



The British Perception of the Remilitarization of the Rhineland, 1936

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PREFACE

"There is always something rather absurd about the past."

Max Beerbohm

Hitler remilitarized the Rhineland on 7 March 1936 in explicit violation of both the treaties of Versailles and Locarno. Within days, it became apparent that no nation was willing to restore the *status quo ante* by force. And with good reasons. To politicians of the day, the Rhineland simply was not an important issue.

Historians, however, endowed, or burdened, with the gift of hindsight, have read much into the Rhineland crisis. Without exception, they pronounce this success of Hitler as the harbinger of calamity; if only Britain and France had the resolve to resist Hitler there and then, the world might have been spared a holocaust unmatched, and hopefully not to be matched, in history.

Two decades later, Anthony Eden, second-fiddle in 1936 but now at the helm of state, considered the Rhineland crisis a lesson learned; in a fit of mid-summer madness, Britain embarked on an expedition to dislodge the rightful owners of Suez, but instead, the excursion hit a watery bier. It was the same lesson, but now unlearned.

Are we then doomed to Beerbohm's dictum and can do no more than indulge in scholastic sophistry? No; I beg to disagree. There was more to history than met the eyes of the *post hoc* Cassandras; tediously well known though it

may be, the "forgotten problem" (this is Taylor's contribution) of the Rhineland should be exhumed and reexamined in the light of new evidence and with a detachment afforded by being a generation removed. This project is but a personal fetish "to understand what happened, and why it happened."

In this endeavor, I owe much to many. Bread and butter courtesy requires thanks to the Harvard Scholarship Fund which, in paying for my trip home, afforded me several work-loaded weeks in London. To my tutor, who is condemned to anonymity by the Department, to Mr. Stuckey and the staff of the Public Record Office, to Mr. Owen and the staff of the Cambridge University Library, to Mr. Cotter and the staff of our own Documents Division, and to my typist, A.D. 2200, I express my deepest gratitude, for without them, this project would not have been logistically possible.

A special debt is owed to my roommates and friends: I apologize for the increasingly frequent fits of deliria when I sojourn with spirits past. And, not least of all, I regret the admittedly nerve-wracking tap-taps that slowly brought this to the light of day.

All mistakes are, of course, mine.

Hanson Y. Huang

Dunster
April, 1973

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The affairs of state are such that no statesman can objectively grasp the full implication of every item of information he receives. Planning and decision, therefore, depends very much on the disposition and beliefs of the individual. This perceptive role with respect to the Rhineland crisis is the central theme of this thesis.

The question of the Rhineland first came into prominence during the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919. France's aim then was to create an independent Rhenish Republic allied to France. But British and United States objections changed the Rhineland into a demilitarized and allied occupied zone.¹

This arrangement, however, was a constant source of disagreement between the allies and Germany, and, indeed, even among the allies. Therefore, in 1925, the Weimar Government, represented by Stresemann, reaffirmed the agreements in return for several concessions, one of which was the early withdrawal of the Allied occupying troops in three phases.² The last troops left on 30 Jan. 1930, and the Rhineland became truly demilitarized five years ahead of schedule.

Hitler addressed the Reichstag on the morning of 7 March 1936; the speech began, as was the custom of the past weeks, with a denunciation of the

¹ For the terms of the Treaty of Versailles, see Appendix I.

² This became the Treaty of Locarno, the pertinent articles of which are in Appendix I.

Franco-Soviet pact. But this time, he went further; the denunciations were capped by the pronouncement that:

In accordance with the fundamental right of a nation to secure its frontiers and ensure its possibilities of defence, the German Government have today restored the full and unrestricted sovereignty of Germany in the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland.³

At the same time, the Ambassadors of the Locarno powers were summoned to the *Wilhelmstrasse* and informed of Hitler's intentions to remilitarize the Rhineland. German Ambassadors also delivered the notice to Governments to which they were accredited. Meanwhile, 19 battalions and 30 artillery units moved into the Rhineland to the tumultuous and enthusiastic welcome of the populace.⁴ The remilitarization of the Rhineland became a *de facto* act.

The British Government, after three months of discussions, adopted a definite policy *vis-a-vis* the Rhineland only on 9 March 1936, two days after Hitler's *fait accompli*. That decision ended a long and tortuous process, fraught with pitfalls, through which all those concerned with the making of British Foreign Policy sought to define the British role in the crisis. This tortuousness, though in many ways unavoidable, was the necessary result of the conflicting perceptions of the situation by each individual: from the first report of a potential crisis in December 1935 to its actual occurrence, all those concerned had to contend with two major questions — what was the best policy towards the Rhineland and towards Germany. It was their

³ Cmd. 5118. See Appendix II.

⁴ Keitel to von Neurath, 7 March 1936, *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-45* (Washington D.C., 1966), Series V, C, 44.

inability to resolve the conflicting perceptions of these two aspects of the same problem that made it so difficult to come to a decision.

This conflict of perception fell into three indistinct phases. The period from the end of 1935 to mid-February, 1936, when the Foreign Office finally decided that a crisis was at hand, constituted the first phase. Another period, contemporaneous with the first, but ending later, on 7 March 1936., constituted the second phase in which the Foreign Office as well as the Committee of Imperial Defence, the highest military planning body of Great Britain, searched for the best line of action in the event a German reoccupation of the Rhineland. The third phase began with the news of the *fait accompli* and ended with the Foreign Secretary's policy statement before the House of Commons in the afternoon of 9 March 1936.

In each of these phases, however, the conflict of perception played a different role. In the first phase, its impact is best characterized as vacillation, and in the second, prevarication. Yet, in the third phase when the conflict finally was resolved, it fostered a steadfastness so strong that information not conforming with the British leaders' beliefs was dismissed out of hand. This last act of irrationality, however, is a boon in disguise for the researcher, for in view of the eclectic discourses of the two previous phases, it might have been well nigh impossible to determine what principal issue the British leaders perceived in the Rhineland crisis.

Yet, an analysis of the conflicts of perceptions cannot tell the whole story; there were enough institutional factors to produce quite a different outcome, especially when the process of decision making was plagued with vacillations as the present case certainly was. The nature of bureaucracy is

such that it attains influence quite unintended by its masters; the final decision by the British leaders therefore begs the question: "was the decision an outcome intended by its makers, or was it merely a quirk of the bureaucratic quagmire?" This question will not be left unanswered.

The thrust of this thesis, therefore, will be along two axes. First, the institutional factors that affected the final decision will be identified if only to be pared away for a more complete examination of the problem of perception.

Second, and more pertinent and important, the question of perception will be examined. The British leaders read a lot into the information they received on the Rhineland situation: in fact, one can only say that they read too much. But these interpretations and analyses were totally unstructured; there might have been some validity to every single observation they made, but put together, they became a coacervation that simply did not make sense. The same official, for example, could arrive at contradictory conclusions from the same piece of information and then go on to propose contradictory policies; and all this was done without any qualms. The official British conception of the Rhineland situation, therefore, drifted along with events.

With cold detachment, one might be able to sort these multifarious observations into several major directions; but that is at best contrived, for the principals involved simply did not categorize their thoughts into any semblance of a system, not to speak of clear-cut directions. However, at the expense of being repetitive and overly clinical, one can elucidate from this artificial order certain overriding principles. These I will call dominant perceptions.

Whether this dominant perception is a universal category I cannot tell, but in the case of the Rhineland crisis, there certainly was a dominant perception — that the Rhineland was without doubt German territory. This perception pervaded all the discussions on the Rhineland, either explicitly stated or implicitly accepted.

When the possibility of a reoccupation was first reported, this perception, like other perceptions, was viewed as part and parcel of the overall discussion. But as the discussions progressed, this perception slowly emerged as an entity on its own; discussions became centered round whether the policy called for by this particular perception could be adopted in the light of other perceptions. Finally, when the crisis came to a head, the policy called for by this perception was adopted and all other perceptions that did not support this policy were suppressed.

This thesis, then, is an examination of the slow process whereby this perception — that the Rhineland was without doubt German territory — became defined and adopted as the key to British policy *vis-à-vis* the Rhineland crisis.

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Since the Foreign Office was by far the most important department involved in the formulation of the British policy in the crisis, I find it necessary to begin with an overview of the principal characters of the Foreign Service involved in the decision making process. The next chapter, Chapter III, examines the first phase mentioned earlier in which the Foreign Office tried to decide if a crisis really was at hand. Chapters IV and V examine, respectively, the Foreign Office and the Committee of Imperial Defence

perspectives of the second phase in which the two departments searched for the best line of action in the event of a unilateral remilitarization of the Rhineland by Germany. Chapter VI brings all the discussions on the crisis to an end when Britain finally committed itself to a policy. In concluding, Chapter VII recapitulates the entire process. But it is repetition with a purpose; I shall venture cautiously into the heuristic, if not prescriptive, implications of this analysis.

CHAPTER II

The Foreign Office: An Overview

On Christmas Eve, 1935, Robert Anthony Eden kissed hands and received from King George V the Seals of the Principal Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs. The King repeated a joke he told earlier, that there should be: "No more coals to Newcastle, no more Hoares to Paris."⁵ Hoare did not laugh when he heard it while surrendering his seals to the King: now, Eden could not either, for his appointment came at one of the darkest hours of the Foreign Office.

Eden was appointed by Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, to restore the reputation of the Foreign Office after the Hoare-Laval fiasco of 9 December 1935. Eden had first declined the offer, for he knew the personnel and institutional problems that beset the Foreign Office, but accepted only when there was no other candidate. This chapter will examine these problems, especially with respect to France and Germany, that Eden foresaw and with which he had to contend during the Rhineland crisis.

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Eden, at thirty-eight, was the youngest Foreign Secretary since the eighteenth century.⁶ He served most of his political apprenticeship in the

⁵ Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators* (Boston, 1962). 355 ff.

⁶ For the life of Eden, his autobiography, *Facing the Dictators*., *ibid.*, is intimate, but somewhat given to hindsight. Lewis Broad's *Sir Anthony Eden* (London, 1955) is good only for its facts.

Foreign Office, and had been the Minister for League of Nations Affairs with Cabinet rank since June, 1935. This latter post was created by Baldwin on 8 June 1935 partly in anticipation of the completion of the League of Nations Union ballot, and Eden was the natural candidate because of his strong pro-League beliefs.⁷

Eden's attitude towards Germany was one of detached judgment. Though he personally disliked Hitler after their first meeting in March 1935 — an event which Eden recorded as ominous for the future because Hitler did not offer any concessions of value — he tried not to allow this sentiment to cloud his diplomacy.⁸ Instead, on more than one occasion, he urged Britain to come to the best possible terms with Germany.

This rational approach to Foreign Affairs also guided his attitude towards France until the Hoare-Laval fiasco. The League of Nations had imposed an embargo on Italy when the latter invaded Abyssinia, but when the embargo

⁷ The League of Nations, with over 1/2 million volunteer workers, and the endorsement of all political parties, conducted the most massive public opinion poll in Britain. The results, published on 27 June 1935, were as follows:

Question	Yes	% Yes	No
1 To remain in the League:	11,090,387	97	355,883
2 Arms reduction with international agreement:	10,470,489	92.5	862,775
3 Abolition of warplanes with international agreement:	9,533,558	85	1,689,786
4 Ban private enterprise in arms:	10,417,329	93.1	775,415
5 Repel aggression by:			
A) Non-military means:	10,027,608	94.1	635,074
B) Military	6,784,368	74.2	2,351,981

A second survey showed that 97% of the 550 Members of Parliament returned in December 1935 were in favor of acting through the League.

⁸ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 148-9, 155.

proved ineffective, Samuel Hoare, Eden's predecessor as Foreign Secretary, tentatively agreed with Laval, the French Premier, on 9 December 1935 to solve the issue substantially in Italy's favor. The agreement, however, was prematurely leaked by France and caused a public outcry in Britain, since it went against all that the League of Nations stood for and would have undone all its accomplishments.

Hoare was forced to resign on 18 December 1936 and Eden took over a Foreign Office that was severely criticized by the public for giving bad counsel. Laval had never been fully trusted by the Foreign Office, and especially not by Eden, who found it necessary to warn Hoare of Laval before the latter left for Paris.⁹ The Hoare-Laval affair further convinced Eden of Laval's, and France's, duplicity. In defending Hoare, Eden wrote: "There was deep mistrust of Laval and many suspected that some unpalatable discovery of his mind must have influenced Hoare."¹⁰ If the French could renege on such a clear cut issue, they might do so again and blame Britain for not honoring Treaty obligations.

Eden's appointment under these circumstances necessarily led to unfortunate consequences. Eden was named by Baldwin only because the latter wanted to placate public opinion by appointing a staunch supporter of the League. Eden noted in his memoirs:

My difficulties were not only international. I was aware that my appointment was not welcome to all my elders in the Cabinet, where there was already no lack of Foreign Secretaries and other aspirants to the Office. I

⁹ *Ibid.*, 335.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 341.

knew that Baldwin's support would be fitful and lethargic.¹¹

That was hardly an auspicious beginning.

In addition, Eden came into conflict with Sir Robert Vansittart, his Permanent Under Secretary, who would rather sacrifice the League than to jeopardize Anglo-French cordiality. The conflicts between Eden and Baldwin on the one hand, and Vansittart and Eden on the other, severely hampered the harmonious functioning of the Foreign Office as well as the negotiating strength of the Foreign Office in the Cabinet.

Eden gradually found himself left out of decisions. Chamberlain, the heir apparent of Baldwin, for example, did not even dare to "consult Anthony Eden, because he would have been bound to beg me [Chamberlain] not to say what I proposed."¹² A Foreign Affairs Committee, too, composed of Hoare, Simon, Halifax, Oliver Stanley and Malcolm MacDonald, was used to watch over Eden.¹³

This conflict finally ended with Eden's resignation over the prerogatives of the Foreign Secretary in 1938.¹⁴ But already in early 1936, Eden was finding his position uncomfortable.

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¹¹ *Ibid.*, 357

¹² Cited in Keith Feiling, *Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1940), 296.

¹³ J. Mackintosh, *The British Cabinet* (London, 1968), 481.

¹⁴ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 666 ff.

Robert Vansittart, the Permanent Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, was the Head of the Foreign Office civil service, and an institution himself by 1935.¹⁵ Eden, his superior, wrote of him:

In my long service at the Foreign Office as a junior Minister and as Secretary of State I have known many heads of the department and appointed some of them. I have never known one to compare with Sir Robert as a relentless, not to say ruthless, worker for the views he held strongly himself. The truth is that Vansittart was seldom an official giving cool and disinterested advice based on study and experience. He was himself a sincere, almost fanatical, Crusader, and much a Secretary of State in mentality than a permanent official.¹⁶

Vansittart was unquestionably a Francophile and a Germanphobe. His love of all things Gallic not only led him to write plays in French, but also gave him the singular distinction of being the first Englishman to become a member of the Paris Jockey Club since the days of Fashoda.¹⁷

His hatred of Hitler's Germany was as intense as his love of France. His personal policy was to "Keep Germany Lean," and, according to German sources, he would not stop short of trying to wreck the Anglo-German Naval pact singlehandedly.¹⁸ Phipps, the British Ambassador in Berlin, once had to inform him that: "A high official of the [German] Ministry of Foreign Affairs told a member of my staff today that the Chancellor would greatly

¹⁵ There are no good books on Vansittart. His autobiographies, *Lessons of My Life* (London, 1945), and *The Mist Procession* (London, 1958) are no more than invectives against Germanophiles, and Ian Colvin's *Vansittart in Office* (London, 1965) aim only to extol an unsung hero.

¹⁶ Colvin, *ibid.*, 271.

¹⁷ Vansittart, *Mist Procession*, 49.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 415; Colvin, *Vansittart in Office*, 64.

appreciate an exchange of views with you personally precisely because he is convinced you are opposed to him."¹⁹ Vansittart must have been flattered.

But this bias brought him into conflict with many quarters. Vansittart accompanied Hoare through the discussions with Laval and was attacked on very good grounds by the British press, as "the man behind it all."²⁰

Vansittart admitted frankly in his memoirs that he did not think the League would be effective in handling the Abyssinian crisis, and therefore came into direct conflict with Eden. Of that period, he recorded, "Such were these odd days that my wife and I found cordiality suddenly limited."²¹ Churchill, a close friend of Vansittart's, described it thus: "His fortuitous connection with the Hoare-Laval Pact had affected his position both with the new Foreign Secretary and in wide political circles."²² Though Churchill tried to defend Vansittart's actions by justifying it as a realization of a greater peril, Germany, the inner political circles never forgave Vansittart for nearly toppling the Government.

Vansittart, too, slowly found his advice ignored and had to work through Orme Sargent and Ralph Wigram, his subordinates in the Foreign Office, and Maurice Hankey, the Secretary of the Cabinet, for:

...I was already so tarred as an alarmist that the information would be challenged if it came from me. I therefore arranged with Maurice Hankey that he should pass the figures privately to the Air Ministry, saying that

¹⁹ F.O. 371/18828, C1834/55/18, Personal and Private, Phipps to Vansittart, 23 Feb. 1935.

²⁰ Colvin, *Vansittart in Office*, 92.

²¹ Vansittart, *Mist Procession*, 522.

²² Churchill, *The Gathering Storm* (New York, 1961), 102 ff., 217.

they came from a reliable source which he could not reveal.²³

Yet, Vansittart was relentless in his crusade. Valentine Lawford, a Third Secretary in the Foreign Office, recalled that:

Even the increasing realization, as the months passed into years, that his arguments lacked whatever mysterious ingredient it might be that was required to move the Cabinet, far from detracting from their appeal for me only added the forlorn beauty of hopelessness to all their other beauties. Even if I hadn't always been drawn towards lost causes I should have found it impossible not to sympathize with this particular protagonist of an apparently losing side. For no twentieth-century witness of the wrath to come could have been less like a resurrected Roundhead. No tireless bureaucrat was ever made less of ink and old leather. . . .²⁴

The end drew near for Vansittart in October, 1936, when he was officially instructed by Lord Stanhope, the Parliamentary Under Secretary, to rewrite a report in an amended and less offensive form.²⁵ Three months later, he was, with Eden's approval, removed "to a newly created Siberia known as the post of Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the Government" to be consulted on only one occasion — a question of theatricals for the French President's visit.²⁶

His fall marked the end, and not the beginning of political oblivion, for as early as 1935, his advice, though acknowledged as learned, was taken with a grain of salt.

²³ Colvin, *Vansittart in Office*, 92; Vansittart, *Mist Procession*, 498.

²⁴ Valentine Lawford, *Bound For Diplomacy* (Boston, 1963), 270.

²⁵ F.O. 800/394, Ge/36/5, Stanhope to Vansittart, 2 Oct. 1936.

²⁶ Lawford, *Bound For Diplomacy*, 271.

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Orme Sargent served Eden as the Assistant Under Secretary of State.²⁷ He was a close friend of Vansittart's, who recalled that: "he was a philosopher strayed into Whitehall. He knew all the answers; when politicians did not want them he went out to lunch."²⁸

This nonchalance became both a liability and an asset. On the one hand, it led to misperceptions and misunderstandings, but on the other hand, it proved to be a solid tower of unemotional advice. Lawford wrote of this:

Sargent...was past shocking. Past emotion, I think I should have risked saying, if I had been asked. At small things he would sometimes bridle; but on larger issues he had such a clear and balanced view of the reasons both for and against any proposed line of action that one could hardly believe that his emotions could be aroused, whatever the decision. Of course, I should have taken it for granted, even if it hadn't been obvious from his minutes, that he personally shared Wigram's and Vansittart's well-known views about the aims of Hitler and the retribution that awaited the unprepared. Instinctively I felt that if anyone 'knew', Sargent knew. But who could tell — could even Sargent himself tell, I wondered — how much he really cared?

Years later it would dawn on me that his outward indifference was a form of consciously assumed protection for sensitivities so acute that if it had been

²⁷ Sargent was a rather forgettable man. He did not leave any memoirs and nothing has been written about him. He did not even make it to the *Dictionary of National Biography*.

²⁸ Vansittart, *Mist Procession*, 389.

humanly possible he might indeed have preferred to do without them. Far from his caring too little, there were grounds for suspecting that he was afraid of caring too much. All the more because it was his nature to see things predominantly in black. And if this surmise is correct, his countrymen may be thankful for his self-knowledge. For while above him Vansittart was driven into isolation and impotence, and below him Wigram bravely burned himself out, Sargent's capacities were to be mercifully preserved for use in equally momentous, if less agonizing years.

But in my ignorance I saw nothing then but the philosopher, coolly prepared for the world to come crashing about his ears and give him his cue for the "What else did you expect?" that would have been his only comment; and in the meantime disinclined, if the policy which he advocated was not adopted by the government of the day, to do more than shrug his shoulders as though to say: if they wished to go the shortest way to perdition, who was he to prevent them? After which he would waste no more time or words. . . .²⁹

Sargent thus plodded on, firm in his beliefs, waiting for the occasion when his advice would be taken. The Cabinet and Eden trusted him; Vansittart had to put forward his own views through him. In the end, his memorandum of 10 February 1936 (which will be treated in detail in later chapters) was the most perceptive and realistic appraisal of the Rhineland situation.

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Ralph Wigram, the Head of the Central Department, is the first Foreign Office member so far discussed that didn't have an overall supervisory role

²⁹ Lawford, *Bound for Diplomacy*, 247.

over Foreign Affairs.³⁰ As Head of the Central Department, he supervised a staff of five that only managed affairs of Execution of Peace Treaties, Belgium, Danzig, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Poland, Europe in General and War Debts. Though efficient, this parceling out of work created an atmosphere of parochial concern among the departments which led to shortsightedness and unnecessary conflicts.

More than others, Wigram's *lebenslauf* greatly affected his perceptions of the world. Brilliant and slightly rebellious, he quickly rose in the Foreign Office hierarchy through a chance acquaintance with Lord D'Abernon.³¹ While Head of the Paris Chancery, he married the daughter of John Bodley, the nineteenth-century French expert, and through her, secured *entree* to influential circles of French society.³² Even after his return to Britain, he retained the confidence of French politicians such as Reynaud, Laval, Flandin and Corbin, and was greatly influenced by them.³³

But personal tragedy struck suddenly. Wigram went down with infantile paralysis, and it was only through a supreme effort of self-will and determination that he pulled through. This stubborn fighting spirit, however, ultimately proved his undoing when he insisted on policies that the Government did not want.

Back in the Foreign Office, "Mr. French," as he was referred to, was naturally anti-German. Having worked for Sir Eyre Crowe, Wigram also came to the conclusion that there could be no peace or agreement with

³⁰ There are no studies or memoirs of Wigram. The best information available must be culled from works of Churchill, Vansittart and Lawford.

³¹ Lawford, *Bound for Diplomacy*, 247.

³² *Ibid.*, 249 ff.

³³ *Ibid.*, 266 ff.

Germany, and especially not with Hitler.³⁴ But it was difficult to tell if his Germanophobia was emotional or rational. On the one hand, he took the time and effort to read *Mein Kampf* and other Nazi classics in the original to learn about their faults; yet, on the other hand he could be petty enough to reject minutes that did not conform to his distaste for Germany.³⁵

His performance as a bureaucrat was as difficult to evaluate. He was praised for expressing himself "with a calm detachment that was a welcome change in manner to Cabinet Ministers though not varying in matter from the uncomfortable advice of his master [Vansittart]."³⁶ Yet, there were those in the Foreign Office whose "smiles tightened a little when his name was mentioned, and who would have admitted, if pressed, that they were not entirely happy about his uncompromising views."³⁷

On net balance, Wigram's advice was still taken by his superiors in 1936, but was rapidly becoming less respected.

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Eric Phipps, the British Ambassador in Berlin, directed Anglo-German Affairs outside the Foreign Office. A staunch anti-German, he carried on a crusade against Hitler as did his brother-in-law, Vansittart. Reputedly, he was the last person to laugh at Hitler to his face.³⁸

Yet, despite being a Grand Officer of the Legion of Honor and an admirer of all things French, he was not above criticizing France for preventing

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 248, 263.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 255, 263.

³⁶ Colvin, *Vansittart in Office*, 92.

³⁷ Lawford, *Bound for Diplomacy*, 260.

³⁸ The occasion was when Hitler compared the S.S. and the S.A. to the Salvation Army. Phipps apologized for laughing. Colvin, *Vansittart in Office*, 31.

agreements with Germany. By 1936, however, his influence with the Government was at a low ebb due to his persistently pessimistic reports, all submitted with "a final paragraph of personal observations, like a spoonful of excellent dressing, to the indifferent salad of mixed views" served up by the Embassy staff.³⁹

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When the Rhineland crisis loomed over Europe, it was these men, Eden, Vansittart, Sargent, Wigram and Phipps, that formulated the basic issues and recommended policies to the British Cabinet. Their differing perceptions of the ends and means involved led, at times, to close cooperation and, at others, to intense conflict. Any account of British perception of the Rhineland crisis must logically begin with their views and roles in mind.

³⁹ Lawford, *Bound for Diplomacy*, 344.

CHAPTER III

"She loves me, she loves me not ..."

Germany: Daisy or Artichoke?

On 30 December 1935, Sir Eric Phipps, the British Ambassador in Berlin, forwarded a short report to the Foreign Office in London. As the Foreign Office staff did not deem the report important enough for immediate action, it was routinely jacketed and placed in Registry to be acted upon by the Central Department at the latter's convenience.⁴⁰ Since this was the last working day before the New Year Holidays, these regular reports would not be read until everyone returned in the New Year.

This chapter will examine the response of the Foreign Office to this and other related reports received between December, 1935 and March, 1936. Since different individuals interpreted these reports differently and gave conflicting advice on the action to take, the Foreign Office vacillated among three assessments of the Rhineland situation.

⁴⁰ A note on Foreign Office procedures: All incoming materials are first decoded, duplicated, and placed in a folder with a *precis* of the contents typed on the cover (docketing). The folder is then passed on to the most junior member of the departments concerned. Within each department, an officer can, if he feels competent, act on it and send it to be filed (Registration and Deposition in archives). Or he can pass it on to someone of higher authority. This procedure is repeated until someone finally acts on it. The folder then goes up and down the chain until no one has any more to say. Thus, in the process, a document may receive little or copious comments. Though the under secretaries of state constantly review all documents received, a document may not receive proper attention because a junior officer did not consider it important enough.

Foreign Office tasks were divided among sixteen departments. The Central Department dealt exclusively with Execution of Peace Treaties, Belgium, Danzig, France, Germany, Luxembourg, Poland, Europe General and War Debts. In 1936 it was headed by Ralph Wigram and had a staff of five.

First, some believed that there was no cause for concern over the Rhineland situation; others believed that there was a potential crisis, but one which would not take place in the foreseeable future; and a third group thought that there was an imminent crisis.

It is hoped that the Foreign Office's perception of a real or potential crisis in the Rhineland situation can be elucidated through an examination of the positions the Foreign Office staff took in the interplay of the conflicting advice and their tortuous search for a definition of the status of the Rhineland situation.

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Phipps referred to three related observations in this report.⁴¹ First, rumors of the remilitarization of the Rhineland, an act which the British Consul in Frankfort had been anticipating since November, 1935, were again in the air.⁴² But Phipps now added a note of urgency: Germany had actually made the decision and was only waiting for a suitable occasion to carry it out. Second, plans for moving troops into the Rhineland by road and rail were reported. Third, the inhabitants of the Rhineland were told, in a lecture by Colonel Gallenkampf, not to fear an invasion, because precautions for their protection and for the repulsion of enemies had been made.

The Central Department examined this report on 2 January 1936, and decided not to do anything about it.⁴³ Taken by itself, the report might have been of some import as the observations led to one conclusion: Germany

⁴¹ C4/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 30 Dec. 1935. The last date indicates the date of receipt at the Foreign Office. Unless otherwise stated, all Foreign Office documents are from the F.O.371 (Political Correspondence) files.

⁴² Frankfort dispatch no. 136, 26 Nov. 1935.

⁴³ It was the fourth document to be acted upon.

was actively preparing for the remilitarization of the Rhineland in the near future. Yet this conclusion was not realized by the Foreign Office at the time because the issue of a Rhineland reoccupation was clouded by numerous extenuating circumstances. Since Hitler's advent to power in January 1933, for instance, there had been twenty-four reports on the future of the Rhineland, with no fewer than seven of these coming during the previous three months.⁴⁴ Among the many motives for remilitarization attributed to Germany were Hitler's opposition to the anticipated ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact and the humiliation of having to maintain a unilateral demilitarized zone.⁴⁵ Since no German actions ever followed these reports, it led the Central Department to believe that the report of 30 December 1935 would be no different. Despite Phipps' concern, the Germans would again probably fail to act.

In addition, the report came from Phipps, which greatly discounted its full import, for Phipps' Germanophobic ideas were well known, and his tendency to overreact to anything *Deutschum* became detrimental to his credibility. Lawford, a third secretary in the Central Department, for example, once made a Freudian slip by referring to Phipps' annual report as "Phipps' Thoughts." Though the mistake was quickly crossed out and corrected, it remained for all his colleagues to see.⁴⁶ Given the pressure of work, then, the Foreign Office simply couldn't follow up on every one of Phipps' thoughts and thus depreciated the report of 30 December 1935.

⁴⁴ From C151/4/18, Foreign Office Memo., 9 Jan. 1936 and C8198/134/18, Phipps to Hoare, 12 Dec. 1935, printed in F.O. 408/65.

⁴⁵ Berlin telegram no. 258, Phipps to Hoare, 2 Nov. 1935. The Franco-Soviet Pact will be discussed later. Letter, Phipps to Sargent, 18 Sept. 1935.

⁴⁶ F.O. 371/19938, C143/143/18, Phipps to Eden, 6 Jan. 1936.

Rumors of reoccupation, however, persisted. On 2 January 1936, Phipps forwarded a copy of the lead article from the 30 December 1935 edition of the *Deutsche diplomatische~politische Korrespondenz (D.D.P.K.)* which attacked the Franco~Soviet pact in the strongest terms yet.⁴⁷ For the first time the possibility of the remilitarization of the Rhineland as retaliation against ratification of the pact was mentioned. This was all the more alarming since the *D.D.P.K.* was an unofficial mouth-piece of the German Government.

The Franco~Soviet pact had, since its signature on 2 May 1935, become a bone of contention between Germany on the one hand and France and the Soviet Union on the other.⁴⁸ In a speech of 21 May 1935, Hitler attacked the pact as "an element of juridical uncertainty."⁴⁹ *D.D.P.K.* followed this up on 6 June 1935 by condemning the pact as obscure and capable of multifarious interpretations, not all of which conformed with the Locarno Treaty of 1925.⁵⁰ These, and many other denouncements, both official and unofficial, claimed that Locarno had been "rendered valueless."⁵¹ The *D.D.P.K.* article of 30 December 1935 thus gave the first hint of possible German response to the impending ratification of the pact.

Germany had similarly attacked the Anglo-French Agreement on the application of paragraph 3, Article 16 of the Treaty of Versailles on 2

⁴⁷ C37/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 2 Jan. 1936.

⁴⁸ The ratification of the pact was being debated in the French Chambers. It was essentially a defensive treaty against Germany which obligated the two parties to mutual aid if Germany attacked either party. However, Germany had grounds to suspect unpublished understandings between France and the Soviet Union and this led to its un-conciliatory attitude.

⁴⁹ Cited in C151/4/18, Phipps to Hoare, 12 Dec. 1935, paragraph 17.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, paragraph 18.

⁵¹ This expression was first used by Herr von Ribbentrop, Berlin telegram no. 128, Phipps to Hoare, 15 May 1935.

November 1935.⁵² Due to the Abyssinian crisis, France and Britain had agreed to act jointly in the Mediterranean. The Agreement did not explicitly state, however, that this cooperation was only directed against Italy in the Mediterranean region. Germany thus interpreted the omission as an intention on the part of Britain and France to apply the agreement to other parts of the world. Such an intention would be in contradiction of the letter and spirit of Locarno, which did not admit of one-sided agreements between two of the parties in it. That the Franco-Soviet pact and the Anglo-French agreement had been denounced together as being opposed to Locarno on 2 November 1935 lent even greater weight to the *D.D.P.K.* article of 30 December 1935.

Other reports from different sources built up the case for the possibility of a German remilitarization of the Rhineland. On 16 December 1935, Herr von Neurath, the German Foreign Minister, had threatened reoccupation against the French attempt at securing a bilateral 'air pact with Britain.⁵³ Phipps warned the Foreign Office that Hitler sounded threatening in their interview of 13 December 1935.⁵⁴ British rearmament was being subjected to repeated condemnation in the German Press, and demilitarized zones, in general, were branded as blemishes on national dignity.⁵⁵

A new issue was brought up in early January. Anglo-French air talks on collective defense of Northeastern France were reported by the *Boersen Zeitung* of 8 January 1936.⁵⁶ Despite denials by the British Government, the

⁵² *Deutsche diplomatische-politische Korrespondenz*, 2 November 1935, in Berlin telegram no. 258, Phipps to Hoare, 4 Nov. 1935.

⁵³ Berlin dispatch no. 1344, Phipps to Hoare, 16 Dec. 1935. Neurath's statement was made in the course of Phipps' interview with Hitler.

⁵⁴ Berlin dispatch no. 1359, Phipps to Hoare, 19 Dec. 1935.

⁵⁵ *Voelkischer Beobachter*, Munich edition, 15 Jan. 1936, in C103/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 8 Jan 1936.

⁵⁶ Dr. Karl Magerle in *Boerzen Zeitung*, 5 Jan 1936, in C103/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 8 Jan. 1936.

German Government declared its dissatisfaction to both Britain and France on 13 January 1936.⁵⁷ The next day, the *D.A.Z.* carried a stern warning: if Britain and France proceeded to formal talks, Germany would be "obliged to consider [such talks]... as a breach of the spirit of Locarno."⁵⁸ Again, the sanctity of Locarno was at issue. But now, these breaches were interpreted as deliberate intention on the part of Britain and France to "encircle" Germany, against which the latter might have to retaliate.

France, meanwhile, was exerting diplomatic pressure on Britain. Monsieur Francois-Poncet, the French Ambassador in Berlin, intimated to Phipps on 30 December 1935 that he believed the Germans would reply to the ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact with military reoccupation of the Rhineland, in which case, France would have to mobilize.⁵⁹ Thus, he hoped that in the light of that possibility, Britain would caution Germany against any rash action. Laval, the French Premier, was in fact flaunting immediate ratification in order to force Britain to take a firm stand on the future of the Rhineland.⁶⁰ On 13 January 1936, France took the penultimate step. The French Ambassador in Berlin told Herr von Buelow directly that the French Government interpreted the German attitude as an excuse for violating the demilitarized zone and that such action would result in very grave consequences indeed. He also reaffirmed France's intention to counter any such moves with mobilization.⁶¹

⁵⁷ C204/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 13 Jan. 1936; Herr von Buelow to French Ambassador, in C223/4/18, Eden to Phipps, 13 Jan. 1936.

⁵⁸ C256/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 14 Jan. 1936, quoting the *Deutscher Allgemeiner Zeitung*.

⁵⁹ C37/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 2 Jan. 1936.

⁶⁰ Reported by M. Leger, Paris telegram no. 2, 3 Jan. 1936, in C157/4/18, Lloyd Thomas (Paris) to Eden, 10 Jan. 1936.

⁶¹ C223/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 13 Jan. 1936.

All these indications should have pointed to one conclusion: the remilitarization of the Rhineland was an almost unavoidable outcome. The one remaining question was when and how the action would take place. But the Foreign Office took a much longer time to arrive at this conclusion. For reasons to be discussed later, the Foreign Office staff continued to read the better side of every report 'and resisted the idea of having a Rhineland crisis on their hands.

* * *

The reluctance to recognize a crisis was inherent in the working method of the Foreign Office.

First, the Foreign Office had a much larger volume of urgent business than any other branch of government in peace time. Palmerston may be able to boast that he read every single report and letter that went through the Foreign Office, but by 1926, one of the less busy years for the Foreign Office, a total of 145,169 pieces of correspondence were received or dispatched.⁶² Unlike other departments which could and did shelve business temporarily, the Foreign Office must act on everything within days of their receipt, which created a situation whereby not only no news was good news, but good news was no news, or, as a corollary, familiarity bred neglect.⁶³ This was the situation when the Foreign Office depreciated Phipps' report of 30 December 1935.

Second, the time constraint also affected the thought process of the Foreign Office staff. They could not afford to look at "British Foreign Policy" in the

⁶² Victor Wellesley, *Diplomacy in Letters* (London, 1944), 192.

⁶³ David Vital, *The Making of British Foreign Policy* (London, 1968), 96.

abstract, or to grasp the direction of policy in its totality. Instead, work and planning were focused around isolated incidents: it was a piece-meal attempt to act on every individual observation that the Foreign Office received.

When numerous related items arrived in rapid succession, a general problem might be perceived, but it was only when the senior staff considered it urgent that such a problem would be deemed a crisis. This process, therefore, depended more heavily than others on the disposition of the individuals handling the information. Since crises often have innocuous and obscure beginnings, it would take some time before the Foreign Office could recognize it as such. This delay in the recognition of the Rhineland crisis was certainly apparent in the Foreign Office after the receipt of Phipps' report of 30 December 1935.

Third, to compound this problem, those who were the best prepared to visualize policy beyond geographical or topical bounds, the Under Secretaries and the Foreign Secretary, were the most overworked. Lord Strang, a former Permanent Under Secretary, estimated that they had to deal with almost twenty percent of all incoming papers because even the department heads felt that the material was important enough to be referred to higher authorities.⁶⁴ Thus, unless an item was singled out for special attention by its author, the senior staff might not be able to grasp its implications at once. Since Phipps only sent in a routine report on 30 December 1935, it took Wigram and Sargent, normally alarmists in matters Germanic, over one month to come to a conclusion.

⁶⁴ William Strang, *The Foreign Office* (London, 1965), 156.

Finally, these operational constraints led to a great hesitancy in reaching a final decision. The decision making process was therefore slow, retrospective, cautious and unusually comprehensive in order to account for all potential consequences. But given the complexity of most cases, those goals were seldom realized: not only were there too many options, but also there were too few people to work on even a select number. This therefore placed a tremendous emphasis on the individuals who chose or ruled out lines of action and gave individual perceptions an inordinately important role in making decisions. This propensity for stability, therefore, led policy makers to down-play the significance of their observations by couching them in more tentative forms.

The interplay of these factors could be seen in the days following the first reports of the rumored reoccupation of the Rhineland.

The military *attache* who reported the arms build-up and troop movement to the Rhineland mentioned in Phipps' report of 30 December, for example, tried to discount the significance of his own observations. He believed that Germany was too eager to establish a rapport with Britain to risk jeopardizing the cordiality established after the Anglo-German Naval pact.⁶⁵ The Foreign Office took him at his word, and did not even recommend a review of the German situation.

Others, including Phipps, believed that the possibility of negotiating an air pact with Germany, patterned after the Naval pact of 1935, was not entirely out of the question. Hitler, on 22 November 1935, had expressed his willingness to stop air construction when German air strength attained parity

⁶⁵ The treaty permitted Germany to build up to 35% of the British Fleet despite a ban on a German Navy by the Treaty of Versailles.

with the French.⁶⁶ The only obstacle to immediate negotiations was the unsettled political situation that arose from the Abyssinian crisis. By no means an optimist in German affairs, Phipps called the chance “as promising as is ever likely to occur to put a stop to an air armaments race.”⁶⁷ The ranting by Germany in 1935 were thus seen as attempts to bolster their negotiating position.

The Franco-Soviet pact, potentially the thorniest issue among the three powers, was also discounted. Collier, the Head of the Northern Department, took Leger at his words when the latter reported that Laval would proceed with the ratification of the pact in the belief that there would be no dangerous reaction in Germany because the German press campaign had been inspired with the view to provide ammunition for opponents of the pact in the French Chamber.⁶⁸ Collier’s minutes of 10 January 1936 on the report showed: "Personally, I share M. Laval’s optimism; but, even if I did not, I shall not think it necessary to suggest a ‘re-examination of the position’ on the account of the German press campaign "⁶⁹ Sargent followed Collier's minutes with: "As I have already said, I do not think it likely that Hitler contemplates an immediate occupation of the demilitarized zone." Though Sargent recognized the possibility of remilitarization, he doubted the efficacy of such an act and thus only recommended caution. All other measures would depend on consultations with Phipps when the latter visited London.⁷⁰

⁶⁶ C7789/55/18, Phipps to Hoare, 22 Nov. 1935, printed in F.O. 408/65.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ The Northern Department managed affairs of Scandinavia, the Soviet Union and Afghanistan; C157/4/18, Lloyd Thomas (Paris) to Eden, 10 Jan. 1936.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ C157/4/18, Lloyd Thomas (Paris) to Eden, 10 Jan. 1936.

Other reports took an even more optimistic stand on the effects of ratification of the pact. Sir George Clerk, the British Ambassador in Paris, was unable to decide if ratification of the pact would necessarily result in remilitarization of the Rhineland.⁷¹ Phipps also reported similar rumors from Berlin to confirm an observation he made on 30 December 1935.⁷²

Eden, after an interview with Herr Von Hoesch, the German Ambassador to Britain, on 2 January 1936, reported to Phipps that German anxiety was centered on the Anglo-French air talks.⁷³ Phipps concurred by forwarding the *Boerzen Zeitung* article mentioned earlier.⁷⁴ Baron von Neurath also told Phipps on 11 January 1936 that: "The German Government do not necessarily — because of the Franco-Russian treaty — intend to refuse to negotiate on the air pact, even if accompanied by bilateral agreement."⁷⁵ This statement by the German Foreign Minister seemed to remove any possibility of German retaliation against the ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact or even the assumption of the rumored Anglo-French air talks: the purpose of the recent attacks seemed only to be to sow discord between France and Britain in order to prevent encirclement of Germany.

German fears that the Soviet Union might be emboldened by the Franco-Soviet pact to interfere in South Eastern Europe were another reason given for the recent German attitude.⁷⁶ Phipps reported on 12 December 1935 that the German forces were poised for action in the East.⁷⁷ Since 1934, the

⁷¹ Paris tel. no.2, Clerk to Eden, 3 Jan. 1936.

⁷² C186/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 8 Jan. 1936; Berlin tel. no. 307, Phipps to Eden, 30 Dec. 1935.

⁷³ Dispatch to Berlin no. 25, Eden to Phipps, 6 Jan 1936.

⁷⁴ Berlin Dispatch no. 23, Phipps to Eden, 6 Jan 1936.

⁷⁵ C213/4/18, letter from Air Vice-Marshal Courtney to Wigram, 11 Jan 1936, minutes by Wigram

⁷⁶ Minutes by Sargent on *ibid.*

⁷⁷ C8198/134/18, Phipps to Hoare, 12 Dec. 1935, printed in F.O. 408/65.

Foreign Office had assumed that German foreign policy would be, in order of priority, 1) absorption of Austria and other German lands, 2) expansion in the East, and 3) recovery of colonies.⁷⁸ The first option had been thwarted by Italy in 1934, so option two now ranked first, a view which Sargent's minutes merely confirmed. In a further minute, E. H. Carr, the first secretary in charge of South European affairs, emphasized that South Eastern Europe, rather than the Rhineland, would be a more likely target for German action.⁷⁹ Thus, a Rhineland crisis continued to be considered out of the question for the moment.

The return of former German colonies was also believed to be Germany's ultimate intent. Phipps reported that Hitler, when interviewed on 13 December 1935, referred to their return as a matter of course:

No trace remained of the deprecating smile with which he indicated to Sir John Simon and Mr. Eden that colonies would be welcome. On this occasion it was a sharp summons to disgorge our loot; in fact, I was almost made to feel that I had stolen his watch.⁸⁰

This very real grievance also detracted from the Foreign Office perception of the seriousness of the Rhineland situation.

The actual preparedness of Germany for remilitarization was also questioned. Phipps had reported in December that Hitler had no definite plans for action anywhere and that the latter was opposed to war if the odds were against him.⁸¹ If anything was to happen to the Rhineland, it would take place only

⁷⁸ Berlin tel. no. 127, Phipps to Simon, 31 Jan. 1934.

⁷⁹ C585/4/18, Eden to Vansittart, 29 Jan. 1936.

⁸⁰ C8373/55/18, Phipps to Hoare, 20 Dec. 1935.

⁸¹ C8198/134/18, Phipps to Hoare, 12 Dec. 1935.

after Hitler had made a final effort to "square" Britain, so as late as 10 January 1936, Collier could write:

Herr Hitler probably does not know himself what his next immediate objective will be....Herr Hitler did not make that final effort [to square Britain] when he had the opportunity in his conversation with Sir Eric Phipps on December 13th — rather the contrary; so it seems likely that he thinks—probably with good reason—that the time is not ripe for it, *a fortiori*, not ripe for the reoccupation of the zone.⁸²

Thus, contrary to many reports, both from Governmental sources and from private sectors, the Foreign Office did not believe that Germany was prepared militarily to face the consequences of remilitarization and would tend to postpone action for some time.⁸³

The reluctance to recognize the seriousness of the situation determined the tenor of the pre-crisis period. Between the receipt of the report of 30 December 1935 and 18 January 1936, only three concrete steps were taken by the Foreign Office to appraise the situation.

First, Vansittart, on his own initiative, compiled a memorandum on 9 January 1936, giving reference to all dispatches that concerned the Rhineland received in the Foreign Office from 1933 to January 1936.⁸⁴ For the first time, the Rhineland issue was seen from its own perspective instead of being part and parcel of other issues.

⁸² Berlin dispatch, no. 1359, Phipps to Hoare, 19 Dec. 1935; C157/4/18, Lloyd Thomas to Eden, 10 Jan. 1936.

⁸³ C8198/134/18, Phipps to Hoare, 12 Dec. 1935.

⁸⁴ C151/4/18, F.O. Memo, 9 Jan. 1936.

Second, this memorandum was sent to Sir Maurice Hankey, the Secretary of the Committee of Imperial Defence, on 10 January 1936 with a covering letter. The letter, signed by Eden, requested that:

...In view of the possibility that the continuance of this demilitarization may from now on be raised any moment, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs considers it desirable to know:—

- (i) What defensive value the Demilitarized Zone is to France, Belgium and ourselves;
- (ii) What obstacle it constitutes to the defense of Germany against attack by the Western Powers.⁸⁵

The remilitarization issue, however, was still considered only as a possibility, and there was no sign of urgency.

Third, Phipps was called back to London for consultations, but as the visit was treated as a routine report rather than as a special mission, it accomplished next to nothing,

In the interim period, the Central Department worked on two principles. Wigram's minutes on Vansittart's memorandum of 9 January 1936 represented one view:

It is *perhaps worth glancing over* – as I think it shows how uncertain is the future of the demilitarized zone.

As Sir R. Vansittart has recognized, this uncertainty is perhaps the strongest argument for getting on terms with Germany with as little delay as possible. (Emphasis added)⁸⁶

⁸⁵ This became C.I.D. 1206B, 10 Jan. 1936.

⁸⁶ C151/4/18, F.O. Memo, 9 Jan. 1936; minutes of Wigram, 9 Jan. 1936.

Wigram expressed no sense of crisis. His recommendations were intended to delay, if not prevent, a hypothetical crisis involving the Rhineland, be it precipitated by France or by Germany. Vansittart disagreed with this policy. Instead, he urged British rearmament before Germany became too strong. He ended his own minutes with: "I think you [Secretary of State] should see these minutes, but need not read all the extracts."⁸⁷ There was no indication that Eden read either the extracts or the minutes; at least he did not initial the document. This estrangement over the seriousness of the issue between the Foreign Secretary and the Permanent Under Secretary became more apparent later.

The second principle evolved out of Wigram's minutes on Leger's report which was mentioned earlier. In the minutes, Wigram recapitulated the German attitude for the past months and concluded as follows:

What is all this for? I am not convinced that it is merely blackmail.

The danger of the position in the demilitarized zone is one of the strongest arguments for the establishment of closer working relationship with Germany. Yet it seems impossible to make any move — We are told that we must wait for rearmament. But does rearmament make any real progress?⁸⁸

Sargent went even further. He did not believe that Germany intended to remilitarize the Rhineland, and his only concern was to form a definite opinion on the Franco-Soviet pact. Vansittart was not to be outdone this time:

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, minutes of Vansittart, 10 Jan. 1936.

⁸⁸ C157/4/18, Lloyd Thomas to Eden, 10 Jan. 1936.

he took the issue directly to Eden who, despite Vansittart's efforts, turned out to agree with Sargent.⁸⁹

The official policy, thus, continued to drift along with events. Six days later, Sargent, who was still at a loss as to Germany's ultimate intention, minuted:

But whatever the motive, as long as the Pact [The Franco-Soviet Pact] is held *in terrorem* over Germany's head and has not been actually ratified it may be possible for the French, if they choose, to use it as a lever.

Anyhow, if we get any more of these German appeals and protestations I think we would do well to take the line that the matter is no concern of ours, and that if the German Government have any proposals to make they should address themselves direct to the French Government on the subject.

Vansittart concurred, but added that Germany, by threatening not to negotiate on an air pact, was trying to blackmail Britain into coercing France against ratification.⁹⁰ The Foreign Office was beginning to recognize the Rhineland situation as a potentially imminent crisis, but it was not before some scheming on the part of Vansittart.

* * *

Vansittart was not only the first to recognize a crisis in the Rhineland situation, but also the first to consider the crisis as imminent. It was not surprising, therefore, that Vansittart, on his own authority, sent an official enquiry to Hankey on 18 January 1936. Intended as a follow-up on his memorandum of 9 January 1936, the letter read in part:

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, minutes of Wigram, 10 Jan. 1936; Sargent, 10 Jan. 1936; Eden, 13 Jan. 1936.

⁹⁰ C213/4/18, Courtney to Wigram, 11 Jan. 1936; minutes of Sargent and Vansittart, 11 Jan. 1936.

Our information respecting German intentions regarding the future of the zone is becoming increasingly serious; and in these circumstances, I feel obliged to ask that the report [asked for by Eden] be treated as a matter of urgency. It is important to have the C.I.D.'s appreciation of the position without delay in order that we may consider what further action seems desirable.⁹¹

Hankey, whose role in the C.I.D. will be discussed in a later chapter, was as much of a Germanophobe as Vansittart, and, in all likelihood, the two might have connived to get the governmental gears rolling.⁹² While nothing came of Eden's request for ten days, it took only six days for Hankey to reply to Vansittart.

Vansittart's letter succeeded in putting on record an idea that might have been broached, but never seriously considered, by the Foreign Office: that they had a crisis on their hands. Indeed, Vansittart even tried to give that recognition a sense of urgency, but in that he failed; he had a hard enough time just convincing the others that a crisis was at hand at all.

In order to drive his point home, Vansittart engaged in feverish activity to round up evidence for his views. On 20 January 1936, he wrote the British Consul in Geneva to ascertain the attitude of the French.⁹³ Eden and Laval were both in Geneva, and, away from the complacent atmosphere of Whitehall, the two might be able to have substantive talks. Vansittart hoped

⁹¹ C291/4/18, Vansittart to Hankey, 18 Jan. 1936

⁹² They have done that before. In 1934, Vansittart, Hankey and Warren Fisher succeeded in overriding opposition in the C.I.D. Defence Requirements Committee to label Germany as the ultimate enemy. See D.C. Watt, *Personalities and Policies* (London, 1965), 85 ff; also, CAB 16/111, C.P. 104(34), Vansittart, 9 Apr. 1934; CAB 4/23, C.I.D. 1149B, (C.O.S. 351), 23 Oct. 1934.

⁹³ C418/4/18, Vansittart to Edmond, 20 Jan. 1936.

for a strong stand by the French, and, if that was forthcoming, he would be able to fully convince the Foreign Office of the need for a definite policy on the issue. In addition, Vansittart might also be able to inject a note of urgency into the discussions at the Foreign Office, if Laval was of the same opinion.

He was fortunate on both counts. Eden reported one of the most depressing interviews he had ever had: Laval was "very perturbed", he was confident that Hitler proposed to remilitarize the zone despite M. Francois-Poncet's warning of "*des consequences redoutables*" on 13 January 1936, and that Hitler would make use of the confusion arising from the coming French elections and the embargo on Italy. Laval was also anxious about the German armed forces: the French General Staff predicted the German General Staff would be ready in eighteen months, and it was rare for a country to wait to take action until it was completely prepared. Eden noted that Laval displayed acute anxiety, especially when discussing the Rhineland, and that the latter "clearly expected this challenge to come at any moment and [is] perturbed as to its consequences." More than once, Laval pressed for British assurances, and Eden felt that the French would address a direct question to that effect in the next few days.⁹⁴ This interview suited Vansittart admirably, for he now had a clear mandate to press for a decision.

A report from Phipps further bolstered his case. The British Consul in Munich noticed on 17 January that:

...the attention of the public at Bavaria is again being directed towards the demilitarized zone, which is now considered to be the one remaining factor in Europe

⁹⁴ C435/4/18, Edmond to Vansittart, 21 Jan. 1936.

which stamps Germany as a second-class nation. In National Socialist circles the hope is openly expressed that the leader will make a speedy decision to alter this state of affairs for both reasons of prestige and for economic reasons. It is also believed that such action on the part of the leader would cause no particular difficulty and that the only reaction on the part of foreign powers would take the form of a "pious protest."⁹⁵

The evidence before Vansittart showed that Hitler had not only given notice of his intention to remilitarize the Rhineland but also given fair indications of the time and method of the act.

Vansittart had earlier embarked on a grandiose project: a definitive statement on German Foreign Policy. Its relevance when printed for the Government on 22 January 1936 was particularly disturbing. The product, Vansittart's *opus magnum* to date, was a report called "The German Danger."⁹⁶ At sixty-two single-spaced foolscap-sized pages, it ranked as one of the most massive documents of this nature ever compiled in the Foreign Office. It was composed of thirty-two Foreign Office dispatches on Germany since 1933 and was intended for circulation to the Cabinet (C.P. 13 (36)). Eden noted in the preface that:

Most of these documents have already been circulated to the Cabinet at various times; but read again as a series, it will be found, I think, that they furnish a useful introduction or background to the study of the German problem as it presents itself today.

⁹⁵ C470/4/18, Phipps to Vansittart, 20 Jan. 1936.

⁹⁶ C454/4/18, Cabinet Paper, 22 Jan. 1936. Completed on 17 Jan. 1936. Eden also mentioned leakage of information. Where important, those leaks will be mentioned.

Eden further observed that: 1) Germany had an undeviating Foreign Policy that had always met with success, 2) the policy was to become the dominant power in Europe through political, economical and military means and 3) the exact direction of the expansion was still doubtful. Eden therefore concluded that Britain must rearm to guard against all eventualities, but simultaneously, Britain must decide if it was possible to come to a *modus vivendi* with Germany.

Vansittart had forced the Secretary's hand, but it took two more events to convince the Foreign Office that it must decide on a definite policy *vis-à-vis* the Rhineland. First, Flandin, the French Foreign Minister, pressed for British assurances on the Rhineland when he was in London on 27 January for the funeral of King George V.⁹⁷ Eden had to evade the issue for lack of a definite policy. Second, Flandin privately informed Clerk on 8 February 1936 that in the event of a remilitarization, France would treat it as a *casus foederis* and would take appropriate measures.⁹⁸ The time had come for a decision.

Vansittart had produced another paper on 3 February 1936. Though only eighteen pages long, this one was not a compendium of reports, but was one long interpretive and speculative essay (Vansittart was an accomplished playwright) which Eden called, "the outcome of prolonged and anxious study in the Foreign Office."⁹⁹ For undisclosed reasons, its printing for the Cabinet was held up until 11 February 1936. Vansittart's views on Germany

⁹⁷ There is great controversy over the nature of the talks. Eden's report to the Foreign Office will be used here.

⁹⁸ C763/4/18, Clerk to Eden, 8 Feb. 1936.

⁹⁹ C997/G, Vansittart, 18 Feb. 1936. The "G" designation means "absolutely top secret" and therefore of limited circulation. This also became Cabinet Paper C.P. 42(36).

were well known and his efforts greatly weakened the position of those who still refused to believe a crisis was imminent.

The final straw came on the same day. Another report of the rumor that Hitler would respond to the ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact with remilitarization was reported from Berlin through Paris. Even those opposed to action finally had to recognize the gravity of the situation. Wigram minuted: "But all this points to the urgent need that we should decide our own policy about the demilitarized zone."¹⁰⁰ Sargent agreed. Vansittart finally won.

* * *

The Foreign Office finally ended its policy of drift and began to seek the best line of action. Yet, even while making that search (the description of which will constitute the next chapter), a propensity to depreciate the crisis continued to be at work.

Hitler, judging from the grievances aired in the past three months, had two opportune occasions to remilitarize the Rhineland by claiming other powers had rendered Locarno useless. His action would then be justifiable as retaliation against unfriendly acts. The first opportunity would come after the ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact, and the second after Italy's expected withdrawal from the League of Nations because of the imposition of an oil embargo against it. All Foreign Office decisions on the Rhineland should thus take these events into consideration. But the Foreign Office refused to recognize the salience of these dates.

¹⁰⁰ C1027/G, G(36)3, Eden, 20 Feb. 1936. Written 14 Feb. 1936.

While the debate on the Franco-Soviet pact in the French Senate was drawing to a close, those members of the Foreign Office who were reluctantly drawn into Vansittart's beliefs tried to find excuses for Hitler's not taking any action. In a report to the Cabinet Committee on Germany, Eden stated:

The possibility of the reoccupation of the Demilitarized Zone in the immediate future cannot be entirely discounted. For instance, it has been suggested that Hitler might use the ratification of the Franco-Soviet pact as a pretext for a reoccupation of the Zone, and it is also possible that he might similarly take advantage of France and ourselves being involved in trouble in the Mediterranean.

The fact is that in this matter we are living in a state of uncertainty, even though the reoccupation of the Zone may not be necessarily imminent.¹⁰¹

That betrayed no sign of haste.

Other ideas were advanced. Mandel was reported as predicting that the reoccupation would not come before the June Olympics in Berlin.¹⁰² Ivone Kirkpatrick arrived at the same idea.¹⁰³ Lawford claimed that France had shelved the whole issue while M. de Lantsheere, the private secretary to M. van Zeeland, was quoted to have said that it was past the stage when Germany could be accused of breaking Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles: "Any such attempt will only lead to a deadlock or to open

¹⁰¹ C1027/G, G(36)3, Eden, 20 Feb. 1936. Written 14 Feb. 1936.

¹⁰² Mandel was a French politician who later became Premier of France; C1081/4/18, Peake (Paris) to Wigram, 20 Feb. 1936.

¹⁰³ Ivone Kirkpatrick, 1st Secretary of Embassy in Berlin. See I. Kirkpatrick, *The Inner Circle* (London, 1959), 80.

defiance."¹⁰⁴ Phipps, in a last minute report before the French Senate cast its vote, added that the German statement concerning retaliation against ratification was intended for home consumption of Germany.¹⁰⁵

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The Franco-Soviet pact was ratified by the French Senate on 28 February. Germany did not retaliate. The optimists in the Foreign Office now had a breathing space to build up their own case against the possibility of reoccupation.

Edmond, the British Consul in Geneva, relayed a conversation between Dodds, the United States Ambassador in Berlin, and Herr von Neurath. In the course of that conversation, Neurath reputedly told Dodds that Germany would rejoin the League of Nations and negotiate an air pact if the other Locarno powers would agree to the abrogation of clauses that set up the demilitarized zone and other inequitable arrangements against Germany.¹⁰⁶ This meant that Germany would not be remilitarizing the zone unilaterally, and thus destroyed Vansittart's thesis.

The same optimistic atmosphere that infected the Foreign Office in early January seemed to be building up again. When Phipps reported that the "hotheads led by General Goering" would wish to reoccupy the Rhineland, the only comment read: "These papers were discussed with the Secretary of State on March 5th and *no further action is required*."¹⁰⁷ (Emphasis added)

¹⁰⁴ C1081/4/18, Peake (Paris) to Wigram, 20 Feb. 1936; C1181/4/18, M. de Lantsheere, 24 Feb. 1936.

¹⁰⁵ The German statement read, "The occasion would not be allowed to pass without some reply on Germany's part." See C1217/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 27 Feb. 1936.

¹⁰⁶ C1350/4/18, Edmond to Eden, 2 Mar. 1936.

¹⁰⁷ C1396/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 4 Mar. 1936.

But when he reported the opposition of the German military to reoccupation, the report was well received.¹⁰⁸

Meanwhile, the crisis was underway. Ambassadors of the Locarno powers were instructed to attend at the *Wilhelmstrasse* on the morning of 7 March 1936, at which time they would be given a memorandum by Neurath. Phipps unsuspectingly informed the Foreign Office on 6 March 1936: "Chancellor's declaration will deal exclusively with Foreign Affairs, chiefly Locarno, and will take about one hour to read."¹⁰⁹

He did not know that the German Ambassador in London had already requested an interview with Eden at the same time.

The next morning, Britain was completely taken by surprise: the Rhineland was remilitarized.

* * *

Two major factors that affected the attempt of the Foreign Office to define the gravity of the Rhineland situation emerged in this examination. .

First, there were the institutional problems. The quantity of work, the time constraints, the division of labor, and the propensity for stability all contributed to the delay in the formulation of a clear cut decision.

Second, and more important, were the human factors involved. The perception of each individual of different items of information contributed to this indecision and this perceptive role played a particularly important part in each individual's conception of the righteousness of Hitler's demands, his

¹⁰⁸ C1454/4/18. Phipps to Eden, 6 Mar. 1936.

¹⁰⁹ C14S5/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 7 Mar. 1936.

aggressiveness and the best course for British policy under the circumstances. .

Of particular significance were the conflicting perceptions of Hitler's aggressiveness and the righteousness of his demands. By 1936, nearly all Britons realized that Hitler was in Germany to stay, and the Foreign Office, with daily dealings with Germany, in particular, had become reconciled to the fact. The question, therefore, was how best to live with it. While every member of the Foreign Office hoped for lasting friendship and peace with Germany, Hitler's demands and intransigencies seemed to stand in the way. Long term planning therefore called for a clear conception of British relations *vis-a-vis* Germany.

Due to the conflicting perception of Germany, however, the Foreign Office was as yet unable to define its attitude towards Germany. On the one hand, the maintenance of treaties dictated that all infractions be opposed; yet, on the other hand, the Treaty of Versailles was a constant reminder of Allied excesses in 1919.¹¹⁰ Even staunch Germanophobes such as Vansittart and Churchill, for example, had been advocates of some sort of revision of Versailles prior to Hitler's advent to power.¹¹¹ In 1936, the circumstances of the Rhineland merely brought this conflict to the fore. This could be discerned in the vacillation of the Foreign Office before 7 March 1936 which prevented a final decision on the gravity of the situation.

¹¹⁰ The literature on Treaty revision is immense, but not always scholarly. E.H. Carr's *The Twenty Years Crisis* (London, 1939), remains, I think, the best study, for it is not only descriptive, but also prescriptive. Other sources can be culled from the pages of Martin Gilbert, *The Roots of Appeasement* (New York, 1966), and, with Richard Gott, *The Appeasers* (Boston, 1963).

¹¹¹ Gilbert, *The Roots of Appeasement*, *passim*.

When rumors of reoccupation were first reported on 30 December 1935, there was great reluctance on the part of the Foreign Office to accept their full implications. This was partly due to the institutional problems described earlier, but the greater portion came from the perceptive element involved.

This latter resistance worked in several ways. First, it opposed the idea of the possibility of a Rhineland crisis. Despite much information to the contrary, the Foreign Office tried very hard to explain away these observations. When Vansittart finally convinced his colleagues on 22 January 1936 that a crisis was a distinct possibility, the resistance acted to underestimate the imminence of the crisis. It took another twenty days before the Foreign Office finally decided that a Rhineland crisis might occur at any time. Yet even after that decision was made, this factor was at work; thus, the Foreign Office was still caught completely by surprise when Hitler struck.

One dominant inference can be drawn from this process — that the Foreign Office considered the Rhineland as a non-issue. This was because the Foreign Office had no doubt that the Rhineland belonged to Germany and, therefore, did not believe it could be a source of contention between the two nations. This sentiment was openly voiced by Wigram as early as 9 January 1936. It was the method Hitler might adopt to exercise German sovereignty in the Rhineland that was cause for concern.

This was the source of the conflicting perception of Germany. On the one hand, the Foreign Office believed in the righteousness of German claims, and therefore should acquiesce in them, but on the other hand, it was convinced that the method Hitler would adopt was a breach of treaty obligations, and therefore should be opposed. As long as the

Foreign Office saw the Rhineland as part of a German problem, this conflict seemed insoluble.

This conflict became more apparent when the Foreign Office had to decide, simultaneously, on policies to recommend to the Cabinet. The same official, for example, could, without qualms, advocate completely contradictory lines of action at the same time. This process through which the Foreign Office contended with these conflicting perceptions in their search for a policy will constitute the next chapter.

CHAPTER IV

The Pre-Crisis Game Plan: Triple Option

In confronting the Rhineland crisis, the Foreign Office had three primary lines of alternative action to recommend to the Cabinet: to give up, to resist any German attempt at reoccupation, and to negotiate a settlement. In fact, the Foreign Office started to explore the efficacy of these policies even before it decided that there was an imminent Rhineland crisis.

These policies, however, were never discussed separately as policies *per se*. Rather, they merely represented the three major scopes of discussion that emerged in the weeks prior to the climax of the Rhineland crisis. Thus, arguments both for and against each policy were interlocked or dependent on the others.

When the crisis was finally thrust upon the Foreign Office on 7 March 1936, several distinct directions of perception can be inferred. This chapter is an attempt to discover the thought processes involved and the outcomes produced in the evolution of these perceptions.

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The first line of policy the Foreign Office had was to allow Germany to remilitarize the Rhineland through either an official policy statement by Britain or a *fait accompli* by Germany.

Five major arguments were advanced in support of a policy of unconditional German reoccupation. First, this policy would demonstrate the British

Government's desires for peace. The German press had been attacking the rumored Anglo-French talks on the air defense of North Eastern France, as well as the increased military budget for Britain. Prince von Bismarck, the German *Charge d'affaires* in London, protested to Lord Cranborne, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, on 15 February 1936 that Germany was: "Profoundly shocked by what appeared to be a definite anti-German bias in the British Press." Eden added that Bismarck complained that:

There was also a tendency ... to throw the whole blame for British rearmament upon German rearmament. In addition, the latter reminded Cranborne of the harm done by the Defence White Paper of 1935.¹¹²

Thus, by giving up the demilitarization clause, Britain might be able to convince the German people, if not Hitler, that it had no intentions to "encircle" Germany.

Second, the Foreign Office had grave misgivings concerning the severity of the Treaty of Versailles, in particular, over Articles 42 and 43 which branded Germany as a second-class power.¹¹³ British officials had no doubts that the Rhineland belonged to Germany, and they believed that it was only a matter of time before the demilitarized zone would be reoccupied.

A third argument for allowing Germany to reoccupy the Rhineland stemmed from Foreign Office concern over the Rhineland becoming a source of

¹¹² Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 376. Hitler, to show his displeasure, pleaded a cold in order to postpone a scheduled meeting with Sir John Simon.

¹¹³ The topic of the British attitude toward the Treaty of Versailles is worth a study of its own. Only the demilitarized zone aspect will be given in this chapter, but a fuller account will be given in the conclusion. See earlier.

conflict between France and Germany. The dissension among Britain, France and Italy presented Germany with ideal opportunities to abrogate the demilitarization clauses of Versailles, but there was always the possibility that France would retaliate and thus draw Britain into the conflict. Thus, it would be good strategy for Britain to be disengaged as much as possible from any direct interest in the matter. As late as 13 February 1936, Eden could give the following instructions to Clerk:

Moreover, as the zone was constituted primarily to give security to France and Belgium, it is for the two Governments in the first instance to make up their minds as to what value they attach to, and what price they are prepared to pay for, its maintenance I consider that the ultimate ought to come from the French side and not from ours, and I hope you will therefore *avoid raising the question*, even unofficially, with M. Flandin... In the event M. Flandin returning to the subject ... you should not give him any encouragement to hope that His Majesty's Government would be prepared to discuss the matter on the basis of a statement of the British attitude. (Emphasis added)¹¹⁴

This attitude of non-commitment for self-interest's sake characterized the British Foreign Office attitude throughout the crisis.

Fourth, in response to Vansittart's urgent query of 18 January 1936 to Hankey on the position of the Committee of Imperial Defense on the Rhineland issue, the latter finally produced two position papers on British stakes in the crisis. Viscount Swinton, the Secretary of State for Air, reported that: 1) the Rhineland was of negligible value as a defensive barrier

¹¹⁴ C790/4/18, Eden to Clerk, 13 Feb. 1936.

against Germany for the Western powers in the event of aggression by air and 2) it did not constitute a serious obstacle to the defense of Germany against air attacks by the Western powers.¹¹⁵ In short, the Rhineland was not of great importance to British aerial defense.¹¹⁶ These papers will be discussed in detail in the chapter on military plans, but let it suffice to say here that their impact on the Foreign Office was immense, since the issue was no longer giving up something vital but merely the readjustment of certain obsolete treaty clauses.

As a fifth and final argument, the Foreign Office believed that Britain was not militarily prepared to fight on the continent. Vansittart constantly urged the Government to rearm during the period before a crisis was thrust upon them, but to no avail.¹¹⁷ By neglecting armaments, Britain had limited its own options.

For these reasons, different members of the Foreign Office, at various times, directly or indirectly supported a policy which sanctioned German reoccupation. Wigram, on 9 January 1936, minuted: "I don't think anyone can doubt that the zone is going to disappear. The important thing is to arrange that it disappears peacefully."¹¹⁸ Even Vansittart, when his efforts on 20 January 1936 to convince his colleagues of an imminent crisis failed, advocated this policy for a brief moment.¹¹⁹ As late as 24 February 1936,

¹¹⁵ C584/4/18, C.I.D., 27 Jan. 1936.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Minutes of Vansittart on C151/4/18, F.O. Memo 9 Jan. 1936; C997/G, Vansittart on Germany, 18 Feb. 1936, paragraphs 3, 36.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ Vansittart minuted, "...and I will certainly dispose of the DMZ in Germany's favour." See C5855/4/18, Phipps to Vansittart, 29 Jan. 1936.

Wigram would still flirt with this policy. He noted: "It is really no longer a question merely of gaining time, but of negotiating on the essential of the question — how is the demilitarized zone to disappear peacefully."¹²⁰

Like all policies, this one also met with strenuous opposition and, paradoxically, often from the same persons who also advocated it. In fact, by late February, the opponents of giving the Germans a free hand finally outnumbered its advocates: Vansittart naturally opposed it, but so did Eden, Sargent and Wigram for different reasons.

Vansittart did not believe that yielding the Rhineland unilaterally would bring about lasting peace. He believed the conditions for peace after the First World War had been undermined since Hitler's advent to power, and a policy of modifying the more objectionable clauses of the Treaty of Versailles was no longer tenable: a new policy was called for, and to continue to grant German demands was foolish. The Rhineland case, he noted, "... is unblushing blackmail. If the German government got their way, they would start blackmailing about something else."¹²¹ Something stronger was needed to establish fruitful relations with Germany.

The fact that Britain hoped to avoid the onus of not upholding her treaties was also a strong consideration against giving Germany a free hand. The Anglo-German Naval Pact of 1935 had been attacked by France as an open breach of Versailles, but it was weathered without too much damage to British reputation. The Hoare-Laval pact of December 1935, however, succeeded in instilling into the minds of the Foreign Office staff that they

¹²⁰ C1181/4/18, M. de Lantsheere, conversation with Sargent, 24 Feb. 1936.

¹²¹ Minutes on C213/4/18, Air Vice-Marshal Courtney to Wigram, 11 Jan. 1936.

would be hounded out of office if they repeated such a fiasco. The Foreign Office, therefore, as late as 4 March 1936, didn't even dare to discuss the disappearance of the demilitarized zone with France for fear that "... it would enable the French Government to place the whole blame on His Majesty's Government for the surrender of the zone and they will certainly do *vis-a-vis* their opinion (sic)."¹²² Instead, it called for legal advice to find a way out of the conflict without appearing to shirk from Treaty obligations.¹²³

Eden, too, was partly opposed to any shirking of Treaty obligations, for he had been appointed by Baldwin to placate the pro-League groups. He had openly blamed the French for deserting the League over Abyssinia. It was impossible for him, therefore, to support a policy that he himself had just condemned.

Others, like E. H. Carr, believed that Germany's ultimate design was South Eastern Europe. Thus, if the Rhineland were abandoned, Germany would be secure in the West and would be free to turn East. The only way to prevent that would be to prevent the remilitarization of the Rhineland.¹²⁴

Finally, there were constant allusions to the different elements in Germany. Phipps, for example, believed that the "cronies", Goering and Goebbels,

¹²² C1405/4/18, F.O. Memo, 4 March 1936.

¹²³ C1064/4/18, Sir William Malkin (Legal Adviser to F.O.), 30 Jan.1936. This memorandum discussed all possible circumstances of the remilitarization of the Rhineland and concluded that it would be best if France was willing to negotiate.

¹²⁴ Carr probably did not have access to the C.I.D. papers that deemed the Rhineland of marginal defensive value to Germany. An associated issue was the relation of France with the Little Entente. Wolfers believed that the British were concerned that France would not be able to help its Eastern allies by invading Germany if the DMZ were remilitarized. I have not been able to find written evidence to support this view. See Arnold Wolfers, *Britain and France Between the Two Wars* (New York, 1940).

pushed for reoccupation over the opposition of the military.¹²⁵ Even on the day before the crisis, he wrote:

I hear privately that discussions have taken place today amongst military authorities regarding the demilitarized zone. It seems that the Army Chiefs have advised against any military action in the matter. They would prefer the Chancellor, when the time comes, to make a public statement.¹²⁶

Kirkpatrick, the First Secretary in Berlin, however, believed that Hitler was responsible, and that Goering and General Milch were against the act.¹²⁷ Despite the difference in perception, both Phipps and Kirkpatrick realized the importance of nurturing the less aggressive factions in Germany. If Hitler could reoccupy the Rhineland without foreign opposition, these factions would lose all influence. Thus they opposed renunciation of the demilitarization clause by Britain.

The relative merits and defects of a policy that allowed German reoccupation without resistance solely from the British perspective were, therefore, fairly well balanced. But there were two overriding considerations that had to be dealt with: 1) was it the best Britain could do under the circumstances, and 2) was France willing to go along with such a policy? Unfortunately, the Foreign Office, due to its conflicting perceptions of the

¹²⁵ C1396/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 4 Mar. 1936,

¹²⁶ C1454/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 6 Mar. 1936.

¹²⁷ Ivone Kirkpatrick, *The Inner Circle*, 80 ff. This apparent contradiction was not unusual for the Rhineland crisis, and, alas, the facts may never come to light. Robertson reported that 1) the German deployment orders were given on 2.Feb. 1936, 2) Hitler decided on the move on 12 Feb. 1936, and 3) Blomberg gave the final orders on 5 Mar. 1936. See E.M, Robertson, *Hitler's Pre-War Policy and Military Plans* (London, 1963), 7, 77, 78. William Shirer gives a slightly different account. Even the Nuremberg proceedings differ from the captured German documents. Fortunately, this issue is only of marginal importance to this paper. Where relevant, it will be discussed.

crisis, could not answer either question before 7 March 1936, and the policy remained a policy and did not become a plan.

* * *

The second line of policy was to resist, with force if necessary, any German attempt at reoccupying the zone. The arguments for this policy were basically the reverse of those of the first general option, but there were also factors unique to this policy.

From the discussion on the Foreign Office practices in the previous chapter, it could be expected that the Foreign Office would be unwilling to make any commitments. British relations with Germany since 1933 had been a wait and see attitude: formal relations had been limited to commercial agreements and the Anglo-German Naval pact of 1935, all of which served to establish a more cordial and cooperative relationship. Thus, despite occasions when tensions built up, such as the German withdrawal from the League and its renunciation of disarmament, the relationship remained one of peaceful coexistence if not of guarded friendship. Since this was the established pattern, the propensity for the *status quo* acted against taking steps to oppose German reoccupation of the Rhineland. Besides, even if the Foreign Office decided on this policy, it would require a political justification which, given the public opinion of that time, was not forthcoming.¹²⁸

Yet, by the same token, the defense of the status quo would demand the maintenance of the demilitarized zone, which had been in existence for seventeen years. In addition, to permit Germany to re-militarize the zone without protest on the part of Britain would be contrary to the recently

¹²⁸ The role of public opinion will be discussed in the chapter on the Cabinet.

demonstrated support of the League as an agency to solve all disputes. That, too, would require a political explanation. Thus, the perception of the Rhineland by the Foreign Office can partly be determined by the method it chose to solve this contradiction.

There were four major reasons why the Foreign Office supported this firm policy option. First, as discussed above, the maintenance of the zone to preserve the status quo tended to support action against reoccupation.

Second, this policy had the support of the Foreign Office Senior staff: Eden because of the League, Vansittart for reasons described in a previous chapter, and Sargent and Wigram through close knowledge of Germany. Even the junior staff, recorded Lawford, were in favour of some action against Hitler.¹²⁹

Third, there was the possibility that Hitler might be toppled if Britain took a firm stand. It was well known that Hitler did not purge all potential opposition in 1934; thus, by taking a firm stand, Britain would aid the opponents of reoccupation who Phipps described as the moderate elements in Germany.

Finally, the Foreign Office had a purely parochial concern — to force other departments to form a position on the crisis. The mechanism of the British Government was such that Foreign Policy decisions by departments other than the Foreign Office depended on reports from the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office, in turn, depended on the other departments for information

¹²⁹ Lawford, *Bound for Diplomacy*, 276. I have some reservations about this, but since no other junior staff member left memoirs, I'll accept this as a general observation.

before it could make a decision. Thus, the issue would continue to drift until some department could come up with a definite stand. It was to halt this process of drift that Eden asked the C. I. D. to appraise the situation. But it was only after Vansittart had committed the Foreign Office to make a decision on the crisis that the C.I.D. took the request seriously.

On the other hand, this policy of resistance would cause concern in many quarters. First, it implied potential armed conflict. War was anathema to the British in 1936: its opponents were triumphant in the Joad resolution at Oxford and the East Fulham by-election of 1933, and the Peace Pledge of 1934, to name a few.¹³⁰ Samuel Hoare, while Foreign Minister, pledged in a speech to the League of Nations on 11 September 1935 that: "Something must be done to remove the causes from which wars are apt to arise."¹³¹ He would rather alter treaties than to fight. Thus, for the Foreign Office to propose this policy would be to act against the beliefs of the Cabinet and the public. That would further lower the standing of the Foreign Office with the nation.

Second, it would also be contrary to the interest of the Foreign Office, for with war, influence in Foreign Policy would pass from the Foreign Office to the military. Besides, if differences with Germany could only be resolved through threatening war, then the rapport established since the Naval pact of 1935 would be undermined. It would, in addition, commit Britain to threaten,

¹³⁰ The Joad resolution was the celebrated topic of debate of the Oxford Union Society in which the House resolved that it will, in no circumstances, fight for King and country. The East Fulham by-election was an upset defeat of the Conservatives in a safe seat because its candidate advocated rearmament (which to the electorate implied a readiness for war). The Peace Pledge was initiated by Rev. "Dick" Shepherd, a radio preacher, who within a year, collected 80,000 pledges not to fight in any war. The British government, especially Baldwin, was affected by these anti-war sentiments

¹³¹ C8198/134/18, Hoare to Vansittart, 11 Sept. 1935.

or even apply, force every time Germany proved to be intransigent. Thus, both from short and long term perspectives, this policy would not be in the best interest of the Foreign Office.

Thirdly, Anglo-German relations after such a threat might take unpredictable turns. Germany could, of course, become a peace-loving and responsible nation. On the other hand, it could also turn towards Russia or Italy. Given the strong anti-Bolshevist bias in official British circles and the general antipathy against Italy, this policy would hardly be advisable.¹³²

Finally, there were doubts about the efficacy of this policy. A successful threat is one “which deters the opponent without implementing the penalty.” But if the opponent is not deterred, then the penalty must be successfully applied to make future threats credible. The Foreign Office, with the information they had of the British and German armed forces, was unable to decide if Britain could make good its threat. This indecision ultimately ruled out the second option.¹³³

Yet, more importantly, this policy was not ruled out sheerly because of logistical disadvantages, for nations have been known to act against all odds. Britain, particularly, with its legacy of the Napoleonic war and the First World War, believed that it could, despite everything, always muddle through. Rather, the Foreign Office did not pursue this policy because it

¹³² Anti-Bolshevism will be discussed in the chapter on the Cabinet. The possibility of an Italo-German alliance was not ruled out until 4 Mar. 1936. See *op.cit.*, C1405/4/18, F.O. Memo, 4 Nov., 1936.

¹³³ Since the F.O. did not advocate this policy, its information on British, French and German forces is not essential to this paper. Suffice to say that the reports were either inaccurate or pessimistic. See C1015/4/18, Cabinet Paper, C.P. 27(36), 10 Feb. 1936; C91/4/18, Courtney to Wigram, 7 Jan. 1936.

slowly came to view the Rhineland issue as separate from the German issue, and thus solved the contradiction posed at the beginning of this section.

The Foreign Office believed, due to tactical considerations and the propensity for the status quo, that the existing relationship with Germany should be maintained. But to continue this relationship in the face of the Rhineland crisis required a change in the status of the demilitarized zone, and *vice versa*, to maintain the zone would jeopardize the existing relations with Germany. By dissociating the issues, however, that relationship could be maintained and the abolishment of the demilitarized zone could be justified on the grounds that it was a rectification of an inequity imposed by the Treaty of Versailles. This rationalization ultimately guided British policy through the crisis.

* * *

The third option was to negotiate a settlement. There would be a limited or comprehensive settlement of differences between Germany and the Western powers based on the abrogation of the Rhineland demilitarization clauses, the scope of which would be decided upon at a later date.

This policy was attractive to the Foreign Office because most of the objections to the two other policies could be resolved, especially since this policy did not entail war or overt shirking of Treaty obligations. But it also posed two major problems: 1) could this policy be adopted by the British Government, and 2) would this be an efficacious policy?

There were six major obstacles that stood in the way of the adoption by the British Government of this policy.¹³⁴ First, there was the possibility of failure. If negotiations failed to produce an equitable settlement after Britain had made known its intentions to negotiate, Britain's reputation might be irreparably damaged, for the failure would be interpreted as British inability to exert any decisive influence. It would then no longer be held in esteem as the leading European power.

In the second place, even if negotiations were successful, their product might still be viewed as another Hoare-Laval pact. Coming only a few months after that fiasco, this policy of negotiation and compromise might be politically inadvisable.

A third objection to a negotiated settlement involved doubts about German sincerity. The Foreign Office could not decide if Germany really wanted such a settlement. If Germany was sincere, all might turn out right. But if this were not the case, the result would be even worse than if the negotiations had simply failed, for it would not only be politically damaging for Britain, but would also compromise Britain's bargaining strength in the future. Germany would then know for certain that Britain was not absolutely determined to maintain the demilitarization of the Rhineland.¹³⁵

Fourth, the Foreign Office was not convinced of the durability of any pact signed with Germany. Some members, like Vansittart, believed that no

¹³⁴ Sources for most of the following arguments have been introduced earlier; only new materials will be noted

¹³⁵ One of Britain's major concerns in the months before the crisis was to keep its attitude towards the Rhineland secret from the French and the Germans. See, e.g., C790/4/18, Eden to Clerk, 13 Feb. 1936.

arrangement that required any sacrifice on the part of Germany would be observed by the latter.

Fifth, even if Germany could be trusted to honour treaties, there would be no guarantee that Germany would not make demands on areas not covered by treaties.¹³⁶ To forestall that, a comprehensive settlement would be needed, but given the Foreign Office's perception of Germany, any such attempt would be doomed to failure.

Sixth and finally, within the Foreign Office framework, no one could tell if the others in the Foreign Office would support or oppose a policy of negotiated settlement. Even among the Germanophobes, there were expressions of sentiments both for and against this policy. Thus, no one would commit himself for fear of being overruled by the department, by Eden, or by the Cabinet. This hesitation, as much as any other factor, prevented the early adoption of this policy.

These objections notwithstanding, the arguments in favour of a negotiated settlement made it the best of all three possible lines of action. By broaching the possibility of negotiations, Britain could reassure Germany of its peaceful intentions. This not only would bolster the more moderate elements in Germany, but would also force the German Government to take a visible stand *vis-a-vis* Britain. Whatever the outcome, then, relations between the two nations would be more frank.

Second, the fear of failure or premature and adverse publicity due to French intransigence could be allayed by keeping the early stages of negotiations

¹³⁶ Minutes of Vansittart of 16 Jan. 1936 on C213/4/18, Courtney to Wigram, 11 Jan. 1936.

secret from the French. This fear of leakage became manifest as early as 6 January 1936, when Britain was warned by Germany of the possible undervaluation of the Mark after an imminent devaluation. France was not consulted because it would lead to “obstruction, and even at the best there would be sure to be leakage.” Thus, Britain decided to deal Francs a *fait accompli* just as it did over the Anglo-German Naval pact.¹³⁷ For the same reason, Eden, when asked by Laval on 22 January 1936, did not find it necessary to explain the British attitude towards the Rhineland.¹³⁸ As late as 14 February 1936, Eden could, when reporting to the Cabinet, write:

... there is a growing demand on the part of the French Government to consult us as regards the action to be taken in the event of the Zone being threatened.

The question of the Rhineland is highly delicate and complicated in view of the variety of circumstances in which it might be raised in practice, and I would therefore prefer not to have to commit myself now to any general statement regarding either policy or treaty interpretation.¹³⁹

By keeping France in the dark as to the British attitude, Britain could more confidently evaluate and advance a policy of negotiations.

A third argument favoring negotiations was that the Foreign Office believed the Rhineland to be strategically useless, and that British interest would be better served if the Rhineland could be exchanged for something more useful. Thus, as early as 21 March 1934, John Simon, the Foreign Secretary, recommended getting something out of Germany by permitting the latter to

¹³⁷ C100/99/18, Memo. Ashton-Gwatkin, 6 Jan. 1936.

¹³⁸ C435/4/18, Edmond (Geneva) to Vansittart, 21 Jan. 1936

¹³⁹ Eden's preface to C1027/G, Vansittart on Germany, 30 Feb. 1936.

remilitarize the Rhineland, for: "... if there is to be a funeral, it is clearly better to arrange it while Hitler is still in a mood to pay the undertakers for their services."¹⁴⁰ When the C. I. D. reported on 27 January 1936 that the Rhineland was of marginal military value to Britain, this view became, *a fortiori*, more attractive. On 31 January 1936, William Strang, Counsellor to the Foreign Office and Adviser on League of Nations Affairs, minuted: "Dispose of the Demilitarized Zone in due season, for what it will fetch: e.g. an air pact." Even Vansittart concurred by noting, "... and I will certainly dispose of the Demilitarized Zone in Germany's favour."¹⁴¹

Lord Stanhope, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs and a political appointee, gave this policy indirect political sanction on 11 February 1936 by noting that the Demilitarized Zone "... will not be a bargaining factor for long."¹⁴² The exact scope of bargaining the Foreign Office envisioned is the subject of a later discussion. Let it suffice to say here that the Foreign Office was fully prepared to trade the Rhineland, which it considered useless, for gains in other sectors.

Fourth, the policy of negotiation seemed the best way out of a delicate situation for the Foreign Office, for it not only could avert war, but would also help Britain retain its allies. Britain, by bringing its allies into the negotiations, would again assume the role of architect of European peace, just as it did in 1925. Thus, instead of having to choose between war or dishonor, both options being equally repugnant, Britain could emerge with

¹⁴⁰ F.O. 408/64, C1961/20/18, Memo., Sir John Simon, 21 Mar. 1934.

¹⁴¹ C585/4/18, Phipps to Vansittart, 29 Jan. 1936.

¹⁴² C837/4/18, Clerk to Eden, 11 Feb. 1936.

an enhanced reputation. This, despite somewhat different circumstances, in fact became Britain's policy after the crisis was thrust upon it in March.

Fifth, this policy, if properly presented to the public, would greatly improve the reputation of the Foreign Office. The Foreign Office had slowly been recovering from the debacle of December 1935. Now was the time to re-establish its former reputation. As long as negotiations were in progress, the Foreign Office would be in full charge of Foreign Affairs; this would not only augment Eden's position in the Cabinet, but also restore the Foreign Office's prestige by keeping it in the public's attention.

Finally, the policy of a negotiated settlement could resolve the conflicting opinions among the Foreign Office staff as well as the conflicting views each member had over the Rhineland. One of the main reasons why the Foreign Office failed to perceive a crisis in early 1936 was its inability to differentiate between the German and the Rhineland questions. Since the former called for resistance and the latter acquiescence, the Foreign Office staff was torn between these two alternatives. The policy of negotiations, therefore, became an acceptable compromise for advocates of both views.

For these reasons, this policy was being considered as early as 9 January 1936, a full month before the Foreign Office decided that a Rhineland crisis was imminent. In a minute to a Foreign Office Memorandum on the Rhineland, Wigram noted:

As Sir R. Vansittart has recognized, this uncertainty [of the Rhineland] is perhaps the strongest argument for getting on terms with Germany with as little delay as possible.

I don't think anyone can doubt that the zone is going to disappear, the important thing is to arrange that it disappears peacefully. And this means that we shall have to administer — with very great discretion — a great deal of calming medicine both in Berlin and Paris. In my view the sooner the doses are begun the better. Otherwise one or the other of the patients — perhaps both — will “go off the deep end.”¹⁴³

This policy became clearly formulated by 10 February 1936. Orme Sargent, hitherto silent on this matter, produced one of the most perceptive and realistic appraisals of the Rhineland situation.¹⁴⁴ The memorandum he wrote first discussed the legal aspect of a hypothetical remilitarization of the Rhineland by Germany. He envisioned three possible courses of action for Germany: to denounce the Treaty of Locarno by pleading the inconsistency of the Franco-Soviet pact with Locarno and simultaneously occupying the zone; to occupy the zone and ask the other signatories of Locarno to legalize the action: or, to request the other signatories to sanction reoccupation without first sending in troops.

The Foreign Office had already determined that the first two courses of action were inconsistent with Locarno and would have to be adjudicated by the council of the League of Nations under Article 4 (1) of Locarno, which would then prescribe the course of action for League members. The chances of the third option developing for Germany were so slim that it was ruled out.¹⁴⁵

But whatever the probabilities of the first two courses, Sargent firmly agreed with the recommendation of Malkin, the Legal Adviser to the Foreign Office,

¹⁴³ C151/4/18, F.O. Memo., 9 Jan. 1936.

¹⁴⁴ C796/4/18, F.O. Memo, Sargent, 10 Feb.1936.

¹⁴⁵ Sir William Malkin's Memo, 30 Jan. 1936.

that: “it would not be better to induce France to negotiate before German reoccupation of the zone does take place.” Sargent arrived at this conclusion because of the repeated French attempts to induce Britain to make a commitment on the Rhineland and its claims to Clerk, the British Ambassador in Paris, that reoccupation would be treated as a *casus foederis*.¹⁴⁶ Though this confirmed the Foreign Office's fears of the infidelity of the French, Sargent later went on to contradict himself by suggesting early consultation with France.

Sargent then posed three questions that had to be resolved before any decisions could be taken: 1) was the value of the demilitarized zone to Britain, France and Belgium such that it was, at need, necessary to defend its integrity by force; 2) if the answer to 1) was in the negative, would it be more advantageous to negotiate with Germany to prevent an illegal occupation than not to negotiate at all; and 3) if the answer to 2) was in the affirmative, would it be desirable to inform the French of Britain's views?

Though the information Sargent had to date was insufficient to form a definite opinion, he nevertheless advanced some tentative answers. He believed that the Rhineland was of less value to France or Belgium than to France's Eastern allies, for the loss of the Rhineland would deprive France of the means of giving them direct assistance by invading Germany. Thus, Sargent feared the political implications and the potential power vacuum in that region. But, as an afterthought he added that France had no intentions of

¹⁴⁶ C435/4/18, Edmond (Geneva) to Eden, 22 Jan. 1936; C573/92/62, Clerk to Eden, 27 Jan. 1936; C763/4/18, Clerk to Eden, 8 Feb. 1936

helping the Eastern powers if Germany invaded Austria, thus deprecating the importance France assigned to the Little Entente.¹⁴⁷

In addition, he doubted if British and French public opinion would support the integrity of the Rhineland by force, and thus produced the first instance of a high official openly admitting that the Rhineland was, after all, German territory. The only condition under which the public might support war was if Germany also invaded France or Belgium. But Sargent warned further that, if in view of the ultimate security needs of Britain, or, through goading by France's allies, the use of force to desist Germany might have to be contemplated, it would be advisable for Britain, in cooperation with France, to warn Germany that Britain intended to uphold the demilitarization of the Rhineland with force if necessary.¹⁴⁸

Sargent also advocated immediate consultations with France if the decision to negotiate was taken by the British Government. But this opinion did not mean he trusted France, for, on the contrary, the exact procedure he advocated was a combination of cajolery and threat. Since this dual approach towards France was ultimately adopted by the Cabinet, it will be quoted *in extenso*:

In the event of a decision to negotiate being taken, it would seem that we should at once approach the French Government, the opening for which has been given us by M. Flandin. We should point out that with a re-armed Germany it is difficult to suppose that the demilitarised zone can continue indefinitely. In

¹⁴⁷ This was the only serious discussion by the Foreign Office of the impact of remilitarization of the Rhineland on the Little Entente. Apart from another mention by Eden, it did not merit further discussion. See Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 375.

¹⁴⁸ This line of action was contemplated in March 1935 when Hitler announced German rearmament but was overruled because it seemed inopportune.

these circumstances we could suggest that an early negotiation with the German Government for the replacement of the zone by some other regime and therefore for the revision of the Treaty of Locarno seems essential. The French, true to their usual practice and egged on by their Eastern allies, would probably insist on the continued assertion of their full treaty rights to the zone, but without having any real intention of defending those rights if violated. This would mean that they would, as in the case of the military clauses of the Treaty, take up an attitude which in effect would end in their abandoning their rights not, as we should like, as part of a compromise or bargain, but as the result of a unilateral repudiation by Germany. If the French were to refuse even to consider the question of modifying the present regime as regards the zone, probably the only way of forcing them to face this issue would be for H.M. Government to make it clear what our interpretation is of the extent of our Locarno obligations in regard to a reoccupation of the zone unaccompanied by any attack on France or Belgium. We might also say that if the French Government refused to discuss a modification of the present regime and insisted on the letter of the law, the "assistance" which H.M. Government are pledged under the Treaty of Locarno to give the French Government in the case of a violation of the zone will also have to be limited to the strict letter of the law in cases where such violation clearly does not imply any immediate attack on France or Belgium, e.g. we would interpret the word "assistance" to which we are pledged as something less than military assistance, until and unless instructed otherwise by the Council of the League.

If France could thus be induced to negotiate, Sargent believed that there should be a comprehensive review of the Treaty of Locarno, ranging from the disappearance of the demilitarized zone and the negotiation of an air pact with a limitation on air armaments, to a German guarantee to Central and

Easter Europe — in short, a maintenance of the existing power alignment after allowing for the reoccupation of the Rhineland. Sargent also pointed out that Germany would not be satisfied with any modifications short of full remilitarization of the zone.

Finally, if negotiations were ruled out, Sargent's view was that "...it would be for consideration whether we should not let France know our view of the procedure under the Treaty of Locarno in the event of an infringement of the demilitarized zone."¹⁴⁹ Knowing France, Sargent could not recommend any policy without reservations and thus deliberately left the alternatives ambiguous. This attitude was not changed when he later wrote a minute to clarify his memorandum.¹⁵⁰

Sargent's formulation of the basic issues of this policy set the Foreign Office to work. The Foreign Office, however, did not address its efforts to the three questions Sargent proposed, for the questions were more appropriate for decision-makers than for policy formulators. Instead, the Foreign Office examined three major conditions in order to determine the efficacy of this policy: 1) did Britain have anything to negotiate with, 2) could France be induced to negotiate, and 3) was Germany sincerely willing to negotiate? All three had to be answered in the affirmative before the Foreign Office could recommend this policy to the Cabinet. The remainder of this chapter will be devoted to an examination of the Foreign Office's consideration of these conditions.

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¹⁴⁹ C796/4/18, F.O. Memo, Sargent, 10 Feb. 1936.

¹⁵⁰ Minutes of Sargent, 10 Feb. 1936, on above.

The first overall study of what Britain had to negotiate with was made on 15 February 1936.¹⁵¹ It contemplated negotiations for an air pact in exchange for a wide ranging series of British concessions, the details of which were to be prepared by the Foreign Office, the War Office and the Air Ministry. For the second time, the Foreign Office sent official requests for the opinions of other governmental departments, the results and implications of which will be examined in the chapter on the Cabinet.¹⁵² The Foreign Office, however, had already made some preliminary studies on the problem and had reached certain conclusions.

The most likely topic for negotiations was an air pact.¹⁵³ Britain, by permitting Germany to remilitarize the Rhineland, could ask for an air pact that would establish a fixed ratio of air strength among the powers, and, if fortunate, would also set a ceiling on air armaments. British bargaining strength in this respect, however, was not limited to its acquiescence on remilitarization of the Rhineland. Two obstacles had stood in the way of an early agreement: Germany's refusal to have a ceiling on air armaments and France's insistence, despite German opposition, on having bilateral, as well as general, agreements. Britain could thus act as mediator between France and Germany and obtain an agreement through *quid pro quo* concessions.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵¹ C998/4/18, F.O. Memo, 15 Feb. 1936.

¹⁵² The first time was when the C.I.D. was consulted on the military value of the Rhineland.

¹⁵³ There was a very lively exchange of views between the Air Ministry and the Foreign Office on this topic; only the more salient features will be examined here. Details can be found in Cabinet Papers 2 and 4 (Minutes and Miscellaneous Information on Overseas Defence).

¹⁵⁴ For Germany's position on an Air Pact, see C7789/4/18, Phipps to Hoare, 22 Nov. 1935. The C.I.D. actually opposed bilateral guarantees because they entailed commitment to fight when the occasion arose. It also doubted the possibility of a German attack on

Negotiation need not, by any means, be limited to an air pact. As early as 1 January 1936, the Foreign Office recognized that German intransigence in international affairs might have been the result of domestic economic troubles, a belief no doubt fostered by Japanese and Italian examples. For this reason, the economic section of the Foreign Office (under the Western Department) which was headed by Frank Ashton-Gwatkin, produced a memo which urged the examination of four ways by which Germany could be aided economically. First, it proposed monetary aid to help Germany through the devaluation of the Mark. Second, it advocated giving Germany freer access to raw materials. Third, it urged preferential trade for Germany in Eastern and South Eastern Europe, and fourth, it proposed a United Kingdom-German Customs Union which would be more advantageous to Germany than the existing most-favored-nation arrangement.¹⁵⁵ Since these proposals required extensive interdepartmental consultations, no final decision was taken before the Rhineland was actually remilitarized.¹⁵⁶

But on 24 February 1936, the Southern Department concluded that:

The centre and south-east of Europe is a region in which British political and economic interests, other than our interests in the maintenance of peace and of the Covenant of the League of Nations, are least directly threatened by German expansion. If, therefore, concessions are to be made to Germany in Europe, it is in this area that they can most conveniently, from the point of

Britain. See CAB 4/24, C.I.D. 1161B (C.O.S. 364), 8 Feb. 1936. The C.I.D. took three full meetings to decide on this

¹⁵⁵ C400/9918, F.O. Memo, Ashton-Gwatkin, 1 Jan. 1936.

¹⁵⁶ The Cabinet Committee on Germany ruled out trade concessions in March because Germany already economically dominated Eastern Europe and the Balkans.

view of His Majesty's Government, and probably, in the long run, from the point of view of Europe itself, be sought.¹⁵⁷

In addition, Britain was willing to consider retrocession of former German colonies now under British mandate — Tanganyika, the Cameroons, and Togoland. Since October 1935, the question of colonies had frequently been raised by a diverse group of German officials: Blomberg, the War Minister, intimated Germany's desires to Phipps on 10 October 1935; General von Reichenau of the German General Staff broached that subject with the British Military *Attache*; and Dr. Schacht of the *Reichsbank* openly asked for the Cameroons on 5 December 1935.

This series of discussions culminated in Phipps' interview with the Chancellor on 13 December 1935. Phipps' impression of Germany's attitude towards the colonies was, to cite the passage again:

The Chancellor referred to their return as a matter of course. No trace remained of the deprecating smile with which he indicated to Sir John Simon and Mr. Eden that colonies would be welcome. On this occasion it was a sharp summons to disgorge our loot; in fact, I was almost made to feel that I had stolen his watch.¹⁵⁸

German desires were unmistakable; on the British side, the policy might follow that of Simon in March 1935, whereby retrocessions would be used to "engage" Germany, or that of Hoare on 11 September whereby all clauses, especially colonial, from which war was apt to arise should be removed. Again, colonial concessions were not ruled out despite strong objections in

¹⁵⁷ Memo by Owen O'Malley, Head of Southern Department, 24 Feb. 1936, circulated to the Cabinet Committee on Germany as CAB 27/559, G(36)6.

¹⁵⁸ C8375/55/18, Phipps to Hoare, 20 Dec. 1935.

the Foreign Office that such action should be considered only in lengthy consultation with other interested departments.

Less tangible concessions included granting Germany *Gleichberichtigung* with other powers, a British guarantee for France and Germany and new arrangements for solving the International Rivers Regime of the Rhine.¹⁵⁹

Germany, on the other hand, was expected to return to the League of Nations, to agree to the inclusion of Holland in all negotiations, to agree to bilateral air armaments inspections, and to guarantee the integrity of East and South Eastern European nations.¹⁶⁰

Thus, Britain had enough concessions to induce Germany to negotiate, and Germany had enough to offer to make negotiations worthwhile for Britain. If all other conditions proved favorable, there would be ample room for diplomatic maneuvers and agreements among the powers. Everything, therefore, depended on whether the powers were willing to engage in substantive negotiations.

* * *

The second condition that had to be answered in the affirmative was whether France could be induced to negotiate in good faith. Since Britain could not pose the question to the French directly, the conclusion drawn by the Foreign Office depended heavily on its perception of France's attitude towards the European situation in general and the Rhineland in particular. If France decided to resist any German attempts at remilitarizing the Rhineland,

¹⁵⁹ C720/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 4 Feb. 1936; C1028/4/18, Minutes of 1st Meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Germany, 18 Feb. 1936.

¹⁶⁰ C998/4/18, F.O. Memo, 15 Feb. 1936.

then the policy of negotiations could never materialize. If France, on the other hand, was not prepared to use force when the occasion arose, there might be a possibility for negotiations. Until Hitler actually delivered the *fait accompli*, however, Britain was never quite sure what action France would adopt.

On 14 January 1936, the French Ambassador in Berlin unofficially informed Phipps that France would treat any infraction of the demilitarized zone as a *casus foederis*, but even Vansittart, the leading Francophile in the Foreign Office, doubted if the French Government would act.¹⁶¹ After two interviews with M. Flandin, Eden confirmed Vansittart's doubts despite Flandin's reiterations to the contrary.¹⁶² Thus, despite another attempt by Flandin to dispel British suspicions on 8 February 1936, the Foreign Office concluded on 14 February 1936 that France would not likely be willing to maintain the demilitarized zone by force.¹⁶³

Yet, the matter did not rest there, for France again brought up the issue when the oil embargo against Italy was discussed by the League of Nations on 3 March 1936. In the first written *communiqué*, France warned, in very strong terms, against the dire consequences of the imposition of the embargo, for that would lead to Italy's withdrawal from the League and Locarno which would, in turn, lead to a German remilitarization of the Rhineland. The *communiqué*, further warned that in that case:

¹⁶¹ C223/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 13 Jan. 1936; C418/4/18, Vansittart to Edmond, 20 Jan. 1936.

¹⁶² C455/4/18, Edmond to Vansittart, 22 Jan. 1936. See also Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 373, 374; L. Namier, *Europe in Decay* (London, 1950), 18 ff.

¹⁶³ C763/4/18, Clerk to Eden, 8 Feb. 1936; Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 375; Colvin *Vansittart in Office*, 94.

The French Government counts on the British Government being ready to hold that the Treaty of Locarno commits them *vis-a-vis* France even in the absence of the other guarantor. It counts on England being ready to support France even alone in the maintenance of the demilitarized zone.¹⁶⁴

Prior to this *communiqué*, Britain had assumed that all French threats of the use of force to oppose German reoccupation were only intended to strengthen French bargaining strength. The terseness of this *communiqué*, however, seemed to be less a tactical move than an expression of intent. The Foreign Office was therefore at a loss to explain this *volte-face*.

Concurrent with this process of determining France's attitude towards the Rhineland, the Foreign Office had to find out if France, in case it decided not to defend the Rhineland, would be willing to negotiate with the Germans. When Eden first brought up the matter with Flandin indirectly, the latter, in a very guarded statement, was not entirely opposed. Eden reported that:

It would really not be possible for any French Foreign Minister, with the best will in the world, to agree to meet the Germans at a conference which would legalize German rearmaments before the French elections. If, however, it was possible to hold matters up till then, we could continue to seek to find ways and means of overcoming the difficulty, which the French Government felt, as soon as the elections were over.¹⁶⁵

Perowne, the third in command at the Central Department, injected another note of optimism when he reported that France would not be adverse to considering some sort of settlement.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁴ C1390, C1391/4/18, Edmond to Eden, 3 Mar. 1936.

¹⁶⁵ C573/4/18, Eden to Clerk, 27 Jan. 1936.

¹⁶⁶ Minutes of Perowne on C720/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 4 Feb. 1936.

In order to press home that hope, Eden hinted to M. Corbin, the French Ambassador in London, that if France wrecked the forthcoming naval conference, relationship between their two nations would be severely strained. He also added that Britain had yielded a lot, especially financially, and that it was up to the French to respond.¹⁶⁷

France, however, underwent something of a *volte-face* on 21 February 1936, when Corbin categorically ruled out any possibility of negotiations. Corbin was reported as saying that:

... it was not possible for them to undertake now to sign a protocol which bound them unconditionally to sign an agreement with Germany at a given date. This was, in fact, equivalent to signing an agreement with Germany now which violated the military clauses of the Treaty of Versailles. No French Government could do this.¹⁶⁸

In addition, Corbin requested Britain to make no advances in the air talks with Germany. In a fit of profound disappointment, Eden concluded that there was no purpose in discussing any treaty because of the French attitude. This policy of negotiations, however, was not ruled out, for by this time, the Cabinet was willing to consider the policy in spite of the apparent non-cooperation of France. That will be discussed in a later chapter.¹⁶⁹

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¹⁶⁷ A1343/4/45, Eden to Clerk, 14 Feb. 1936."A" stands for the American Department which managed Naval Affairs.

¹⁶⁸ A1534/4/18, Eden to Clerk, 21 Feb. 1936.

¹⁶⁹ CAB 23/83, 15(36)1, 5 Mar. 1936. The designation means that that was part of the first conclusion of the fifteenth meeting of the Cabinet in 1936.

The final condition which the Foreign Office had to consider in determining the viability of a negotiated settlement was the sincerity of Germany. This was a sensitive topic in the Foreign Office, especially among the Central Department members. Vansittart, for example, was opposed to any agreement with Germany as stated in his two massive reports, and Sargent and Wigram were certainly disinclined towards it. But Germany was making a very convincing case.

Hitler prepared the ground for belief in his sincerity on 22 November 1935, when he expressed his willingness to enter into air discussions. Coming only five months after the Anglo-German Naval Pact, this gesture even convinced Phipps, who called the occasion “... as promising an opportunity as is ever likely to occur to put a stop to an air armament race.”¹⁷⁰ Thus, despite warnings to the contrary by Vansittart on 9 January 1936 and Collier the day after, the Foreign Office was slowly gravitating towards the belief that the demilitarized zone might just be the last factor in Europe that stamped Germany as a second-class power and Germany was sincere in offering to negotiate this final settlement.

Germany, too, continued to cultivate this belief of the British. On 2 March 1936, Neurath intimated to Dodds, the United States Ambassador in Berlin that Germany would rejoin the League of Nations and even discuss arms limitations if: 1) Germany could get back some colonies, 2) Germany was invited to join in the naval discussions and 3) the demilitarization clauses were removed.¹⁷¹ Germany thus tempted Britain with its own desires. This campaign to lead Britain into a mood for immediate negotiations was

¹⁷⁰ C7789/55/18, Phipps to Hoarc, 22 Nov. 1935.

¹⁷¹ C1350/4/18, Edmond to Eden, 2 Mar. 1936.

intensified in the next few days. By leaking the contents of an interview with the Rumanian Ambassador on 24 February 1936, Neurath reiterated Germany's willingness to reenter the League on conditions similar to those he enumerated to Dodds.¹⁷²

On 6 March 1936, the day before the remilitarization of the Rhineland, no less than three channels were used to convey the same impression. The *Voelkische-Beobachter*, in a lead editorial, claimed that Britain opposed a French attempt to secure a joint warning against Germany. The paper claimed that "... it is reported in well-informed quarters that the Cabinet are not disposed to meet French wishes. Their opposition is due principally to the fear that Germany might regard such action as further proof of an encirclement policy."¹⁷³ This, of course, was playing on British fears that the chance for negotiations might be jeopardized.

In Berlin, Neurath, on 6 March 1936, requested an interview with Phipps for the next morning (together with the Ambassadors of other Locarno Powers), and, in passing, suggested that negotiations for an air pact be started immediately.¹⁷⁴ Phipps' report on this offer was promptly dispatched and was received in London the same day.

At the same time, von Hoesch, the German Ambassador in London, informed Eden that despite objections to the French suggestion of bilateral air pacts, Germany was willing to enter into substantive air talks at once.¹⁷⁵ On his way out, Hoesch mentioned an important communication from the

¹⁷² C1404/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 4 Mar. 1936.

¹⁷³ C1448/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 6 Mar. 1936.

¹⁷⁴ C1455/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 7 Mar. 1936. (Sent and received on the 6th.)

¹⁷⁵ C1450/4/18, Eden to Phipps, 6 Mar. 1936.

Chancellor and suggested a further meeting the next morning. That was easily arranged since 7 March 1936 was a Saturday.

No meeting among high Government officials took place on the evening of the 6th: the Cabinet had tentatively decided to broach the subject of negotiations with France as soon as it was convenient, and the Foreign Office was sure that that would be the best policy, especially since the encouraging developments of the past week.

The next morning, the Foreign Office was caught without a policy.

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Although the Foreign Office failed to commit itself to a definite line of policy, it was steadily veering toward a policy of negotiations. Eden had actually asked permission from the Cabinet on 5 March 1936 to broach the possibility of Air Pacts with the German Ambassador the next day.¹⁷⁶ That attempt, of course, was thwarted by the reoccupation on 7 March 1936. But the British inclination was clear; given time, Britain would have settled for negotiations.

A policy of negotiations was, in fact, the natural outcome of the discussions and deliberations on the Rhineland by the Foreign Office since January, 1936. As discussed in the last chapter, Foreign Office decisions were the result of both institutional and human factors. Both of these factors lent

¹⁷⁶ CAB 23/83, 15(36)1, 5 Mar. 1936, conclusion 1(b).

themselves, in the case of the Rhineland, to a compromise policy — that of negotiations.

First, institutional constraints tended to rule out a policy of resistance. It was customary for all departments of the Government to seek Treasury approval before they proposed any action that involved new expenditure.¹⁷⁷ Rather than to face Treasury rebuff, the departments preferred not to propose expensive action. This financial concern pervaded all Foreign Office planning in the days prior to the crisis. Maintenance of the status quo, on the other hand, virtually precluded a policy of non-action.¹⁷⁸ A policy of negotiations therefore became the best compromise.

More importantly, a policy of negotiations also served as the only possible compromise for the divergent, individual perceptions of Germany, especially with respect to the aggressiveness of Hitler and the validity of his demands.

As discussed in the previous chapter, this conflict prevented the Foreign Office from forming a definite opinion on the gravity of the Rhineland situation. It was not surprising, therefore, that the Foreign Office found it even harder to advocate a particular line of policy, for to advocate a policy was predicated on the Foreign Office's having a clear conception of the exact nature of the crisis.

Since the Foreign Office failed to form such a conception, it also failed to decide upon a policy.

Yet, despite this vacillation, the Foreign Office was beginning to have a clearer view of the situation by February, 1936. A policy of resisting

¹⁷⁷ For Treasury control, see the chapter on the Cabinet.

¹⁷⁸ The conflicting views of the *status quo* were discussed in the previous chapter.

German reoccupation was becoming untenable, not only on strategic grounds, but also on moral grounds. This latter development was the basis of Wigram's observation of 9 January 1936 and 24 February 1936; even Vansittart claimed that he "will certainly dispose of the DMZ in Germany's favour."¹⁷⁹ By late February, 1936, nearly every member of the Foreign Office was convinced that Germany, despite treaty restrictions, had the right to station troops in the Rhineland. The logical policy for the Foreign Office, therefore, was to give up the demilitarization clauses.

This policy, however, was not adopted because the Foreign Office was beginning to have certain misgivings about Germany's profession of adherence to treaties. This view was spearheaded by Vansittart and was supported, in varying degrees, by Wigram and Sargent, an opposition formidable enough to block a policy of acquiescence to German reoccupation.

A policy of negotiations therefore became a compromise solution to the conflicting views of the situation. The opponents of acquiescence, for example, were not prepared to prevent German reoccupation forever; in fact, they, too, opposed the permanent demilitarisation of the Rhineland. Their only interest was to find an acceptable way to abolish the zone. Only in this light can the paradox of a Foreign Office official advocating opposing lines of action at the same time be explained; the Foreign Office was preoccupied with the form, and not the substance of any German reoccupation.

The Foreign Office, in fact, never really questioned the ultimate reoccupation of the Rhineland; its purpose was to seek the most acceptable

¹⁷⁹ C151/4/18, F.O. Memo, 9 Jan. 1936; C1181/4/18, M. de Lantsheere, conversation with Sargent, 24 Feb. 1936; C585/4/18, Phipps to Vansittart, 29 Jan. 1936

time and method to readjust this apparently inequitable status of the Rhineland. The vacillation, therefore, of the Foreign Office in deciding on the imminence of the Rhineland crisis was the result of its inability to determine the best time to negotiate a settlement, and the further vacillation in settling on a policy was the result of its inability to find the best means to rectify the injustice to Germany of having to maintain a demilitarized zone.

Thus, despite its failure to decide on a definite line of action, the Foreign Office was in fact beginning to opt for a policy of negotiations as the best compromise between its conflicting perceptions of the Rhineland situation; Hitler's move on 7 March 1936 merely catalyzed the process.

CHAPTER V

Tarnished Brass

The Committee of Imperial Defence, the highest military planning body of the British Government, was officially requested on 10 January 1936, for the first time, to furnish information on the Rhineland.¹⁸⁰ This request by the Foreign Office specifically asked that:

... In view of the possibility that the continuance of this demilitarisation may from now on be raised any moment, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs considers it desirable to know:—

- (i) What defensive value the Demilitarised Zone is to France, Belgium and ourselves;
- (ii) What obstacle it constitutes to the defence of Germany against attack by the Western Powers.¹⁸¹

The C.I.D, therefore had to take a definite stand not only on these two questions, but on a whole range of other questions that concerned the military relationship among Britain, France and Germany.

This chapter will examine these questions and the answers the C.I.D, offered. Such an examination will elucidate the C.I.D.'s perception of its role vis-a-vis Europe in the thirties and, in particular, its role vis-a-vis the Rhineland.

¹⁸⁰ CAB 4/24, C.I.D. 1206-B, 10 Jan. 1936. See also Chapter III.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

The C.I.D. oversaw all military planning for the British Empire. Though it did not have a fixed membership, the major service departments, the Foreign Office and the Treasury were usually chosen by the Prime Minister who was, *ex officio*, chairman.¹⁸² Despite its similarity with the Cabinet in composition, the work of the C.I.D. was quite different, at least statutorily, since it only dealt with military affairs.

The Committee issued regular reports on the state of the British Armed Forces, but, at the request of any member, usually the Foreign Office, special reports would be drafted. Information for all reports was supplied by the relevant departments and was utilized by the service departments for their provisional reports. These would be discussed and amended before final adoption by the full committee. An examination of these reports and the discussions on them would, therefore, yield much information on the attitudes and beliefs of the personalities involved.

Eden's request of 10 January 1936 and, subsequently, Vansittart's request of 18 January 1936 set the C.I.D., and especially the Air Ministry, to work.¹⁸³ These requests, though nominally only asking for an estimate of the military value of the Rhineland, in fact asked if the Rhineland was worth defending, and, if so, if Britain were militarily prepared for its defense. These were the questions the C.I.D. had to resolve before the Foreign Office could decide on the efficacy of a policy of resistance, and therefore, there was great pressure on the Committee to complete the appraisal quickly.

¹⁸² This section on the C.I.D. and British military planning between the wars would not be necessary if only there had been a single adequate study. But as it is, some of the more important facts must be supplied here.

¹⁸³ C291/4/18, Vansittart to Hankey, 18 Jan. 1936.

The Air Ministry, in a memorandum submitted on 27 January 1936, reported that the Rhineland was of negligible value militarily to Britain, France or Belgium.¹⁸⁴ It concluded that, due to modern aircraft, Germany did not need to establish an air force within the zone for attack on the Western powers; nor would the zone constitute an obstacle to the air defense of Germany from the West due to the ease of installing anti-aircraft defenses. The only advantage of the zone to the Western powers would be to tie down some German forces to defend the zone in case of a land attack from the West.

The General Staff clarified these advantages in a report of the same date.¹⁸⁵ It argued that since there were few bridges on the Rhine, France could, without much effort, seize the Palatinate and the Ruhr at Aachen-Koblenz while Germany was engaged in the East. That conclusion, however, assumed that Germany had to be engaged in the East. But, as discussed in earlier chapters, the advantage would not be realized because France never contemplated attacking Germany in order to defend the Little Entente powers in Eastern Europe.

Though the conclusions drawn by the reports of 27 January 1936 might have been based entirely on military considerations, there was evidence to show that the military was willing, for other reasons, to abandon the Rhineland without a fight. These beliefs greatly affected the Military's assessment of the Rhineland situation in the weeks prior to the crisis.

¹⁸⁴ CAB 4/24, C.I.D. 1210-B, 27 Jan. 1936.

¹⁸⁵ CAB 4/24, C.I.D. 1211-B, 27 Jan. 1936,

As early as 31 December 1925, the C.I.D. sub-committee on Demilitarised Zones concluded that:

59. A demilitarised zone established entirely at the expense of one country, that is including only its own territory, is an arrangement no State would freely accept unless adequate compensation were offered it. If such a zone be set up by treaty after a war with a view to insuring the safety of the victor, the result might well prove contrary to that expectation. The country in whose territory the zone had been established would in time react against what would be considered a humiliating and permanent reminder of defeat. The demilitarised zone would in that case become a cause of friction instead of a guarantee of security.

60. The case of the demilitarised zone established under Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles is a case in point. Once Germany has got rid of the occupying armies, which are her chief concern at the present moment, it is probable that she will react against the unilateral character of this arrangement. The danger of this will, however, certainly be mitigated by the beneficent effect of the Treaty of Locarno.¹⁸⁶

Ten years later, on 14 February 1935, the C.I.D. decided to oppose an Anti-aerial Bombing Convention based on Locarno because:

One of the events that bring the "flagrant violation" provisions of the Treaty of Locarno into operation is a flagrant breach of Articles 42 and 43 of the Treaty of Versailles; in other words, the construction of fortifications or the maintenance and assembly of armed forces in the demilitarised zone. Any time

¹⁸⁶ CAB 16/68, D.Z.2, 31 Dec. 1925. "D.Z." stands for Demilitarized Zone.

within the next year or two the Germans may reoccupy the demilitarised zone and proceed to fortify it....

It is almost certain that when matters come to this point none of the signatories of the Locarno Treaty will be prepared to take action. In this country the position would be particularly difficult if the French Government called on us to cooperate. Many people in the United Kingdom would say that Hitler was quite right. Still more would say that it was no affair of ours. Few would be ready to risk their own lives or those of their kith and kin, or to embroil the nation in a European war for this reason.¹⁸⁷

These two reports show that, all other considerations aside, the C.I.D. would not be willing to maintain the demilitarization of the Rhineland because it did not believe that its maintenance was justified. The Committee, therefore, never made plans merely for evicting the Germans from the Rhineland.

The conviction that the demilitarized zone would ultimately be re-occupied by Germany was strengthened when the C.I.D. Joint Planning Committee reviewed British Defence Policy in May 1935. The Committee predicted that the Germans felt encircled and, within 1935: “There was the possibility of Germany refusing to be bound any longer by the Treaty of Locarno and her consequent occupation of the demilitarised zone in the Rhineland.”¹⁸⁸ In August, 1935, this view became clearly formulated.¹⁸⁹ With remarkable accuracy, the Joint Planning Committee predicted that in Phase I (i.e., the present):

¹⁸⁷ CAB 4/23, C.I.D. 1162-B, 14 Feb. 1935.

¹⁸⁸ CAB 55/7, J.P. 109, 13 May 1935. “J.P.” stands for Joint Planning.

¹⁸⁹ CAB 55/7, J.P. 111, 1 Aug. 1935. The passages following are from the same source.

Herr Hitler has stated that he values so highly the British pledge given in the Treaty of Locarno that, for the sake of it, he will observe the sanctity of the de-militarized zone in the Rhineland, in spite of the affront to German sovereignty which this unilateral zone involves; and, so long as belief in the mutuality of the pledge exists, there is no reason to think that Germany will flagrantly infringe the demilitarized zone....

But Phase II, the result of the encirclement of Germany and the concomitant hardening attitude of Germany, was beginning, and in this phase, Germany:

... has no longer the same need for the Treaty of Locarno as she had in the days of her military weakness when she still feared a “preventive war” by France; and it is assumed that by playing off the other Locarno Powers against one another at the appropriate moment she has been able to re-occupy and fortify the demilitarized zone in the Rhineland without precipitating a crisis.

Germany would probably allow the rest of the Treaty of Locarno to continue to exist as a simple mutual guarantee treaty. It might even be supplemented by a special Air Pact on the same basis.

Italy was expected to be involved in an Ethiopian adventure and would be disinclined to take action against Germany:

Thus it seems that Germany will be able in this phase to re-occupy the demilitarized zone and to fortify it without opposition, other than diplomatic. By so doing she will have gained increased security on her western frontier and will be able to act more freely and in greater strength in the east. The western powers will have lost correspondingly in security without any compensating advantages, and Germany will have won the first round against those who are trying to hold her in

check; she may hence-forward be expected to concentrate on her policy of expansion eastwards.

The tone of the discussions indicated that the Military was resigned to the loss of the demilitarized zone and was not prepared to defend it by force.

By 1936, these remarkably accurate predictions of Hitler's intention to reoccupy the Rhineland should have been the cause for alarm, but the C.I.D., like the Foreign Office, tried to depreciate the gravity and imminence of the crisis. The military *attache*, described in an earlier chapter, who first reported rumours of preparations for re-occupation on 30 December 1935, for example, tried to mollify the full implication of his own observation.¹⁹⁰ The successful conclusion of the Anglo-German Naval pact in 1935 also whetted the appetite of proponents of negotiations with Germany. It was not surprising, therefore, that whatever the military value of the Rhineland, the military was also willing to acquiesce in its abolition.

* * *

In another vein, the military was reluctant to assign a higher value to the Rhineland because it might in fact be called to defend the zone.¹⁹¹ British defense policy after the First World War was based on the One-Power Standard and the Ten Year Rule which greatly limited arms construction.¹⁹²

¹⁹⁰ C4/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 30 Dec. 1935.

¹⁹¹ The literature on British Defence Policy between the wars is small and is further hampered by the notorious Public Record Act of 1958 (the Fifty-Year Rule). Some of the files have been opened in 1968, but have not been extensively made use of to date. The military material used in this chapter comes partly from a cursory examination of these files and partly from culling through books on the military enumerated in the bibliography.

¹⁹² C.I.D. definition of the One-Power Standard:

The requirements of a One-Power Standard are satisfied if our fleet, wherever situated, is equal to the fleet of any other nation, wherever situated, provided that

In addition, Britain disarmed, partly due to treaty obligations, but also due to financial woes.¹⁹³ The Ruhr invasion of 1923 and the Manchurian crisis of 1931 also distorted the deployment of the meager British forces.¹⁹⁴ British armed forces were therefore in a deplorable state by 1935.

The Air Ministry and General Staff, when formulating the reports of 20 January 1936, had to take into account the forces available for use in the Rhineland if the occasion arose. The navy, still the primary bastion of the British forces, would be useless, and therefore was not taken into consideration. The principal force to be used would be the Air Force and the Army (in the form of an Expeditionary Force).

The Air Force was ill-fated from its inception. It was conceived after an intense internecine struggle between the Navy and the Army over control of air armaments, and the problem was not settled until 1937 when the Navy

arrangements are made from time to time in different parts of the world, according as the International situation requires, to enable the local forces to maintain the situation against vital and irreparable damage pending the arrival of the Main Fleet, and to give the Main Fleet on arrival sufficient mobility.

See CAB 4/23, C.I.D. 1181-B, 29 Apr. 1935.

The Ten Year Rule, established in 1919, assumed that there would be no major war for ten years. It was formally revoked in March 1932, but was publicly announced only on 10 Mar. 1936. See M. Postan, *British War Production* (London, 1952), 1; F. Johnson, *Defence by Committee* (London, 1960), 225; C. Webster & N. Frankland, *The Strategic Air Offensive Against Germany* (London, 1961), I,57.

¹⁹³ In 1938, for example, John Simon, the Chancellor of Exchequer, euphemistically called the cut in military budget as the preservation of the "Fourth Fighting Arm." Postan, *British War Production*, 13.

¹⁹⁴ The British Air Force, for example, was designed to strike France, and Japan was viewed as the principal enemy until 23 Oct. 1934. Since June 1933, however, there were numerous proposals to plan against Germany, but there was always an objecting majority. This ended in October 1934 when war with Germany was envisioned in five years time. See CAB 4/22, C.I.D. 1112-B, 30 June 1933 for the Foreign Office position; CAB 4/23, 1147-B, 23 Oct. 1934; CAB 4/23, 1149-B (C.O.S. 351), 23 Oct. 1934. "C.O.S." stands for "Chief of Staff."

won control of the Fleet air arm.¹⁹⁵ The Air Force's development was further hampered by the rapid advance in air technology and the conflicting views within the Air Ministry on the best use of the Air Force.¹⁹⁶

These handicaps became alarming in 1935. In April, official figures showed that German peacetime air production was near double that of Britain.¹⁹⁷

When the document was circulated in the Foreign Office, Sargent went beyond his domain to suggest that future planning should be taken out of the hands of the Air Ministry.¹⁹⁸ A report on aircraft performance in June, 1935, also showed that British light bombers could not reach Germany from British air bases and the heavy bombers could barely penetrate Germany with 500 pounds of bombs.¹⁹⁹ The ultimate test was in practice; in 1935 a British escort squadron, in a joint military exercise, missed the French squadron over the English Channel.²⁰⁰

The Army was in no better shape, for it received the lowest priority of all the armed forces:²⁰¹ full mechanization did not begin until 1934,²⁰² the field guns and anti-aircraft guns used in 1935 were of World War I vintage, and

¹⁹⁵ R. Higham, *The Military Intellectuals, 1918-39* (New Jersey, 1964), 64.

¹⁹⁶ The biplanes which made up the majority of the R.A.F. were out-moded by 1933. The conflict between offensive and defensive deployment of the air force made design and production near impossible. This was only temporarily resolved in Feb. 1937. N. Macmillan, *The Royal Air Force in the World War*, (London, 1942), 14; Webster & Frankland, *Strategic Air Offensive*, 88 ff.

¹⁹⁷ C3614/55/18, D.C.(M).(32)138, April 1935.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁹ CAB 4/23, C.I.D. 1179-B, 20 June 1935. As late as Sept. 1938, the Air Staff believed that given the low range and flight load British aircraft, the best use of night bombers would be to drop propaganda leaflets. Air Council to Ludlow-Hewett, 15 Sept. 1938, in Webster & Frankland, *Strategic Air Offensive*, 99-100.

²⁰⁰ Boyd Calde, "Anti-Aircraft Defence", *Saturday Review*, CLIX, 22 Jun. 1935, 777, in Higham, *Military Intellectuals*, 189.

²⁰¹ See Postan, *British War Production*, Appendix 6.

²⁰² The following data are from *ibid.*, 67 ff.

the Vickers machine guns used dated back to 1880. In late 1936, the Army had 209 light and 166 medium tanks for a total of 375; 104 of the former and 164 of the latter were obsolete. As late as 1937, wooden dummies had to be used in military exercises.

It was therefore not surprising that the Chief of Staff committee, when asked about an expeditionary force by the C.I.D. sub-committee for Defence Policy and Requirements on 15 January 1936, replied that:

Once German rearmament is completed, possibly in about five years' time, it may be vital to us to have an expeditionary force capable of being sent to the continent. Such a force cannot be created at a moment's notice. If it is possible that it may be required in five years' time, preparation must be begun now, in order that the necessary reserve of men and material may be created.²⁰³

That was less than two months before the Rhineland crisis.

In addition, apart from the *materiel* handicaps, the military had to work under the guideline set by the Joint-Planning sub-committee on 6 August 1935 which stipulated, in light of the quality of the armed services, that: "At least two months' notice is required before all our forces can be considered as able effectively to cooperate ... on a war basis."²⁰⁴

German armaments, on the other hand, were viewed with alarm and wonderment: Britain never knew exactly the size and quality of the German forces. The *Luftwaffe*, for example, was estimated at fifty percent of Britain's

²⁰³ CAB 16/111, D.P.R. (D.R.)5, 15 Jan. 1936. "D.P.R." stands for Defence Planning and Research.

²⁰⁴ CAB 23/82, 42(35)3, 6 August 1935.

in November, 1934.²⁰⁵ Hitler, however, claimed air parity with Britain in March 1935, and the Air Staff, under Ellington, accepted the figures in official calculations on 15 April 1935.²⁰⁶ Thus, the Royal Air Force, despite the planned expansions, was no match for the Germans for at least three years.²⁰⁷ Baldwin, the Prime Minister, was so exasperated by the conflicting figures that he admitted to the House of Commons on 22 May 1935 that Britain had no idea of the size of the Luftwaffe.²⁰⁸ This confusion in estimation also applied to the British estimations of the German Army. In short, German forces were considered by the British military as bigger and better than Britain's in every way. War simply was not feasible under these circumstances.

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The C.I.D. also had to weigh the possibility of an economic sanction against Germany. The first plan for economic pressure short of war was formulated on 30 October 1933, but only in 1935 was it examined in any detail.²⁰⁹ A preliminary assessment on 25 January 1934, however, concluded that:

²⁰⁵ *Hansard*, House of Commons deb., 295, col. 882, 28 Nov. 1934.

²⁰⁶ CAB 53/24, C.O.S. 373, 15 Apr. 1935. This was denied by Londonderry, the Air Minister and Sassoon, the Under Secretary. See C. Londonderry, *Wings of Destiny* (London, 1943), 126-7.

²⁰⁷ Expansion Plan "C" was adopted on 21 May 1935. The R.A.F. was to be expanded by 16 squadrons to 68 by 1937. However, the 52 squadrons planned in 1923 were not yet completed then.

²⁰⁸ For example, in letters to Baldwin, Churchill claimed that Germany would have 2091 first-line planes by 1937; Simon, the Foreign Secretary, claimed it to be 900, but believed a secret report of 3000; Goering claimed in 1935 that Germany could wipe out the French Air Force of 155; Goering and Milch claimed Germany had no air force to speak of in 1935 in the trial at Nuremberg. See *Trial of the Major War Criminals*, IX, 46; also, *Stanley Baldwin Papers*, File 1.

²⁰⁹ CAB 4/22, C.I.D. 1118-B, 30 Oct. 1933.

WE THINK IT DOUBTFUL WHETHER THE MEMBERS OF THE LEAGUE PARTICIPATING IN THE APPLICATION OF ECONOMIC PRESSURE COULD MAKE IT EFFECTIVE, IN THE CIRCUMSTANCES ENVISAGED [NO WAR], EVEN IF IT WERE APPLIED OVER A LONG PERIOD, UNLESS IT WERE REINFORCED BY MEASURES SUCH AS COULD HARDLY BE ADOPTED WITHOUT THE EXISTENCE OF A STATE OF WAR. (The entire passage was set in capital letters in the original.)²¹⁰

When plans for sanctions were examined in detail in June, 1935, the sub-committee for sanctions concluded that if sanctions were applied, Germany would default on all debts and reparations owed to Britain and would bring down Swiss, Dutch and British banks.²¹¹ In an accompanying report, the sub-committee repeated its conclusions of 1934 and further warned that:

Full economic pressure on Germany would produce injurious effects on the trade of the United Kingdom, as well as the Dominions, India and the Colonies. These effects would be immediate, severe and, in some respects, possibly lasting. In particular, the exercise of economic pressure on Germany would involve grave financial consequences to this country.²¹²

Three days later, the sub-committee again warned of the possibility of war if sanctions were imposed.²¹³ Economic pressure, therefore, hardly seemed an efficacious threat against Germany, especially because it would involve war, the prevention of which was the *raison d'être* of sanctions.

²¹⁰ CAB 4/22, C.I.D. 1128-B, 25 Jan. 1934.

²¹¹ CAB 4/23, C.I.D. 1175-B, 3 Jan. 1935; C.I.D. 1177-B, 6 Jun. 1935, Britain held £40m covered by the Standstill Agreement, £26m from interest on Dawes and Young loans and £25m from 4% interest on German Funding Bonds.

²¹² CAB 4/23, C.I.D. 1175-B, 3 Jun. 1935.

²¹³ CAB 4/23, C.I.D. 1177-B, 6 Jun. 1935.

The full C.I.D. reviewed these three reports on 11 July 1935, but merely took note of them — not even the Germanophobes suggested finding ways to make sanctions effective.²¹⁴ In fact, sanctions were not discussed in detail again until after the Rhineland was remilitarized.

* * *

The C.I.D. formed its first opinion on the Rhineland situation on 20 January 1936.²¹⁵ At this meeting, the committee only acknowledged the Foreign Office memorandum on the Rhineland mentioned in an earlier chapter.²¹⁶ No mention was made of Eden's and Vansittart's requests of 10 January and 18 January respectively: only Stanhope, the Parliamentary Under Secretary representing the Foreign Office, mentioned that he assumed, on the basis of information supplied by the War Office and Air Ministry, that the demilitarized zone was not of critical importance to Britain. The full Committee, then, at the suggestion of the Prime Minister, resolved to postpone all decisions until Phipps returned to London to brief the Government.

The course of events from this date became almost melodramatic. As Phipps' report was of no import, neither Germany nor the Rhineland was discussed when the C.I.D. next met on 6 February 1936. Two more reports on the weakness of Britain and France *vis-a-vis* Germany within the next week further intensified the British fear of war. Finally, on 21 February 1936,

²¹⁴ Meeting 270, 11 July 1935.

²¹⁵ Meeting 273, 20 Jan. 1936.

²¹⁶ C151/4/18, F.O. Memo. (Central Dept.), 9 Jan. 1936; also as C.I.D. 1206-B, 10 Jan. 1936.

information from financial circles showed that German debts in Britain had soared, thus aggravating the economic undesirability of sanctions or war.

The refortification of the Heligoland on 25 February 1936 proved to be a forerunner of the remilitarization of the Rhineland. The Heligoland, like the Rhineland, was barred from being fortified by the Treaty of Versailles. When Hitler revoked this restriction on 25 February 1936, the Admiralty only noted that the Heligoland did not, “to any material extent facilitate offensive operations against ourselves and its fortification cannot be said to constitute a threat to our security.” In addition, the Admiralty acknowledged that, to the Germans, its de-fortification was certainly a case of non-equality. This last admission clearly expressed what the C.I.D. as a whole thought of the Rhineland.

On 4 March, the Air Ministry produced yet another estimate of the *Luftwaffe*. Swinton, the Air Minister, concluded his memorandum with a warning that:

... in circulating this paper I feel bound to express a personal anxiety which I feel with regard to estimates of this nature, however carefully prepared. German capacity to produce aeroplanes is enormous. She has vast man-power. She can and is giving some sort of flying training to a large number of men. Her mass-produce machine may not be of the highest performance. Many of her pilots will be inadequately trained. But if Germany chose to use partly trained pilots to bomb indiscriminately, she could, within a short time produce and go on producing machines for them. I cannot escape the foreboding that Germany would employ tactics of this kind to reinforce the more precise operations of her more highly trained squadrons.²¹⁷

²¹⁷ CAB 4/23, C.I.D. 1216-B, 4 Mar. 1936.

This clearly harked back to Baldwin's warning that the bombers will always get through. Phipps, on the same day, reported that Hitler had “talked exuberantly about Germany’s growing immunity from sanctions.”²¹⁸ This additional information merely reinforced the reluctance of the C.I.D. to recommend action in any form against Germany.

Three days later, Germany remilitarized the Rhineland: the C.I.D. devoted its efforts to the prevention of war or sanctions.

* * *

The Committee of Imperial Defence had two major considerations *vis-a-vis* the Rhineland situation. It believed that the British Forces were no match for the Germans: war would be sheer madness. But the C.I.D. also believed that the Rhineland was rightfully German in all respects; the forced demilitarization was a travesty of justice. Both considerations were at work prior to the crisis, and both tended to oppose any action against Germany that was only for the maintenance of the demilitarization of the Rhineland. But until the crisis materialized, these two considerations worked as a single influence to desist the use of force. How the C.I.D. resolved and set priorities for these considerations when the Rhineland was remilitarized will be examined in the next chapter.

²¹⁸ C1395/4/18, Phipps to Eden, 4 Mar. 1936

CHAPTER VI

The Phoney Crisis

Hitler addressed the German *Reichstag* on the morning of Saturday, 7 March 1936: the speech began, as was the custom for the past few weeks, with a denunciation of the Franco-Soviet pact. But this time Hitler went further — the denunciations were capped by the pronouncement that:

In accordance with the fundamental right of a nation to secure its frontiers and ensure its possibilities of defence, the German Government have to-day restored the full and unrestricted sovereignty of Germany in the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland.²¹⁹

At the same time, the Ambassadors of the Locarno powers were summoned to the *Wilhelmstrasse* and informed of Hitler's intentions: German Ambassadors also delivered the notice to Governments to which they were accredited. Meanwhile, 19 battalions and 30 artillery units moved into the Rhineland amid the tumultuous and enthusiastic welcome of the populace.²²⁰ The remilitarization of the Rhineland became a *de facto* act.

This chapter will examine the first critical decision the British Government had to make — what its first public policy statement should be. And there was a severe time constraint on its deliberations, for this decision had to be made by Monday, 9 March 1936, when the House of Commons reconvened

²¹⁹ Cmd. 5118. See Appendix II.

²²⁰ Keitel to von Neurath, 7 Mar. 1936. *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-45* (Washington D.C., 1966), Series C, V,44.

after the weekend. An examination of this decision making process would reveal not only the dominant perceptions different government officials had of the Rhineland situation prior to the crisis, but also the changes, if any, of these perceptions.

Britain entered the crisis without any clear definition of its role or policy. The Foreign Office, as described in Chapter IV, was unable to support fully any of the three alternative lines of action. The materialization of the crisis therefore forced the issue upon them; the Foreign Office had to come up with a well-defined policy for Cabinet review. The Committee of Imperial Defence, too, was unable to produce a definite policy prior to the crisis; instead, it dodged the issue by not discussing the Rhineland situation at all after the Foreign Office had asked for its opinion. Now, in less than two days' time, both departments had to come up with a finalized policy. This chapter will first examine the formulation of the recommendations offered to the Cabinet by the Foreign Office and the C.I.D. in the light of their perceptions prior to the crisis. Then, the methods the departments used to convince the Cabinet and the final decision of the Cabinet will be examined.

* * *

Eden was the first member of the British Cabinet to be informed of Hitler's act; von Hoesch, the German Ambassador, by previous appointment, called on Eden at 10 a.m., 7 March 1936, and read the memorandum he had promised the day before.²²¹ Eden reported later that von Hoesch prefaced the memo with, "I am afraid that the first part of it will not be to your taste, but the later portions contain an offer of greater importance than has been

²²¹ See Chapter III. The memorandum was published as Cmd.5118, here reproduced as Appendix II.

made at any time in recent history" — an acknowledgement that Hitler's justifications of reoccupation might not be acceptable to Britain, but, taken with the proposals, should prove to be palatable.²²² After listening to the memorandum, Eden replied in the same vein; he regretted the action of the German Government, for it amounted to the unilateral repudiation of a Treaty freely negotiated and freely signed, but that he would give the proposals careful consideration, especially the offer to return to the League of Nations. The interview then ended: Eden had chosen his words carefully when he referred to the reoccupation only as a "unilateral repudiation," for British treaty obligations partly hinged on the term "flagrant breach."²²³

Eden was shocked by the suddenness of Hitler's action; he was opposed to any unilateral repudiation, but was equally loath against immediate retaliatory action. Hitler's offer to return to the League, especially, struck Eden as an option that must be exploited. Thus, for lack of a pre-determined response to such an action, Eden could only give a non-committal answer to von Hoesch.

This vacillation and indecision, however, was dispelled when Eden summoned M. Corbin, the French Ambassador, for an initial briefing of the British position. Corbin was informed that Britain regretted the German action, but that the offers, especially with regard to the Air Pact and Hitler's proposal to return to the League, were important. The best policy, therefore, would be to wait and see, and not to add to the difficulties; Britain and France must not close their eyes to the counter-proposals, for these would

²²² Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 380 ff

²²³ See Appendix I for the legal aspects of the breach.

have a considerable effect on public opinion.²²⁴ Corbin, on the other hand, did not give any indication of what the French attitude might be, but only deplored the German action. In this interview, Eden implicitly indicated that British military action could be ruled out.

Eden next informed the Prime Minister and the Service Departments of the recent development, and recorded that Baldwin, the Prime Minister, was disposed against any form of action for domestic reasons.²²⁵ On Eden's return to the Foreign Office, telegrams from Phipps and Clerk awaited him. Phipps' telegram, surprisingly, did not contain anything important, but Clerk reported a substantive talk with Flandin, the French Foreign Minister. Flandin, according to Clerk, was considering the situation calmly and would act *de se concerter* with other Locarno powers. France would also be calling a meeting of the Locarno powers in Paris and the League Council in Geneva which, he hoped, would condemn the German action. The French Government, Flandin reiterated, could neither abandon its defenses nor negotiate under threat. Clerk was also informed of the cessation of military leave in Eastern France. In an accompanying report, Clerk also reported that an official press statement by the French Government had called for economic and military sanctions.²²⁶ Eden, however, was not moved by this late profession of strength by the French.

²²⁴ C1436/4/18, Eden and Corbin, 7 Mar. 1936. Eden's memoirs reproduced this conversation, but, for reasons to be examined later, left out the portion bearing on his remark on the importance of bilateral pacts and the German offer to return to the League. He thus left out the only indication of what policy the Foreign Office might advocate. See Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 383.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 385.

²²⁶ C1490/4/18, Clerk to Eden, 7 Mar. 1936; C1491/4/18, Clerk to Eden, 7 Mar. 1936. Eden, in his memoirs, failed to mention the cessation of military leave and the hope for sanctions. Instead, he called Flandin's statement "temperate." This omission will be discussed later. See *ibid.*, 386.

By the time Eden composed his report to the Cabinet on the same day, he had already resolved the conflicting perceptions of the Rhineland situation he held prior to the crisis; this solution became the central argument of his report. He began by rejecting, as von Hoesch had anticipated, the arguments put forward by Germany for reoccupation; but, the ultimate disposition of the demilitarized zone was another matter, for:

...it is relevant to recall here that the possibility of negotiations between the Locarno Powers, which might have culminated in authorising its reoccupation by Germany, was already under consideration in London. A memorandum which I circulated on the 14th February, 1936 (G. (36) 3), states that "taking one thing with another, it seems undesirable to adopt an attitude where we would either have to fight for the zone or abandon it in the face of a German reoccupation. It will 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." And a Foreign Office memorandum on the Air Pact, prepared in consultation with the Air Ministry and War Office (G. (36) 4 of the 2nd March, 1936), expressly envisages the possibility that if we pressed the German Government to discuss the Air Pact they "would reply that they will raise the question of the continuance of the demilitarised zone; but in many respects such a reply might be to the good." Indeed, in the communication which I made to the German Ambassador on the 6th March (Foreign Office dispatch No. 286 of the 6th March) I had this possibility very definitely in mind, though, of course, no indication of the kind was given to Herr von Hoesch.²²⁷

²²⁷ CAB 24/261, C.P. 73(36), 8 Mar. 1936; Germany and the Locarno Treaty. Memo by the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, para, 3.

Eden's concern, therefore, was less for the disappearance of the zone than for the method Hitler chose to effect his remilitarisation. This belief became startlingly clear in a later passage:

The German government, by the reoccupation of the zone effected on the morning of the 7th March, have thus not by that action produced a result, so far as the demilitarised zone itself is concerned, which we were not prepared ultimately to contemplate. It is the manner of their action, as I informed the German Ambassador yesterday, which we deplore.²²⁸

Thus, it was only when the issue was forced upon him that Eden was able to set aside all other arguments and grasp the situation at its crux. In fact, Eden implicitly attributed his own vacillations prior to the crisis to his inability to decide on the exact scope of negotiations; Hitler's action merely:

... complicated the negotiations. For by reoccupying the Rhineland he has deprived us of the possibility of making to him a concession which might otherwise have been a useful bargaining counter in our hands in the general negotiations with Germany which we had it in contemplation to initiate. ***Such negotiations are now inevitable***, but we shall enter them at a disadvantage, for we have lost the bargaining counter to which I have just referred (Emphasis added)²²⁹

As concluded in Chapter III, Hitler's action merely catalyzed the Foreign Office decision making process by drawing the discussions to their logical conclusion — that of a policy of negotiations. The precipitousness of the remilitarization only deprived Britain of a cheap bargain.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*, para.4.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, para 5.

Eden continued the report with a discussion on the merits of Hitler's proposals in the light of initial responses of the other Locarno powers.²³⁰ But he proceeded to outline his policy recommendations to the Cabinet without making any commitment on those proposals.

He foresaw three types of relationship with Germany. First were "safe and advantageous" agreements, these being agreements that would give:

immediate and more or less lasting relief from the present international tension, and the durability of which might be assumed be reason of the fact that Herr Hitler would not be making any concrete concessions or submitting to any inconvenient restrictions — in fact agreement in which the spirit rather than the letter was the essential element.²³¹

Non-aggression pacts, Air pacts and the return of Germany to the League would fall into that category.

Second were "expedient but unimportant" agreements. These would be:

...those which might be useful for the time being for the improvement of the international atmosphere or in order to anticipate unilateral action by Germany, but which would not contain stipulations of vital importance to us. In this category would fall all agreements for cancelling minor restrictions imposed on Germany, such as the International rivers regime, the fortification of Heligoland, &c. in which Germany, would be the sole beneficiary.²³²

²³⁰ Again, no mention was made of Clerk's report of French military measures in its Eastern provinces. *Ibid.*, para. 18.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, para. 24. This discussion was left out of Eden's memoirs.

²³² *Ibid.*, para. 25

Finally, there were "dangerous" agreements that would call for substantive concessions such as air armament limitations, disarmament or the retrocession of colonies on the part of Britain.²³³

Pursuant to this classification of Anglo-German relations, the Rhineland question would naturally, therefore, be classified as "expedient but unimportant." As such, it was a "minor restriction" that might have given Britain a bargaining tool; its loss was therefore not a tragedy, but only, as Eden stated it earlier, "the loss of a useful bargaining counter for Britain."

In that light, British policy should be to prevent having to resort to direct measures to re-impose the demilitarization of the Rhineland. So, treaty repudiation notwithstanding, Britain "***must prevent*** any military action by France against Germany" (Emphasis added); Germany should not even be asked to evacuate the Rhineland "unless the powers who made that request were prepared to enforce it by military action"; and the possibility that the French Government might be goaded to take action by its public "must be ***avoided at all costs.***" (Emphasis added)²³⁴

More practically, while Britain could not prevent the League Council from finding Germany guilty of a violation of the demilitarized zone, Britain ought to drive home the point that the "finding ought to be on the distinct understanding that it is not to be followed by a French attack on Germany

²³³ *Ibid.*, para. 26

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, para. 28. Sargent (at least the handwriting looked like Sargent's) was less adamant than Eden in trying to prevent hasty action by France and changed the underscored passages from "prevent" to "discourage," and "avoided at all cost" to "avoided if possible." Eden cited the amended version in his memoirs and claimed it to be his own. This, together with other discrepancies between Eden's memoirs and the actual documents, will be examined later. See Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 387 ff.

and a request for our [Britain's] armed assistance.”²³⁵ Britain, in addition, ought to resist satisfaction for France on the grounds that it was both impracticable and inconsistent with any idea of negotiations with Germany for a new settlement.²³⁶

The basis of British planning, Eden concluded, should be to:

...cajole France to accept this mandate [of negotiations] ...The strength of our [British] position lies in the fact that France is not in the mood for a military adventure of this sort. Unfortunately, between military action on the one hand and friendly negotiations on the other, there lies the policy of sulking and passive obstruction, and it is this policy to which the French Government, in their weakness, will be inclined to have recourse, and out of which we shall have to persuade them.²³⁷

This sounded remarkably similar to Sargent’s prescription of 10 February 1936.²³⁸

Eden's perception of the Rhineland crisis, therefore, became manifestly clear. Throughout the discussions in his report, he was really only interested in the form of the reoccupation; that the Rhineland would ultimately be remilitarized was never seriously questioned. All the vacillations, deliberations and discussions prior to the crisis were merely designed to make the reoccupation as palatable as possible to all concerned and, if possible, bring some gains to Britain. It was therefore natural that, when the crisis materialized, he would oppose any action to restore the *status quo ante*.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, para. 29.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, para. 31

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, para. 33.

²³⁸ C796/4/18, F.O. Memo, Sargent, 10 Feb. 1936.

The League of Nations, however, remained an important element in Eden's conception of the European situation. But the League was not to be an instrument to enforce every aspect of the Treaty of Locarno; instead, any pronouncement by the League Council on the German action was to be based on the assumption that no direct action should be proposed. This policy, however, by no means meant that Eden was disrespectful of the League; rather, the League was viewed as an agency whereby inequities could be adjusted. Eden had finally dissociated the Rhineland question from the Locarno question; his policy of acquiescing to the reoccupation of the Rhineland while, at the same time, maintaining the integrity of the League, was not contradictory, but complementary.

Sargent and Vansittart, too, after the *fait accompli*, agreed with Eden's views. When Eden's report was shown to them, Sargent only mollified Eden's anti-French sentiments, and Vansittart was reported by Eden to have "approved it enthusiastically, describing it as lucid, dispassionate and realistic" and only suggested minor alterations.²³⁹ As with Eden, Hitler's action also solved the dilemma for Sargent and Vansittart. Prior to the crisis, they were unable to decide on a policy due to their failure to distinguish between the Rhineland and German questions; the best they could have done then was to settle on a compromise policy of negotiations. But they even failed to achieve that because they could not decide on the most opportune time and method to broach the subject of negotiations with Germany. Hitler, therefore, not only settled the question of the time and method of opening negotiations, but also forced the separation of the Rhineland from the German question through a simultaneous condemnation of the demilitarization clauses and the offer of a

²³⁹ Eden, *Facing the Dictators*, 388. Only at this point in his memoirs did Eden mention the French military preparations.

comprehensive settlement. Given those circumstances, Vansittart and Sargent could not but agree with Eden's views.²⁴⁰

After concluding that Germany should not be opposed, the Foreign Office Staff became non-receptive to reports that ran counter to their conclusion. Thus, despite reports of French military maneuvers and preparations, the Foreign Office simply refused to believe that France might invoke Article 4 (3) of the Locarno Treaty and go to war with Germany.²⁴¹ This conviction did not alter even after Sarraut, the French Premier, in a radio broadcast to his nation on the evening of 8 March 1936, strongly stated that:

Having conscientiously examined the situation, I declare in the name of the French Government that we intend to see maintained that essential guarantee of French and Belgian security countersigned by the British and Italian Governments

²⁴⁰ Unfortunately, the two days of March 7 and March 8 are neglected by historians; most discussions on the Rhineland crisis begin with Eden's speech in the Commons on 9 Mar. 1936 when Britain had to shift gears and put on a facade of strength. Colvin, the biographer of Vansittart, did make excursions into this period, but he had to depend on Eden (who has been shown to be unreliable) and was misled; Vansittart's memoirs, unfortunately, were finished up to 1935 when he died; Sargent left nothing; the only indication of Wigram's view, his famous lament that "War is now inevitable...Wait now for bombs on this little house," was made days later.

²⁴¹ C1501, Clerk to Eden, 8 Mar. 1936; C1508/4/18, Clerk to Eden, 9 Mar. 1936; C1509/4/18, Clerk to Eden, 8 Mar. 1936. For Article 4(3) see Appendix I. Ironically, the French Government was actually putting on a show and did not contemplate action. No one really knows what happened in the French Cabinet meeting of 7 March 1936; the participants all gave conflicting accounts aimed more at setting themselves up as advocates of action than at historical scholarship. Flandin, for example, even had his dates wrong. Duroselle's article, I think, is by far the best account of this despite the fact that the *Documents Diplomatique Francais* on which he based his discussions is hardly the last word on French diplomacy. More pertinent here, though, is the fact that the British Government did not know that the French were only calling a bluff when they advocated action; the information available to the Foreign Office only showed that France, contrary to British preconceptions, was willing to resist Germany. It is therefore inaccurate to attribute British inaction, as Eden, Colvin *et al* did, to French inaction.

which is the Treaty of Locarno. We are not disposed to allow Strasbourg to come under the fire of German guns.²⁴²

It was in this atmosphere of strong anti-French and anti-war sentiment that Eden drafted his speech to be delivered before the House of Commons on 9 March 1936. It began with a recapitulation of the events of March 7 and March 8, and, after a mild condemnation of the German action, called for the rebuilding of a new European structure.²⁴³ The Foreign Office had finally made up its mind.

* * *

The Committee of Imperial Defence was worse hit by the 9 March 1936 deadline than the Foreign Office. The latter had at least been aware of a potential crisis, and, when it came, was prepared, though surprised. The C.I.D., however, neither expected nor made contingency plans for a Rhineland crisis; the full C.I.D. committee, as discussed in Chapter V, shelved the issue after its January meeting; the Chief of Staff sub-committee, the political forum of the service departments, did not discuss this issue in 1936; and the Joint Planning sub-committee never discussed the Rhineland as an independent issue. Now, in two days' time, the C.I.D. had to come up with a detailed appraisal of the situation as well as a definite recommendation for the Cabinet.

²⁴² A. Toynbee, *Survey of International Affairs*, 1936 (London, 1937), 269.

²⁴³ The draft and the finalized version was combined as C1606/4/18, House of Commons debates, 10 Mar. 1936. This speech will be treated later because the Cabinet made extensive and significant alterations.

The product, a report addressed to the Foreign Office, was necessarily tentative, cautious and defensive.²⁴⁴ Even the title gave away the Committee's lack of resolve; at that critical hour when war was a distinct possibility, the memorandum was passively called "Note on C1480/4/18 of 7th March, 1936. The German Memorandum of 7th March, 1936." This "Note" began with an *apologia*:

The unilateral action which Hitler has taken during the week-end must of necessity come as a shock to public opinion throughout Europe. It is important, however, that natural resentment should not blind us to the fact that many, if not all, the proposals contained in the German Memorandum are those for which we have been working.

You will have seen the paper G(36)1 produced for the Cabinet Committee on Germany which dealt with the Demilitarized Zone.²⁴⁵

That the C.I.D. tied the political implications of Hitler's offers to the purely military aspect of the reoccupation was significant; on the one hand, the C.I.D. was overstepping its constitutional bounds, but more importantly, on the other, the linkage was an attempt to absolve the military from not having

²⁴⁴ C1533/4/18, Col. Piaget (War Office) to Wigram, 9 Mar. 1936. I have not been able to locate the final copy, if any, of this report addressed to the Cabinet. The Agenda of the Cabinet meeting of 9 Mar. 1936 did not list any report from the C.I.D. submitted prior to the meeting. But I cannot believe that at that critical juncture, the C.I.D. could have gotten away without making a report to the Cabinet, even if orally, through the Secretary for War. If in fact the C.I.D. did not do so, then this fact would merely substantiate my arguments.

²⁴⁵ G(36)1 was based on C151/4/18, F.O. Memo, 9 Jan. 1936, which has been discussed in Chapter III; it only listed past references to the Rhineland, with no suggestions for British policy planning.

prepared any contingency plans should they be needed.²⁴⁶ This became more apparent in the next passage when the Foreign Office position was discussed:

It is understood that the Foreign Office agreed that the unilateral demilitarized zone could not be maintained in perpetuity and that it should be our object to liquidate it while it still could be used to obtain from Germany conditions of a satisfactory and durable settlement, as for example, the return of Germany to the League of Nations, the Air Pact, and possible air limitation.

The Foreign Office therefore became a scapegoat for the unpreparedness of the military.

This non-decisive attitude of the military, however, was not particular to the Rhineland issue. Liddell Hart, perhaps the most astute military observer in Britain then, recorded that:

The British Government did not get much clear guidance, nor encouragement of action, from its chief military advisers during this critical period — least of all from the C.I.G.S. Chief of Imperial General Staff Montgomery-Massingbred. In December he had talked to the Imperial Defence College, and I heard from Martel [Major General] and others who were present that they had been "painfully surprised by his attitude. He looked tired and talked nebulously." He left the impression that his "one thought" was to postpone a war —not look ahead.²⁴⁷

That feeling was most apparent in March, 1936, when the Military tried to find every excuse to avoid war.

²⁴⁶ Within the period under examination, Eden once, in exasperation, minuted that "It was no business of the Air Ministry to have view about the Franco-Soviet pact. We shall end by getting into tangles (?—illegible) if this sort of thing is to go on unchecked." Eden's minutes, 23 Jan. 1936 on C213/4/18, Courtney to Wigram, 11 Jan. 1936.

²⁴⁷ L. Hart, *The Liddell Hart Memoirs 1935-1938* (New York, 1965), I, 212.

The War Office report of 8 March 1936 reflected these sentiments; it concluded that "Any immediate military counter-action [against Germany] would in fact produce disastrous results." It also opposed a preventive strike against Germany because it would "be impossible to limit a war thus started." In short, military action "should not be contemplated." Similarly, the War Office opposed economic actions because they not only would be ineffective, but would also lead to war.

On the other hand, the War Office was generous towards Hitler's offers.²⁴⁸ The proposed non-aggression pact, for example, "*is all to the good.*" (Emphasis added) Regarding the Air pact, it concluded that: "Germany would certainly not agree [to bilateral pacts] and, in my opinion, would be justified from a practical point of view." The War Office then observed that Hitler did not offer arms limitation despite the latter's emphasis on this subject in his speech to the *Reichstag* on 7 March 1936. The War Office's analysis was that "This is probably because he feels that the initiative does not rest with him, but the general effect of his proposals, if accepted, would create a more favorable opportunity for arriving at some limitations of armaments."

The final recommendation of the War Office was therefore extremely conciliatory:

Whatever strong protests it may be necessary to make on political grounds against the drastic action which Herr Hitler has taken, it appears essential that these should not prevent the acceptance of all that seems hopeful in the German offer. It is essential also that acceptance should be prompt and not hedged

²⁴⁸ See Appendix II.

about with conditions and qualifications such as have in the past prevented a settlement.

The tone and content of this report showed that there were two factors at work in the drafting of this report. First, the War Office believed that Britain was too weak to fight or engage in economic sanctions against Germany; it therefore opposed any action.²⁴⁹ But logistical considerations alone could not explain the tone of the report. Instead, a second factor was at work; this was the special status of the Rhineland as discussed in the previous chapter.

The C.I.D. not only did not consider the Rhineland militarily useful, but believed that it was unjustified and, therefore, potentially dangerous. It was for this reason that the C.I.D. opposed the demilitarization clauses during the Versailles Conference, the Locarno discussions and finally, during the Stresa Front discussions in early 1935. It was natural, therefore, that the C.I.D. would not now be willing to recommend the eviction of German troops from the Rhineland.

* * *

The Cabinet met at 11 a.m. on Monday, 9 March 1936, and had to decide on a policy statement that was to be delivered by Eden to the Commons that afternoon.²⁵⁰ The Cabinet had already discussed the Rhineland issue in its present context, namely a unilateral reoccupation by Germany, on 5 March 1936.²⁵¹ On that occasion, the Cabinet concluded that:

²⁴⁹ For details, please see Chapter V. When the possibility of war persisted after 9 March 1936, the Chiefs of Staff sub-committee did not stop short of juggling their figures to convince the Cabinet. That, alas, is a problem outside the scope of this examination. See CAB 53/27, 441 (J.P.), 16 Mar. 1936; 442 (J.P.), 18 Mar. 1936.

²⁵⁰ Surprisingly, it was not an emergency meeting, having been called on 6 March 1936.

²⁵¹ Meeting 15, 5 March 1936.

Germany already was understood to have violated the demilitarized zone to the extent that she had more aerodromes than she was entitled to and more police. Any violation she made was more likely to take the form of equipping barracks and eventually placing garrisons in them which was hardly a flagrant aggression.²⁵²

They also agreed that since neither Britain nor France would be willing to resist a German occupation, Britain should negotiate the disappearance of the zone. The meeting of 9 March 1936, therefore, was, in part, a continuation of the previous meeting except that the question was no longer how to reopen negotiations but how to make the best use of the circumstances imposed by the German action.²⁵³

In decisions of such importance, only the more senior members of the Cabinet carried any weight. They, however, were already bent on a policy of negotiations.²⁵⁴ Ramsey MacDonald, the Lord President of the Council, for example, as early as 1922 had called the Rhineland arrangement "the most deadly and bleeding wound in the body not alone of Germany, but of

²⁵² CAB 23/83, 15(36)1, 5 Mar. 1936.

²⁵³ Middlemas, in his biography of Baldwin, claimed that:

Probably most members of the cabinet believed that it would be thought wholly unreasonable to use force to resist a German reoccupation of the Rhineland, and among them some, by their own admission, felt that Germany had a case for doing as she wished.

Little of substance has been written on this most important meeting; it received a one line comment in Eden's memoirs and was not mentioned in any others. Hankey's minutes of the occasion, unfortunately, were abominably brief and did not identify the speakers. (This was usual for Hankey).

²⁵⁴ In Foreign Affairs, Baldwin, the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Eden, the Foreign Secretary, and Ramsey MacDonald, the Lord President of the Council and representative of Labour were most powerful in the Cabinet.

Europe."²⁵⁵ It was, therefore, unlikely that he would speak out in favor of action now.

Neville Chamberlain, the heir apparent of Baldwin, was the most influential man on the cabinet. He, however, was strongly opposed to war because that would be disastrous to the British economy. Cooper, the Secretary of War, said of him:

There was no certainty of war. He himself hated the idea of it. So, he believed, did all sensible men. Mussolini and Hitler must surely be sensible men too or they would never have risen to the great positions they occupied. Therefore they could not want war. There were certain things that they did want, and there were certain things that we could give them. If he were in control of foreign policy he could meet these men round a table and come to terms with them. The danger of war would be removed and we could all get on with social reform.²⁵⁶

In fact, Chamberlain was so solidly planted on stability that he read the *Times* for public opinion more avidly than he did Foreign Office dispatches.²⁵⁷ The Rhineland, to him, was therefore something that Britain could well afford to give to Germany.

Stanley Baldwin, the Prime Minister, was the most important and yet most mythical man in the Cabinet. As Prime Minister, he had final say in Foreign Policy matters, but he once remarked that he had little interest in

²⁵⁵ R. MacDonald, *Socialist Review*, March, 1922, XIX, 119.

²⁵⁶ D. Cooper, *Old Men Forget* (London, 1954), 200.

²⁵⁷ Mackintosh, *The British Cabinet*, 605. The *Times* leader of 9 March 1936, incidentally, implicitly endorsed the German action by calling it a "Chance to Rebuild."

International Affairs and was only concerned to keep the peace between his colleagues.²⁵⁸

In matters of Foreign Policy, therefore, he drew advice from an inner group whose advice he did not doubt.²⁵⁹ When the Rhineland was remilitarized, this group, composed of Thomas Jones, who had been Baldwin's confidant for years, the Astors, who hosted the alleged "Cliveden Set", Lord Lothian, who was believed by the Germans to be the most important man in England, Arnold Toynbee, the historian, and Thomas Inskip, who later became Minister for Coordination of Defence, found it necessary to form a "Shadow Cabinet" to make up Baldwin's mind.²⁶⁰ Jones best characterized the advice of this "Shadow Cabinet" when he noted that: "Germany of course (as always) was wrong in method but right in fact."²⁶¹ Baldwin simply could not resist this unanimity of his closest advisers.

Given these dispositions, the Cabinet sat down to work on Eden's speech to the Commons.²⁶² In his original draft, Eden first narrated the events of the weekend and followed it with a mild condemnation of the German action.

²⁵⁸ I. Kirkpatrick, *The Inner Circle* (London, 1959), 38.

²⁵⁹ Mackintosh named the Official group as Hoare, Simon, Halifax, Oliver Stanley and Malcolm MacDonald; George named Montagu Norman, Dawson and Jones. I tend to agree with George. See Mackintosh, *The British Cabinet*, 481; M. George, *The Warped Vision* (Pittsburgh, 1965), 74. There was also the alleged "Cliveden Set" which the principals involved denied existed. The influence of these informal groups on the making of British Foreign Policy is worth a study of its own; I will not do it injustice through a facile treatment.

²⁶⁰ T. Jones, *A Diary with Letters, 1931-50* (London, 1954), 179. I have left out the influence of Montagu Norman, the Director of the Bank of England, a Germanophile and, by Baldwin's own admission, one of his greatest friends, because there is no evidence to show that Norman was with Baldwin on the weekend of 7 March 1936. Besides, the London Banks were closed and the official position on the financial crisis could not have been available to Baldwin before he went to the Cabinet meeting.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁶² CAB 23/83, 16(36)1, 9 Mar. 1936.

The draft then closed with a call to Germany to enter into serious negotiations, for "It is our manifest duty to replace it [Locarno] if peace is to be secured." Eden, as discussed earlier, was already remarkably temperate in his report to the Cabinet; this speech, which evolved from the principles of that report, was as temperate. But the Cabinet was still dissatisfied with the strength of the condemnation. They were wary of Eden's legalistic inclinations, and their alterations of the draft illustrated what they perceived of the Rhineland crisis.

In his draft, Eden began his condemnation with:

Let us not delude ourselves.... The abrogation of the Treaty of Locarno and the occupation of the demilitarized zone has profoundly shaken confidence in any engagement into which the Government of Germany may in future enter....It strikes a severe blow at that principle of sanctity of treaties which underlies the whole structure of international relations. To acts of such a nature, this country must unalterably be opposed.

This passage was followed by a passage on how Britain might respond to such an act.

The Cabinet, however, fearful that it might provoke Germany, deleted the last sentence of the passage cited above and substituted the following paragraph with a more conciliatory message which read: "There is, I am thankful to say, no reason to suppose that the present German action implied a threat of hostilities...." And later, in a passage cited earlier, "a manifest duty to replace" was reworded as "a manifest duty to rebuild." To replace Locarno with another, the Cabinet believed, would be repugnant to Germany.

This amended and mollified version was delivered by Eden to the Commons at 3 p.m. that same afternoon. It was well received; the banners of evening papers read: "Manifest Duty to Rebuild." The British Government finally decided on a policy.

* * *

The meeting of 9 March 1936 was short, deterministic and anti-climactic. And for good reasons.

First, foreign affairs was so exclusive a field in the nineteen thirties that no member of the Cabinet felt competent enough to challenge the Foreign Secretary. Thus, Eden's report was adopted without question. The alteration of his draft changed only the tone, and not the content of the speech.

Second, information on Foreign Affairs that reached the Cabinet was subjected to treasury control. Warren Fisher, the Permanent Under Secretary of the Treasury, while not of Cabinet rank, was, *ex officio*, the Head of the Civil Service, and, as such, controlled the submission of documents to the Cabinet.

His concern for the financial well-being of Great Britain caused him to prevent alarming reports from ever reaching the Cabinet. The Cabinet was therefore partly oblivious to the danger of the situation.

Third, decisions in British Foreign Policy often were not made by the British; rather, the government vacillated until they were confronted with a *fait accompli*. An experienced official once noted that:

...one kind of fact which seems to get through and indeed is warmly welcomed.... If postponement of decision has finally

resulted in another party taking the initiative and securing some gain, so far from being any dismay in Whitehall there are loud sighs of relief. "You see, this is a fact. We have got to accept this and operate on this basis from now on."

Hitler dealt a *fait accompli*; Britain therefore had to contend with the terms. In this case, it meant negotiations.

But these internal influences aside, the Cabinet itself was opposed to action against Germany. The fear of war and its resulting chaos naturally influenced the British decision. But this fear alone simply could not explain the docility, if not pusillanimity, that infected the Cabinet meeting of 9 March 1936. Nor could it explain the apparently aberrant action of Eden, who acted against all his former beliefs, so much so that later, when writing his memoirs, these two days had to be distorted to fit his more well-known image.

Instead, that docility, or rather complacency, was due to the Cabinet's belief that the remilitarization of the Rhineland was a non-issue. In the two days between the remilitarization and the Cabinet meeting, the members became reconciled to the fate of the Rhineland.

Ramsey MacDonald, for example, must have been relieved that the remilitarisation came about as it did. Baldwin, too, after the telephone calls from Jones and Lothian, must have been convinced, if he had not been convinced earlier, that the Rhineland was, treaty breaking notwithstanding, German territory. After all, it was Lothian who coined the immortal phrase, "Jerries into their own back garden."

The Cabinet meeting of 9 March 1936 merely formalized this belief.

CHAPTER VII

“Goosey, Goosey Gander
Whither dost thou wander?
Only through the Rhineland,
Pray excuse my blunder”

— Punch

The Rhineland crisis did not die; it simply faded away. The days after 9 March 1936 saw a series of Locarno meetings, League Council Meetings (extraordinary, of course), 4-Power Conventions, Three-Power Meetings, and no less than Five-Power Conferences. The European Powers ritualistically went through a series of proposals and counter-proposals, notes, memoranda, and questionnaires. But all to no avail; interest in the Rhineland petered off until it was forgotten, but only to be resurrected a decade later to be given the singular honor of being the “Last chance to stop Hitler.”

The British leaders, of course, were not preoccupied with these grand sweeps of historical misfortune; after all, were they not noted only for their lack of foresight? This band of ‘Pinheads,’ as Lloyd George called them, had more immediate concerns — to convince everyone that negotiating was the best policy. And they even failed in this.

Not unnaturally, they have received the full blame for nonchalantly sleepwalking to their own disgrace, to the untimely end of many, and to the disgrace of a nation not better, but certainly not worse than any other. But that is a totally different story.

* * *

Who were the guilty men? Eden called his policy the ‘Appeasement of Europe’ — that, before the word has acquired a preferred, but alas, debased meaning. The Rhineland was, after all, German territory; it still is.

To be misinformed is bad enough; to blind oneself to reality is worse. There is an old fable of a frog that lived at the bottom of a well. “Heaven,” the former pronounced, “is a circular disk of light.” A little knowledge, we know, is a dangerous thing, but it is more so when a frog living on the surface willfully plunges in his head and exclaims, “My! Heaven is indeed a disk!”

The British leaders of 1936, living when they did, could never have conceived of the depths to which humanity could sink. Yet, even in that well of ignorance, they grasped the principal anomaly of the Rhineland crisis. We, however, though blessed with the light of hindsight, pursue an endless round of witch hunt. Who, we still ask, was to blame?

But blame for what? If for the Second World Folly, then all — the British leaders, Hitler especially, even those who simply watched — were to blame. But that, again, is another story.

But if it is blame for the Rhineland that we have to pin, then it cannot be placed on the British leaders; nor can it be placed on Hitler, though he can

never be exonerated. The guilty men were the vindictive schemers of Versailles, whose iniquitous edifice doomed ages yet unborn.

The British leaders, despite all their fears and weaknesses, saw the Rhineland crisis primarily as a redress, a restoration of sovereign rights. Did not Churchill, period Cassandra, pronounce: “Appeasement in itself may be good or bad according to the circumstances. Appeasement from weakness and fear is alike futile and fatal. Appeasement from strength is magnanimous and noble, and might be the surest and perhaps the only path to world peace?”

We now know; Shaw's eloquence has cut it to the crux: “On an occasion of this kind, it becomes more than a moral duty to speak one's mind. It becomes a pleasure.”

The Rhineland crisis was, perhaps, the last moral duty.

APPENDIX I

The Legal Aspect of the Rhineland

1. The **Treaty of Versailles**, 1919, which set up the demilitarized zone, stipulated that:

Part III, Section III —Left Bank of the Rhine:

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 kilometres to the east of the Rhine.

Article 43. In the area defined above the maintenance and the assembly of armed forces, either permanently or temporarily, and military manoeuvres of any kind, as well as the upkeep of all permanent works of mobilisation, are in the same way forbidden.

2. The **Locarno Treaty** of 1925 further stipulated that:

Article 1. The high contracting parties collectively and severally guarantee, in the manner provided in the following articles, the maintenance of the territorial status quo resulting from the frontiers between Germany and Belgium and between Germany and France and the in-violability of the said frontiers as fixed by or in pursuance of the Treaty of Peace signed at Versailles on

the 28th June, 1919, and also the observance of the stipulations of articles 42 and 43 of the said treaty concerning the demilitarized zone.

Article 2. Germany and Belgium, and also Germany and France, mutually undertake that they will in no case attack or invade each other or resort to war against each other.

.....

Article 4.

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

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

(3) In case of a flagrant violation of article 2 of the present treaty or of a flagrant breach of articles 42 or 43 of the Treaty of Versailles by one of the high contracting parties, each of the other contracting parties hereby undertakes immediately to come to the help of the party against whom such a violation or

breach has been directed as soon as the said Power has been able to satisfy itself that this violation constitutes an unprovoked act of aggression and that by reason either of the crossing of the frontier or of the outbreak of hostilities or of the assembly of armed forces in the demilitarized zone immediate action is necessary. Nevertheless, the Council of the League of Nations, which will be seized of the question in accordance with the first paragraph of this article, will issue its findings, and the high contracting parties undertake to act in accordance with the recommendations of the Council provided that they are concurred in by all the members other than the representatives of the parties which have engaged in hostilities.

APPENDIX II

**MEMORANDUM BY THE GERMAN GOVERNMENT
RESPECTING THE FRANCO-SOVIET TREATY, THE TREATY OF
LOCARNO, AND THE DEMILITARISED ZONE IN THE RHINE
LAND. — COMMUNICATED TO THE SECRETARY OF STATE
FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS BY THE GERMAN AMBASSADOR ON
MARCH 7, 1936. (Extract)**

[Translation.]

MEMORANDUM.

Immediately after being informed of the Pact between France and the Union of Socialist Soviet Republics, concluded on the 2nd May, 1935, the German Government drew the attention of the other signatory Powers of the Locarno Rhine Pact to the fact that the obligations, which France has undertaken in the new Pact, are not compatible with her obligations arising out of the Rhine Pact. The German Government then explained their point of view in full detail and in both its legal and political aspects — in its legal aspect in the German Memorandum of the 25th May, 1935, in its political aspect in the many diplomatic conversations which followed on that Memorandum. It is also known to the Governments concerned that neither their written replies to the German Memorandum, nor the arguments brought forward by them

through the diplomatic channel or in public declarations, were able to invalidate the German Government's point of view.

In fact, all the diplomatic and public discussions which have taken place since May, 1935 regarding these questions, have only been able to confirm on all point the view expressed by the German Government at the outset.

1. It is an undisputed fact that the Franco-Soviet Pact is exclusively directed against Germany.
2. It is an undisputed fact that in the Pact France undertakes, in the event of a conflict between Germany and the Soviet Union, obligations which go far beyond her duty as laid down in the Covenant of the League of Nations, and which compel her to take military action against Germany even when she cannot appeal either to a recommendation or to an actual decision of the Council of the League.
3. It is an undisputed fact that France, in such a case, claims for herself the right to decide on her own judgment who is the aggressor.
4. It is thereby established that France has undertaken towards the Soviet Union obligations which practically amount to undertaking in a given case to act as if neither the Covenant of the League of Nations, nor the Rhine Pact, which refers to the Covenant, were valid.

This result of the Franco-Soviet Pact is not removed by the fact that France, in the Pact, makes the reservation that she does not wish to be bound to take military action against Germany if by such action she would expose herself to a sanction on the part of the guarantor Powers, Italy and Great Britain. As regards this reservation, the decisive fact remains that the Rhine Pact is not based only on the obligations of Great Britain and Italy as guarantor Powers,

but primarily on the obligations established in the relations between France and Germany. Therefore it matters only whether France, in undertaking these treaty obligations, has kept herself within the limits imposed on her so far as Germany is concerned by the Rhine Pact.

This, however, the German Government must deny.

* * *

...In this manner...the Locarno Rhine Pact has lost its inner meaning and ceased in practice to exist. Consequently, Germany regards herself for her part as no longer bound by this dissolved treaty. The German Government are now constrained to face the new situation created by this alliance, a situation which is rendered more acute by the fact that the Franco-Soviet Treaty has been supplemented by a Treaty of Alliance between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union exactly parallel in form. In accordance with the fundamental right of a nation to secure its frontiers and ensure its possibilities of defence, the German Government have to-day restored the full and unrestricted sovereignty of Germany in the demilitarised zone of the Rhineland.

In order, however, to avoid any misinterpretation of their intentions and to establish beyond doubt the purely defensive character of these measures, as well as to express their unchangeable longing for a real pacification of Europe between States which are equals in rights and equally respected, the German Government declare themselves ready to conclude new agreements for the creation of a system of peaceful security for Europe on the basis of the following proposals:—

- (1) The German Government declare themselves ready to enter at once into negotiations with France and Belgium with regard to the creation of a zone demilitarised on both sides and to give their agreement in advance to any suggestion regarding the depth and nature thereof on the basis of full parity.
- (2) The German Government propose, for the purpose of ensuring the sanctity and inviolability of the boundaries in the West, the conclusion of a non-aggression pact between Germany, France and Belgium, the duration of which they are ready to fix at twenty-five years.
- (3) The German Government desire to invite Great Britain and Italy to sign this treaty as guarantor Powers.
- (4) The German Government agree, in case the Netherlands Government should so desire and the other Contracting Parties consider it appropriate, to bring the Netherlands into this treaty system.
- (5) The German Government are prepared, in order to strengthen further these security agreements between the Western Powers, to conclude an air pact calculated to prevent in an automatic and effective manner the danger of sudden air attacks.
- (6) The German Government repeat their offer to conclude with the States bordering Germany in the East non-aggression pacts similar to that with Poland. As the Lithuanian Government have in the last few months corrected their attitude towards the

Memel Territory to a certain extent, the German Government withdraw the exception which they once made regarding Lithuania and declare their readiness, on condition that the guaranteed autonomy of the Memel Territory is effectively developed, to sign a non-aggression pact of this nature with Lithuania also.

(7) Now that Germany's equality of rights and the restoration of her full sovereignty over the entire territory of the German Reich have finally been attained, the German Government consider the chief reason for their withdrawal from the League of Nations to be removed. They are therefore willing to reenter the League of Nations. In this connection they express the expectation that in the course of a reasonable period the question of colonial equality of rights and that of the separation of the League Covenant from its Versailles setting may be clarified through friendly negotiations.

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