin was certainly premature in announcing that "the Government brings to you, after the days which have been weighed down with agony, the consolidation of peace."<sup>40</sup> What he actually brought were proposals which might have resulted in the consolidation of peace if they were ever accepted. The value which he ascribed to the commitment from Britain was hardly definite, since the British had just demonstrated that they could fail to act in accordance with their assurances.

Although Flandin's confidence was later shown to be ill-considered, there was not much criticism of the policy he had arranged for France. At the close of his address, three-fourths of the Deputies gave him a standing ovation. There was no debate, but a short statement was presented in support of the government by Robert Schuman, the President of the Commission for Alsace-Lorraine and the Deputy from Thionville.

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<sup>40</sup>Pierre-Etienne Flandin, March 20, 1936, Débats, 1936, pp. 1063-1065.

Speaking for those Frenchmen who were "under the fire of German cannons," he rejected all "political adventures" and "any hostility against Germany." Then following the example of the Senate,<sup>41</sup> the Chamber of Deputies voted 351 to 200 in favor of adjourning until June 1.<sup>42</sup> Clearly, most members of Parliament did not want to damage their own prospects at the polls by criticizing the government and thus appear eager for war with Germany.

Flandin's speech and his conduct of foreign affairs was reviewed favorably in most papers, but some had misgivings about the possibility of negotiating with Hitler. The ovation that Flandin received from the Chamber of Deputies was hailed in Le Petit Parisien as "a most touching testimonial for the gratitude of a nation." The readers of Le Matin were asked, "What better proof of the confidence of the Chamber could be given than their suspension of work at an hour as difficult in our history?" Georges Bidault, in L'Aube, doubted the success that had been claimed, although he admitted that Flandin had probably achieved all that could have been hoped.

That which, after 'the days heavy with agony,' M. P.-E. Flandin brought back from London, is, finally, the restriction of a Franco-British alliance. . . . But there was no other solution possible in the situation, other than accepting France alone in the face of Germany--the duel or the duet.

In Le Jour, Léon Bailby predicted that French diplomacy would not cease retreating, since any new settlement would have the same germ for

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<sup>41</sup>On March 12, the Senators had cast 231 votes in favor of ratifying the Franco-Soviet Treaty with 52 abstentions. After the remilitarization of the Rhineland, many Senators who had been opposed to an alliance with Russia decided that it was best to give the appearance of unity.

<sup>42</sup>Robert Schuman, March 20, 1936, Débats, 1936, p. 1065; Le Temps, March 22, 1936, pp. 3,4.

disillusion.<sup>43</sup> Although few journalists were optimistic about the British guarantee, there was not much criticism of the policy the government had followed. Perhaps the French people had unconsciously given up any idea of protecting Eastern Europe when the Maginot Line was built--that is, if they ever really wanted anything other than a defensive foreign policy. Now that France had, in theory, lost the ability to deliver a crushing blow against Germany in the Rhineland, there was not much public concern about Eastern Europe. In case such criticism came, the British and French governments were announcing at every opportunity that the proposals they had made did not neglect the security of the East.

On March 24, the German government made its first official reply to the proposals which the Locarno powers had presented on March 19. Ribbentrop returned to London with a memorandum restating the opinion of the German government and rejecting the Locarno proposals on the grounds that they were "based on a new discrimination which is intolerable." Nevertheless, the German government was willing to comply with the British request and present new proposals after the elections.<sup>44</sup> In the private conversations that followed the delivery of the note, Eden said that Ribbentrop reacted violently to the mention of Staff talks, and even had the "impudence" to say that he hoped the prospect of Staff talks would not be mentioned to Parliament.<sup>45</sup> According to the German interpreter,

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<sup>43</sup>"Revue de la presse," Le Temps, March 22, 1936, p. 4.

<sup>44</sup>London Times, March 25, 1936, p. 16.

<sup>45</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, p. 406.

The phrase 'staff talks' to Ribbentrop at that time was like a red rag to a bull. He felt instinctively that concrete military agreements between England and France would be a very high price to pay for the militarization of the Rhineland.<sup>46</sup>

Ignoring Ribbentrop's admonition, Eden devoted considerable time to responding to criticism of the Staff talks and the British guarantee when he spoke to the House of Commons on March 26. France and Belgium had the right to request that sanctions be invoked and that the severity of the sanctions be increased until the German troops were withdrawn from the Rhineland. Since such a request had been made at the beginning of the crisis and Eden was "not prepared to be the first British Foreign Secretary to go back on a British signature," the agreement reached by the Locarno powers had to be supported as compensation "for the loss of security suffered by France and Belgium." He maintained that Britain already had clear obligations under the Treaty of Locarno and that therefore "the only question that can be at issue is whether or not you are prepared to make arrangements to carry out those obligations should the need arise." The staff conversations were "only for the purpose of obligations under the Locarno Treaty," and there was a clear distinction between "staff conversations for a specific and limited purpose now and those conversations in the years before 1914."<sup>47</sup> After Eden's speech several members of the Labour Party questioned the propriety of setting the greater criminal to catch the lesser one by stationing Italian troops in the Rhineland. In addition, there were those who feared that Britain was seeking peace in the West at the expense of the East.

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<sup>46</sup>Schmidt, Hitler's Interpreter, p. 45.

<sup>47</sup>Anthony Eden, March 26, 1936, Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 5th Series, vol. CCCX, col. 1439-1453.

However, the majority of the members of all parties were willing to accept the general principles which Eden had outlined, although some of the details were still open to question.

The next move in what was becoming a chess game of proposals and counterproposals was left to the German people, who were prepared to do what Hitler expected of them. When they went to the polls on March 29, the majority could sincerely vote in favor of securing equal rights for Germany, but the method of the election made it difficult for them to do anything else. The only means of voting against the Nazi party required defacing the ballot and probably could not be kept secret. Nevertheless, the importance of the 98.8 percent majority should not be denied, since Hitler was extremely concerned about being able to claim that his policy had been endorsed by the entire German nation. In evaluating the influence of the election, François-Poncet, the French ambassador in Berlin, wrote that

It is this gain of five million votes, being added to the thirty-nine million already assured, which will constitute in the eyes of the National-Socialists that which is unprecedented, stupendous, fantastic, and phenomenal in the balloting of March 29.<sup>48</sup>

The day after the German elections, in a speech made to his constituency at Vézelay, Flandin posed several precise questions which he wanted the German government to answer clearly when it responded to the Locarno proposals. Two special questions were intended to challenge the sincerity of the German proposals of March 7.

What will be the value of a treaty tomorrow if Germany can reserve for itself the right to repudiate it in the name of eternal morality and the vital rights of the German people?

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<sup>48</sup>Dispatch, François-Poncet to Flandin, Berlin, March 29, 1936, DDF, 2nd Series, vol. I, Doc. No. 543, p. 718.

. . . What will be the value tomorrow of a new treaty with Germany, the only independent and impartial judge that she will recognize and to whose decisions she will submit?

France still intended to resist any German attempt to separate peace in the West from Eastern Europe or to divide the proposals made by the Locarno powers.

For us, peace is indivisible, and it cannot be covered by bilateral pacts of nonaggression which one of the nations could repudiate at any chosen moment, while the others would be prevented from taking collective action, designed to contribute to the respect of legal treaties and the security of all the associates, strong or weak, great or small.

Calling attention to the fact that German propaganda was increasing in Austria, Danish Schleswig, Polish Silesia, Czechoslovakia, and Switzerland at the same time Hitler was making appeals for peace and saying he had no further territorial demands, Flandin questioned German motivation as compared to that of France.

If Chancellor Hitler is prepared for a general discussion without reservation or reticence, then let him reply to all the questions which we have posed and then let him say so before his people, not by vague speeches designed to mislead or lull certain public opinion, but by a categorical and precise declaration. . . . We are all the more resolved to work toward the establishment of a true and durable peace, accordingly we are determined to denounce manoeuvres and trickery which, under the mask of peace, will prepare the way for new conflicts and new wars.<sup>49</sup>

Deciding not to reply directly to Flandin's questions, the German government sent Ribbentrop to London on March 31 as promised. Having just received "a solemn general mandate to represent the Reich and the German nation," the German government was prepared to work for "a general reconciliation and understanding of the nations of Europe" as long as its freedom, independence, and equality were preserved. The

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<sup>49</sup>Le Temps, March 31, 1936, p. 1.



reoccupation of the Rhineland was defended not only on the familiar grounds that the Franco-Soviet Pact violated the Treaty of Locarno, but also because the demilitarization provisions of the Treaty of Versailles violated the trust that Germany had put in Wilson's Fourteen Points and "the only legal argument behind them was force." The German government rejected "all proposals in the draft [made by the Locarno powers on March 19] which impose one-sided burdens on Germany and therefore discriminate against her." There were only a few changes in the policy Hitler had announced on March 7. Germany was willing to consider the twenty-five-year nonaggression pacts only for four months. During the four-month period of negotiations, an international commission which could observe military activities in the Rhineland was acceptable. If obligations which required military assistance should develop during the discussions for nonaggression pacts, Germany was also willing to assume such obligations.<sup>50</sup> Previously, Hitler had refused to be committed to any arrangements for mutual assistance, and this point could be considered a kind of concession from Germany.

On April 3, although Eden said that these new proposals were "most important and deserving of careful study," the German government had failed to make the contribution for which he had asked. Accordingly, he told the House of Commons that on April 1, he had sent a letter to the Belgian and French governments which stated that Britain was ready to "instruct their General Staffs forthwith to enter into contact." It was the view of the British government that the delivery of this letter in no way implied that their effort for conciliation had failed, and

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<sup>50</sup>London Times, April 2, 1936, p. 9.

Belgium and France were asked to confirm their understanding that "this contact between the General Staffs cannot give rise in respect of either Government to any political undertaking, nor to any obligation regarding the organization of national defence." Eden thought that announcing British readiness for Staff talks at this time was the only action that could give "the sense of security" which was required for the beginning of negotiations.<sup>51</sup>

In order to avoid the unfavorable publicity that could have come from a quick rejection, the French government chose to make a detailed reply to the German memorandum and present new proposals to the Locarno Powers. The French ambassadors in London, Berlin, Rome, and Brussels were called to Paris on April 3 so that they could participate in drafting the French proposals. François-Poncet, the ambassador in Berlin, complained that this was the only meeting of the sort that he attended and criticized the French government for failing to use the knowledge gained by the ambassadors in an effective manner. When asked if the German peace plan was truly sincere, François-Poncet answered quite correctly that

For the time being, [Hitler's] chief care was to feed the conversation, for, while it was going on, his troops remained in the Rhineland and the world was growing accustomed to their presence there. . . . When Hitler spoke of peace, it was German peace, pax germanica.

In his determination to shake off the consequences of the defeat of 1918, and establish domination in Central Europe, he was "a pirate who observed neither the manners nor the morality of the regular navy."

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<sup>51</sup>Anthony Eden, April 3, 1936, Parliamentary Debates (Commons), 5th Series, vol. CCCX, col. 2303-2308.

François-Poncet predicted that although Hitler probably did not want war, Germany would fight if Britain and France attempted to stand in his way.<sup>52</sup>

On April 6, the French Council of Ministers approved a commentary and reply to the German memorandum which was sent to the British government. After sending copies to the Italian and Belgian governments, the texts of both documents were released to the press on April 9. The new German contention that the demilitarization of the Rhineland was "counter to the engagements taken at the moment of Armistice" was dismissed as having "no foundation either directly or indirectly." According to the French, the Germans were attempting to invoke a new juridical theory "that no nation could voluntarily renounce its sovereign rights without exterior pressure." Thus, Germany, was claiming the right to question the "territorial statute results from the treaties of 1919 . . . in spite of whatever confirmations [there] may have been . . . since the peace was made." As a contribution to peace, the German plan was "unfortunately more apparent than real." Considering the German propensity for the coup de théâtre, each of their proposals was examined and rejected as insincere and incompatible with their actions.

After the critical examination of the German thesis, the French government put forward its own peace proposals based on "collective security, mutual assistance, disarmament, economic cooperation, and European associations." Recognition that "the first basis of international relations should be . . . the equality of rights and independence of all States" did not prevent any nation from "voluntarily and in the

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<sup>52</sup>François-Poncet, The Faithful Years, p. 200.

common interest, limiting in certain circumstances the exercise of its sovereignty and rights." Although conceding that "no treaty should be regarded as unalterable," the French proposed that all nations accept the territorial status quo for twenty-five years. Then international boundaries could not be modified without the consent of all nations involved in the change. For "the permanent control of the carrying-out of treaties," France proposed the establishment of a European Commission with its own military force under the League.<sup>53</sup> Certainly, there was nothing in these French proposals that had not been rejected by Germany several times or anything that was really specific enough to serve as a basis for negotiations in the immediate future. However, these proposals did serve the definite purpose of giving the appearance of still working for peace, and as François-Poncet observed, "Things were being done as though the lawyers of two parties to a suit were exchanging briefs before an imaginary jury."<sup>54</sup>

At the April meeting of the League in Geneva, the Locarno powers held discussions to determine their procedure against Germany. They indicated in an official communiqué on April 10 that although Germany had not made any contribution, they were still interested in exploring all the possibilities for reconciliation. Therefore, the representative of Great Britain was instructed to inquire into the meaning of the bilateral treaties proposed by Germany. The Locarno powers announced that their General Staff conversations would begin on April 15. The French peace plan would be submitted to the League, and Germany was also

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<sup>53</sup> Le Temps, April 9, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>54</sup> François-Poncet, The Faithful Years, p. 200.

invited to submit its plan. The Italian government was represented at this meeting, as it had been at the other Locarno discussions, but it reserved its approval.<sup>55</sup>

On April 15, officers representing the armed forces of France, Belgium, and Britain met in London. The Italian government remained aloof and did not even send an observer. During the conference, which lasted only two days, details concerning troops, ports, communications, and transportation were exchanged. It was decided that after the War Ministries had studied the information, the results could be transmitted by their military attachés.<sup>56</sup> Although their military collaboration was not extensive at this time, these talks certainly laid the foundation for an alliance and caused many in Germany to think that the price for the remilitarization of the Rhineland might be too high.

In France, the responsibility for allowing German troops to stay on the Rhine was not really an issue in the campaign that spring. Most Frenchmen were too concerned about their stagnant economy or the threat of a Bolshevik revolution to discuss seriously foreign policy and military theory. French failure to do something about the German coup was not really associated with any particular party and indeed, was seldom called a failure. Hitler's judgment that most Frenchmen were too concerned with domestic issues to recognize the seriousness of his activities was proved correct. There were the usual political statements about national defense and desire for peace, but the specific implications of the remilitarization of the Rhineland were not made a campaign

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<sup>55</sup>London Times, April 11, 1936, p. 12.

<sup>56</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, pp. 417-418; London Times, April 15, 1936, p. 10; April 20, 1936, p. 14.

issue.

However, when Léon Blum was almost killed by a hooligan element of the Action Française, many were convinced that the threat of Fascism in France was certainly real. This unprovoked attack was so outrageous that Action Française, ostensibly a royalist organization which generally followed any course that would damage democracy and the Republic, was dissolved by a decree from the Sarraut government. Charles Maurras, the leader of Action Française and the publisher of its newspaper, was ultimately indicted for incitement to murder through his inflammatory articles. The contention that only the Popular Front, a coalition of Radical Socialists, Socialists, and Communists, could save the country from Fascism was thus given considerable credence, although the promise of economic and social reform, which included higher pay, collective bargaining, public works, and banking reform, probably attracted more moderate votes.<sup>57</sup>

The opposition from Moderates and the Right was badly divided. Instead of aligning with sincere Republicans in support of the reform which France desperately needed, they vilified the Popular Front as a "dictatorship from Moscow" and predicted bankruptcy, inflation, disarmament, and war with Germany if Communists were elected. The internal violence which had followed the election of a Popular Front government in Spain was often mentioned as a portent for France. Le Temps, hoping to inspire a united opposition, asked, "What if the Popular Front, having succeeded in deceiving a majority of the voters in France,

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<sup>57</sup>Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, pp. 287-288.

revolutionaries would introduce this country to fire and blood?"<sup>58</sup>  
Faced with what they were told was a choice between Communism and Fascism, the majority chose the Popular Front, not because they wanted Communism or Socialism, but because they wanted a change from the conservative policies that had failed to bring France out of the Depression.<sup>59</sup>

The results of the first election on April 26 were not conclusive, but they did favor the Popular Front. In those districts where one candidate did not receive an absolute majority in the first election, there would be a runoff the following Sunday. Alarmed by an increase of 697,348 votes over the number the Communists had won in 1932, Le Temps called for "the formation of a great party for counterrevolution" to protect France from the perils of Communism.<sup>60</sup> However, the superior discipline of the Popular Front parties was obvious in the second round of elections on May 3. In most instances, their candidates which had received the largest vote in the first election had the support of nearly all the voters on the Left, while the Right remained divided. The following table compares the membership of the Chamber of Deputies in 1932 to that of 1936:<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>58</sup>Le Temps, April 19, 1936, p. 1.

<sup>59</sup>Bonnefous, Histoire de la troisième république, vol. V, pp. 406-417.

<sup>60</sup>Le Temps, April 29, 1936, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup>Bonnefous, Histoire de la troisième république, vol. V, pp. 419-422.

	1932	1936	Gain	Loss
Communists	10	72	62	
Dissident Communists	11	10		1
Socialists	97	146	49	
Socialist Republican Union	45	26		19
Independent Socialists	21	9		12
<u>Radical Socialists</u>	<u>158</u>	<u>115</u>		43
Total Popular Front	342	378		
Independent Radicals	65	31		34
Left Republicans	99	83		16
Popular Democrats	23	23		
Democratic Republican Union	76	88	12	
<u>Conservatives</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>11</u>	5	
Total Opposition	269	236		

The only members of the Sarraut government who were not reelected were Déat and Stern, the Ministers of Air and Colonies. If there was any implication for foreign policy in the election, it indicated support for disarmament, the League, and cooperation with the Soviet Union.

While waiting for the Blum government to assume office, the British completed drafting the questionnaire they had agreed to present to Germany. On May 6, Sir Eric Phipps, the British ambassador in Berlin, was instructed to seek an interview with Hitler in order to "search out the ambiguities in the German memoranda." It was a week before Hitler would accept the questionnaire, and by that time the British government had decided to release the entire series of questions to the press, because most of it had already been leaked. The purpose of the British inquiries was to secure "the greatest possible precision" on the points which required elucidation prior to beginning negotiations. In general, the British questions were concerned with the respect that Germany might now be expected to show for the clauses of the Treaty of Versailles which remained operative.<sup>62</sup> When the interview was finally granted to Phipps on May 14, Hitler said that he would delay making a specific

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<sup>62</sup>London Times, May 9, 1936, p. 14.



reply until the newly elected French government took office. In fact, he never felt obligated to reply. After the German elections, Hitler was certain that he could deal with Britain and France from a position of strength and therefore had no reason to hurry negotiations with them. Most of the interview was devoted to the customary tirade on equal rights and Bolshevism in Spain and France. Hitler's only response to the questionnaire was to claim that he had the right to alter the sections of the Treaty of Versailles which limited German sovereignty, but he recognized that the sections dealing with territorial clauses could not be altered except by agreement.<sup>63</sup>

On June 4, the newly elected Popular Front government assumed office in Paris amid nationwide strikes which the lame duck Sarraut government could not stop. Involved with this domestic crisis which threatened to wreck Blum's government, the first foreign policy statement was not given until June 23. The new government seemed imbued with a spirit of conciliation not usually shown by governments to the Right. The main theme was that France desired "peace for all peoples and with all peoples, knowing that it is indivisible and that none would be safe from the conflagration that would flare up if vigilance on the part of the pacific nations were not ever-present and ever-active." The French government pledged complete faith in the League and collective security, while relying on "the unreserved support of Great Britain, the cordial sympathy of the United States . . . and the powerful cooperation of the U.S.S.R." Although the parties which formed the Popular Front had always been in favor of an understanding with Germany, they could

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<sup>63</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, p. 420.

not ignore Germany's rearmament and repudiation of treaties. Nevertheless, they were prepared to examine any sincere German proposals that did not conflict with the principle of undivided peace. They also favored lifting the sanctions against Italy, which no longer served a useful purpose.<sup>64</sup>

Briefly, it appeared that there might be closer cooperation among the Locarno powers. On July 3, the representatives of Britain, Belgium, and France to the League decided that a conference between their prime ministers and foreign ministers, as well as those of Italy, was needed to discuss the status of the Locarno Pact.<sup>65</sup> However, on July 11, Italy declined the invitation issued by the Belgian government on the grounds that "certain Mediterranean obligations . . . form an obstacle to Italy's participation." Moreover, the Italians thought that it would be necessary to invite Germany to any preparatory meeting.<sup>66</sup>

On July 23, the representatives of Britain, Belgium, and France met in London to discuss the international situation and to decide how they might get negotiations started with Italy and Germany. According to Eden, Belgium and France were "ready to make a reasonable agreement."<sup>67</sup> This would seem to indicate that they were willing to forget about the interim period during which they had intended to require certain concessions from Germany. The conference lasted only one day, and the communiqué issued that evening was amazingly polite to Germany. Their

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<sup>64</sup>Yvon Delbos, June 23, 1936, Débats, 1936, pp. 1530-1546.

<sup>65</sup>London Times, July 4, 1936, p. 14.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., July 14, 1936, p. 16.

<sup>67</sup>Eden, Facing the Dictators, p. 439.

expressed purposes were to arrange a meeting of the five original Locarno powers, to negotiate an agreement to take the place of the Locarno Pact, and to resolve "the situation created by the German initiative of the 7th March."<sup>68</sup> There was no attempt to dictate a specific agenda for the meeting, nor was there any attempt to provoke answers or concessions from Germany. By referring to the German coup as merely a "situation" rather than a "flagrant breach," the conferees indicated their acceptance of German forces in the Rhineland. On July 31, the Italian and German governments announced that they accepted "in principle" the invitation to participate in five-power conversations.<sup>69</sup> Nevertheless, in spite of reminders sent by the British government on September 18, November 4, and November 19, the conference never materialized, since other difficulties put it out of question.

The beginning of the Spanish civil war in July had made negotiations with Germany and Italy impossible. Although Blum's personal sympathies were with the Popular Front government in Spain, he was not prepared to face the storm of criticism that came after the news of his intention to send arms was leaked to the press. The Right in France was not opposed to seeing the insurgent members of the Spanish Army remove Socialists and Communists from power. At least, a Fascist government in Spain would not present the specter of a Red Revolution. Submitting to the pressure for nonintervention, Blum allowed only a few arms to enter Spain through unofficial channels. The result was the prolongation of the war without really giving enough assistance to make any

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<sup>68</sup>London Times, July 24, 1936, p. 14.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., August 1, 1936, p. 12.

difference in the outcome. If France had acted quickly, perhaps the duly elected Popular Front government in Spain could have quelled the rebellion before German and Italian aid arrived. The establishment of another Fascist government on France's border was a severe moral blow to the prestige and integrity of the Left in France and certainly not in the interest of national security.<sup>70</sup>

The protection of France's borders was further weakened in the fall of 1936 when the Belgian government asked to be released from the Treaty of Locarno. In 1919, Belgium had relinquished its traditional status of neutrality so that it could be closely associated with France. Since the Treaty of Versailles and the Franco-Belgian Military Agreement in 1920, Belgium was generally regarded as a political satellite of France. However, during 1935 and 1936, the Belgians had witnessed the inability of France and Britain to make collective security effective. Moreover, the question of the French alliance had become involved with political pressure from the Flemish population, who had traditionally mistrusted the French. The conclusion of the Franco-Soviet Pact and the related danger of aggression from Germany caused the Belgian government to look more critically at being closely associated with French foreign policy.<sup>71</sup> On March 6, the day before the remilitarization of the Rhineland, France and Belgium had exchanged notes which recognized that parts of their 1920 agreement were outdated and that they would only maintain the provision for contact between their General Staffs.<sup>72</sup> On March 11, Van

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<sup>70</sup>Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, pp. 296-306.

<sup>71</sup>DIA, 1936, pp. 220-223.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., pp. 72-73.

Zeeland announced that the object of Staff conversations was to facilitate meeting obligations from the Treaty of Locarno and that a stipulation had been added to assure that conversations would not "lead to any undertaking of a political nature nor any obligation with regard to the organization of national defence for either of the interested parties."<sup>73</sup> Thus, the friendship between Belgium and France was already questioned before the events of March 7 provided ample proof that guarantees from Britain and France would not automatically insure Belgian security.

The Belgian government gradually adopted the belief that it would be safer to assume complete responsibility for its own defense and thereby avoid provoking Germany further. The first public warning of the change came on July 20, when Paul Spaak, the Foreign Minister in the new Cabinet organized by Van Zeeland in June, indicated that he intended to follow a realistic policy.

The nations of a continent cannot reasonably be asked to consider with the same realism and sincerity of judgment affairs which directly concern them and events which are taking place thousands of kilometres away in regions where they have neither interests nor influence. Indivisible peace, mutual assistance, and even collective security are general ideas whose practical effect must be clearly explained and clearly limited.<sup>74</sup>

The circumstances which caused the reexamination of Belgian foreign policy were reviewed by King Leopold III in an address to the Cabinet on October 14. Their aim had to be not that of "preparing for a more or less victorious war as the result of an alliance, but at keeping war away from our territory." The remilitarization of the Rhineland had

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<sup>73</sup>SIA, 1936, p. 353.

<sup>74</sup>London Times, July 22, 1936, p. 15.

placed Belgium in a position similar to that before World War I, and because of geography, they were obligated to maintain "a military machine of such a size as to dissuade any of our neighbours whatsoever from using our territory for attacking another state." In meeting this obligation, Belgium was making such a contribution to the peace of Western Europe that it created "a right to the respect, and to assistance if need be, of all the states which are interested in this peace." Public opinion would not allow the government to go beyond a defense system capable of resisting attack; "All unilateral policy weakens our position abroad and--rightly or wrongly--arouses dissensions at home." Assistance from an ally could not arrive in time to prevent an invasion. Even though intervention might result in a final victory, "the struggle would have covered the country with ravages of which those of the 1914-18 war offer only a pale reflection." The primary purpose of the King's speech was to obtain support for the military preparations which were required for "a policy exclusively and completely Belgian."<sup>75</sup> Since the speech was drafted specifically for its impact on domestic politics, and the King was persuaded to allow publication only after he was convinced that it would help in obtaining support for defense spending, the language and the force of the presentation was considerably different from what would have normally been made public.

After the Belgian government realized that the speech had created an unfavorable impression in Paris and London, its ambassadors were instructed to convey assurances that Belgium had no intention of failing

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., October 15, 1936, p. 13.

to meet its obligations as a member of the League.<sup>76</sup> Speaking to a meeting of the Brussels Socialist Federation on October 18, Spaak declared that Belgium intended to remain with the League and participate in collective security, but he remembered the fate that had befallen Ethiopia because of its excessive reliance on collective security while neglecting its own defense. He added that Britain and France had different responsibilities in world politics and must for reasons of prestige follow policies of their own.<sup>77</sup> It was clear that Belgium wanted protection and security without the commitment for reciprocal military assistance to France and Britain. By defending their own frontier, the Belgians hoped that France and Germany would recognize that both nations were thus protected from attack. Statements given by members of the Belgian government continued to stress the benefits for Britain and France in Belgian self-reliance. Speaking at a luncheon in London on November 27, Van Zeeland summarized the role that he saw for Belgium in European affairs.

Our geographical position makes our country a keystone of Western Europe; one cannot tamper with keystones without wrecking the edifice itself. It is for us a duty--a duty towards ourselves and a duty to the great nations that are our neighbours--to do the utmost in our power to dissuade any one from the temptation of attacking us, of using our soil as a short cut. It is in this way that we, too, serve peace, not in word, but in deed. . . .<sup>78</sup>

After a series of secret conversations culminating in a joint Anglo-French declaration on April 24, 1937, Belgium was released from its obligations under the Treaty of Locarno and the proposals of the

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., October 20, 1936, p. 15.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., October 19, 1936, p. 13.

<sup>78</sup>DIA, 1936, p. 234.

Locarno powers made in 1936. The communication issued by the British and French governments indicated that they were acting in response to the desire of Belgium to have its international rights and obligations clarified. Belgian determination to defend its borders against invasion and to prevent its territory from being used for aggression against another nation was noted. Britain and France reaffirmed their support of each other and maintained that they would assist Belgium under the terms of the Treaty of Locarno and the proposals of March 19, 1936. Belgium was released from the reciprocal guarantees for military assistance to Britain and France.<sup>79</sup> When the declaration of April 24 was presented to the League on May 27, the representatives of Britain, France, and Belgium indicated that their governments believed that the declaration should be regarded as a step towards the elaboration of a new Western Pact.<sup>80</sup>

However, nothing came from the expressed intentions to secure a replacement for the Treaty of Locarno. The promise that Britain had made on March 19 to consult with France if the new treaty with Germany failed was, according to Flandin, simply forgotten by succeeding governments. He was certain that when the Germans started fortifications in the Rhineland a new situation which required some further commitment from Britain was created, but France failed to make the effort to salvage even this last scrap from the ruins of Locarno.<sup>81</sup>

The tragic consequences of France's failure to prevent the

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<sup>79</sup>London Times, April 26, 1937, p. 14.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., May 28, 1937, p. 15.

<sup>81</sup>Flandin, Politique française, p. 210.



remilitarization of the Rhineland were unequivocal. The defection of Belgium symbolized a decline of confidence in collective security and French military and diplomatic leadership. "With cruel anguish," Blum sensed "that here was a new symptom of the progressive dismantling of all our European positions."<sup>82</sup> Belatedly, the French made the decision to extend the Maginot Line to the sea along their border with Belgium, but only a skeletal framework was completed by the beginning of World War II. Although both the Belgian and French governments had affirmed their interest in continuing General Staff conversations between the two countries, very little of actual military value was ever accomplished. Although Gamelin had insisted that French troops had to be in place before the actual German invasion, the French were not invited to enter Belgium until the Germans had attacked in May, 1940, more than eight months after the war had begun.<sup>83</sup> Thus, France was left without the completion of the Maginot Line and without adequate concerted plans between the French and Belgian General Staffs.

The progressive dismantling of French alliances continued in Eastern Europe. Efforts to strengthen French ties with the Little Entente, an alliance which France had sponsored between Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Romania since 1920, were unsuccessful. Although Blum approved a loan to finance Polish rearmament, the French government could not alter substantially the pro-German policy that Poland had initiated in 1934.<sup>84</sup> Since the French army had failed to act when the Rhineland

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<sup>82</sup>Quoted in Colton, Léon Blum, p. 207.

<sup>83</sup>Gamelin, Servir, vol. II, p. 229.

<sup>84</sup>Shirer, The Collapse of the Third Republic, p. 313.

was undefended, it was only reasonable for the nations to the east of Germany to assume that France was not likely to attack in their defense when fortifications were in place in the Rhineland. Therefore, they were forced to follow policies which would not provoke Hitler.

The entire French system of collective security in Europe was predicated on the ability of the French army to deliver a crushing blow against the industrial heart of the Rhineland. Without this immediate threat, protecting Central Europe from German aggression became exceedingly difficult, if not beyond the imagination of the French military, whose thinking and defensive nature simply did not correspond to France's foreign policy requirements. Certainly, they recognized that the remilitarization of the Rhineland would render all their planning useless, yet they never demanded that any action be taken to prevent the catastrophe and were content to engage in further studies while they knew the Germans were preparing to act. As long as Gamelin was in command, this process of postponing decisions by engaging in endless studies continued to plague the army. The remilitarization of the Rhineland might not have been such a tragedy if the French government could have learned that the army had to be prodded into preparing for offensive action, but the army was allowed to continue undisturbed in its obsession with the defensive. Although Sarraut, Flandin, and Paul-Boncour recognized this flaw in the military, they did not make the essential changes. After the war, when Sarraut testified before the Parliamentary Investigating Committee, he freely admitted the mistake.

One of the grave faults of politicians and members of government is that they have always had complete confidence, permeated by timidity, in the military. . . . It is stupid, but

that's the way it is.<sup>85</sup>

French foreign policy had little relation to military policy; in the case of the Rhineland crisis, it was the military which prevailed.

Simple lack of foresight and preparation must be added to the oversight of the army. A small professional force that could penetrate the Rhineland quickly was needed, not mobilization for total war. The forces that were on active duty in France were more than adequate to drive out the few nervous Germans who were parading around in the Rhineland. Yet for reasons not made clear in the evidence now available, military intelligence completely misjudged the strength of the Germans and therefore misrepresented the reply that was required. The army, as well as the government, made a serious error in waiting for British approval and support. Gamelin insisted that the French army was prepared for war, but he always added that it would be necessary to have the support of the other Locarno powers.

Aside from their weakness in dealing with the army, the worst fault of the members of the government was wasting time with Britain and the League. The situation called for immediate action by France alone. Certainly, the British were hesitant, perhaps even hostile, to military action against Germany, but the attitude of Britain can only be an explanation, not an excuse for the failure of the French government. Considering the ineptitude of the League in dealing with Hitler, it was totally naive to think that a mere condemnation would have any effect on the status of German troops in the Rhineland.

Parliament, the press, and the public must be listed as

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<sup>85</sup>Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 283.

contributors to French weakness and complacency. The national defense committees for the various branches of the armed forces should have insisted that France have the army which its policies demanded, yet none of these committees seriously questioned the government or held investigations to determine why German troops were allowed to remain unchallenged in the Rhineland. When they met after March 7, it was only to receive reports on the measures that had been taken; in each instance, the statement read by the Chief of Staff was approved. The inappropriate leadership of the army is not surprising, since it was never cross-examined by those who were elected and legally responsible for national security. It is sufficient to say that the press failed to meet its responsibility to inform a free society. French journalism in many instances had become merely partisan propaganda. Investigation and critical reporting was often replaced by not very subtle political advertising. On both the Left and Right the press was prepared time after time to see national security sacrificed to domestic political ambitions. Finally, French voters must bear some responsibility for the government they elected and the lack of concern shown for the vitality of basic democratic institutions.

The ease with which the remilitarization of the Rhineland was accomplished had serious implications for the behavior that could be expected from Hitler. His staggering success at the polls proved that he had the public support which no leader of the Weimar Republic could have matched. The unfounded hesitancy and caution of the generals had demonstrated the superiority of the Führer's intuition. Europe had no choice but to assume a different attitude toward Germany. Hitler, as usual, was suitably impressed by his own master stroke, and the coup

always remained one of his proudest accomplishments.

Pursuing the new opportunities presented by the remilitarization of the Rhineland, Hitler signed three treaties in rapid succession and embarked on a new foreign adventure. On July 11, Austria signed an agreement with Germany which required that its foreign policy always recognize that it was a "German state." On July 22, Hitler decided to support the rebellion in Spain in order to prolong the conflict to such an extent that Italy could never come to terms with Britain and France. In August, Ribbentrop was sent to London in an unsuccessful effort to reach an agreement with Britain. The pièce de résistance for Hitler was the formation of the alliances which united the nations that would be the aggressors in World War II. On October 21, a secret protocol which outlined a common foreign policy for Germany and Italy was signed in Berlin, and on November 25, Germany and Japan signed the Anti-Comintern Pact, which held the promise of defending Western civilization from Communism. The propaganda value of the new alliance was obvious, but in addition there was a secret protocol in which Germany and Japan agreed to "safeguard their common interests" in case of an attack by the Soviet Union.<sup>86</sup>

In retrospect, it is obvious that France, by expelling the German troops from the Rhineland, could have deflected the rise of an aggressive Germany and spoiled the blueprint which Hitler perfected for subsequent offenses. The failure of the French government and military is made doubly tragic by the fact that they were painfully aware of the consequences for European peace and France.

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<sup>86</sup>William L. Shirer, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich: A History of Nazi Germany (New York, 1967), pp. 407-411.

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