Between Disarmament and Remilitarization
German, French, and British diplomacy, 1933-1936

Yanaï Bar

0243671
MA Internationale Betrekkingen in historisch perspectief

Supervisors:
Prof. Dr. D.A. Hellema
Dr. G. Aalders

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**Introduction**

In 1932, the German Weimar Republic was far from being the potent world Power that managed to hold its own against a coalition of Italian, Russian, French, and British forces in the First World War. Due to the peace settlement of the Great War, Germany was disarmed, destitute, largely unemployed, ravaged by ideological divisions, and lacking full sovereignty over the whole of its territory. In early 1933, however, Adolf Hitler became German Chancellor, and in little over three years he managed to turn Germany’s wretched strategic position to Germany’s favour. By March 1936, Hitler had defeated the Great Depression, consolidated himself as Germany’s supreme ruler, reintroduced conscription and heavy weaponry to the German military, and fully incorporated the Saar and the Rhineland into the Third Reich. Whereas in the 1920s Germany had been under French and British tutelage, neither France, in 1932 the best armed European nation, nor Great Britain, in 1932 arguably the most prosperous European country, undertook effective action to thwart Hitler’s violations of the treaties that were supposed to preserve a peaceful Europe. The question that remains is ‘why’?

This thesis focuses on the French and British responses to the growing international assertiveness of Germany under Hitler’s leadership in the years 1933-1936. The policies of France and Great Britain are commonly referred to as ‘appeasement’. In writing this thesis, I have kept strategic expert Edward N. Luttwak’s definition in mind, stressing that “‘Appeasement’ implies that the causes of conflict can be identified and removed by cooperative diplomatic surgery.”\(^1\) I would like to research what made them accommodate Hitler in his early years, instead of opposing him when Germany was still weak and France and Britain still strong. To delve into this subject, I will examine how Hitler presented his actions to be non-threatening enough for France and Great Britain to passively let him have his way. Also, I will consider the situation in which France and Great Britain were, what other issues preoccupied them, and possibly distracted them from the German threat. And what initiatives did they develop to contain Hitler’s aspirations? Looking into these matters, I hope, will enable me to better comprehend the policies pursued by France and Great Britain in the 1930s.

I have chosen to focus on French and British policies, because they were the two powers that most naturally were to oppose Hitler. Because of Germany’s central position in Europe and great strength, France had been an enemy of the German state ever since its unification in 1870. Great Britain had traditionally prevented any power from seeking hegemony on the continent, and had continued to do so during the First World War. Of the other Allied powers that had fought Germany in the Great War, the United States had

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\(^1\) Strategic Expert Edward N. Luttwak holds the following definition of appeasement: “‘Appeasement’ implies that the causes of conflict can be identified and removed by cooperative diplomatic surgery.” Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (London 2001) 213n.
chosen isolation from active participation in international affairs when it rejected entry into the League of Nations when it was erected in 1920, and was therefore not eligible to oppose Hitler in the 1930s. Russia, from 1923 on called the Soviet Union (USSR), had turned Bolshevik through the revolutions of 1917, and did not participate significantly, nor was it invited, onto the international scene until it was too late to effectively impede Hitler. Finally, Italy had become a Fascist state in 1922 and seemed therefore to be a more natural ally to Hitler than an adversary, though, as will be explained in this paper, France and Great Britain did try to include the Italians in an anti-German coalition.

The choice to begin the focus of my research in January 1933, with Hitler’s accession to power, was obvious, since I wanted to examine how French and British politicians responded to the actions of Hitler. The final year of my research, 1936, was a natural choice, because until that year the French and British could have stopped Hitler without it taking a major war to do so. When in March of that year Germany reoccupied the Rhineland, it seemed a new war was inevitable unless the western democracies would accommodate Hitler, which for a few years was what they did. Since I wanted to examine Hitler’s shrewd diplomacy and the reasons why France and Britain conceded to him, it seems only natural to demarcate the end of my research where diplomacy turned to be a mere instrument for the postponement of the use of force. Therefore, I chose March 1936 as the final date of my research.

This paper does not aim to reveal any new material on the subject concerned, but will mostly serve as a comprehensive study of the diplomatic overtures between Germany, France, and Great Britain, between 1933 and 1936. The innovative aspect of this study is that it elaborates on the policies of each of the countries concerned from their own perspective. During my research I have not encountered one research that addresses the policies of all three of these countries separately.

After this introductory chapter, a chapter will follow on the international developments in Europe between the end of the First World War and Hitler’s accession to power. To best comprehend what considerations governed German, French, and British leaders, one must examine the history that preceded the actual interaction between Hitler and his West European rivals. The third chapter will delve into the chronology of Hitler's foreign policy in the years 1933-1936, so as to grasp what and who exactly the French and British politicians were up against in the demarcated years. The fourth chapter will examine the relative French passivity to the growing assertiveness of Hitler’s Germany. To complete the picture, the fifth chapter will research the quandary of British policymakers. With the reader fully informed of the events that played out between 1933 and 1936, the final chapter will analyze the policies of the three countries in reference to their larger strategic objectives. This chapter is meant to put the policies of the countries concerned under closer scrutiny, and will also critically discuss the prevailing assumptions of acclaimed authors on the
subject The concluding chapter therefore serves not only as a concise summary, but also as a deeper analytic investigation into the politics that dominated the demarcated years.

The research for this paper was conducted through a survey of the existing literature. In writing the chapter discussing the developments between the end of the First World War and Hitler’s accession to power I found great help in Sally Marks’ The Illusion of Peace, as well as Graham Ross’ The Great Powers and the Decline of the European State System 1918-1945. To get an understanding of the workings of the Nazi economy, I found Dan P. Silverman’s Hitler’s Economy most helpful, as well as War and Economy in the Third Reich, written by Richard J. Overy. I found E.M. Robertson’s Hitler’s Pre-War Policy and Military Plans highly useful to comprehend the inner dynamics of Nazi diplomacy. Also Nazi Foreign Policy, written by Christian Leitz was insightful. William L. Shirer’s The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich helped me grasp the economy of Hitler’s consolidation of power over German society, and Barton Whaley’s Covert German Rearmament proved most useful to explain German secret inter-war rearmament. Writing the chapter on the French perspective on matters I found great help in Robert J. Young’s excellent work In Command of France. Peter Jackson’s book France and the Nazi Menace was very enlightening on the work of France’s intelligence services. To get a better understanding of the economic overtures between France and her East European allies I read David E. Kaiser’s Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War. In order to understand British diplomatic efforts, I found help in British Appeasement in the 1930s, written by William R. Rock, as well as R.A.C. Parker’s Chamberlain and Appeasement. Profits of Peace, written by Scott Newton, was most insightful on British economic interests in Europe. On the British military I read the outstanding work The Sources of Military Doctrine, written by Barry R. Posen. The Roots of Appeasement, a work by Benny Morris, was helpful to get an understanding of the prevailing mood in British public opinion during the years under scrutiny. The collected essays in The Origins of the Second World War, edited by Robert Boyce and Joseph A. Maiolo, address the various political considerations at the time from different perspectives. As a comprehensive study on the roots of the Second World War and the war itself, I found a useful manual in Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint, and John Pritchard’s The Penguin History of the Second World War. Giving an overall view on history, both James Joll’s Europe Since 1870, and Henry Kissinger’s Diplomacy, provided insightful comments on historic developments. Finally, Anthony P. Adamthwaite’s The Making of the Second World War contained various helpful excerpts of speeches and documents directly originating from the period’s key policymakers.

In writing this paper I found great help in suggestions for further reading from dr. Ralf Futselaar and from dr. Ben Wubs. I am also indebted to dr. Gerard Aalders as well as to prof. dr. D.A. Hellema for their useful comments and advice. Naturally, none of the above mentioned are responsible for any shortcomings in my work.
1. Paving the Way: From Versailles, through Locarno, to Geneva

In order to fully grasp the meaning of Hitler's revisionist assertiveness in international politics in the 1930s, we must first comprehend the stage Hitler entered in 1933. After the Great War, a wave of pacifism swept across Europe, and this sentiment largely determined the policies followed by the national entities in Europe in the inter-war period. The idealism of American president Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points and the establishment of the League of Nations were initiatives meant to institutionalize pacifism in an era in which at long last everyone seemed to desire nothing but peace. This idealism, however, would not survive the relentless attempts by states such as Germany, Italy, and Russia to revise the treaties that ended the First World War. The treaty of Locarno, signed in 1925, seemed to reinforce the agreements made with Germany at Versailles in 1919, but in fact served to undermine it. Finally, the Great Depression and the introduction of Hitler onto the international scene, were to lead the world down the road to catastrophe.

Settling the Great War

After the United States finally entered the World War in 1917, and the failed German Western spring offensive of the following year, it seemed to be only a matter of time before the German forces would be defeated. With this in mind, new ideas began to circulate of how to build a new international system, which would prevent such a devastating war from ever occurring again. In a speech delivered before the United States Congress in January 1918, President Woodrow Wilson announced his 'Fourteen Points', which were supposed to serve as guiding principles along which a new, peaceful, world order was to be crafted. The pre-war borders were to be restored in Europe, though in Eastern-Europe, nations previously living under the rule of the dismantled Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empires would have the right of national self-determination. Furthermore, economic and maritime barriers were to be lifted, and colonies should be readjusted to incorporate the wishes of colonial peoples. Finally, states should undertake to disarm to a minimal level, consistent with the preservation of domestic security. All these provisions were to be monitored and safeguarded by a general association of states, which through a system of collective security was to guarantee the peaceful coexistence of nations. As it turned out, however, the Wilsonian ideals would not be easy to implement.

After the Germans finally surrendered in November 1918, a follow up conference was organized in Paris to settle the terms for peace. The victorious parties (Great-Britain, France, Italy and the United States) were inhibited from following the Fourteen Points open midedly by differing attitudes and perspectives. Most notably they were troubled by a number of worrying considerations. First, how to guard Europe from the specter of

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international communism (which had settled in freshly Bolshevik Russia), dauntingly lingering behind the ravaged lands formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. Second, how to prevent Germany, arguably a stronger force than the French and British armies put together, from seeking to overturn her defeat once she had regained her powers. Third, how to redraw European borders so that the currently checkered and mixed map of nationalities is turned into a neatly organized map of nation states. Fourth, how to prevent a world war from erupting again. Though they did come up with some inventive solutions which seemed insightful at the time, the Allied powers failed to accomplish what they set out to do.

To prevent Russian communism from overtaking the European continent a ‘quarantine belt’ (cordon sanitaire was the term coined then) of anti-Russian states was established in Eastern-Europe. Here, nations formerly living under imperial rule were granted independence. These nations, due to their history of living under foreign rulers, were innately suspicious of powerful empires, and communist Russia was no exception to this suspicion. Their anti-Russian attitude was thus guaranteed, and the ideal of national self-determination was served by this solution as well, it seemed like all parties would fare best by this solution. The Baltic States (Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia) as well as Rumania and Czechoslovakia emerged as independent states from this settlement. Many of these states, however, still contained substantial minorities, which in some cases was to prove a fatal problem.

Addressing the problem of potential German resurgence turned out to be even more challenging. The French, craving security on their eastern border, wanted to see Germany dismembered into a non-threatening entity. This, however, collided with Wilson’s ideal of self-determination. The British were caught in a quandary. Distrustful of French intentions on the continent, and under pressure from the Americans insisting on a soft agreement for Germany, Britain was reluctant to follow the French in a harsh settlement. British public opinion, however, demanded the Germans to be punished for the many sacrificed soldiers. A compromise was found when French premier Georges Clemenceau, accepting an American and British security guaranty as well as a clause limiting the German military establishment to a 100,000 personnel maximum, finally caved to British and American pressure. Germany lost fairly little territory considering their defeat in the most destructive war the world had till then witnessed. Germany lost a small strip of Schleswig to Denmark, the small districts of Eupen and Malmédy to Belgium, Alsace-Lorraine was returned to France, the Saarland was to be placed under a collective mandate with a plebiscite determining the wishes of the population after fifteen years, and the Rhineland, though remaining German, was to be permanently demilitarized. In the east Germany lost relatively more territory, namely a part of upper-Silesia to Czechoslovakia, Memel to Lithuania, a corridor to Poland, which was supposed to provide the latter with an outlet to sea, and finally Danzig was to

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become a Free City. To the Germans, however, the loss of territory, was hurtful. Since they had escaped foreign occupation during the war, they did not feel defeated. Furthermore, they argued they had surrendered to the terms set in Wilson’s Fourteen Points, not to the terms presented to them in Versailles, which ignored the right of self-determination for Germans by cutting into German territory and prohibiting an Anschluss with Austria.5

Perhaps the most upsetting clause for Germany in the Versailles Treaty was the war-guilt clause. This stipulated that Germany had to take sole responsibility for causing the war, as well as pay reparations to the Allies for the damages they suffered during the war. The amount of money to be paid by the Germans was not yet fixed because public opinion in the Allied countries expected to be awarded gigantic figures, far beyond Germany’s capacity to pay. To the French, this arrangement could also serve to keep Germany weak, by tapping off its excess financial strength in the form of war reparations. The German government, for its part, refused to sign the Treaty of Versailles, but after the German Chief of the General Staff Paul von Hindenburg declared that Germany could not militarily resist the Allied forces, a new government signed the Treaty.6 A strong minority in the new German Weimar Republic, however, remained opposed to signing the Treaty. This discontented minority would prove fertile breeding ground for those seeking to revise the international system that emerged.

A Fragile Balance

With the Treaty of Versailles all agreed upon between the Allied powers, hopes were set that the Paris Peace Conference would safeguard peace, much as the Congress of Vienna had done, little over a century before Paris. However, the first blow to the new peace settlement was dealt when the United States Senate refused to ratify the Versailles Treaty in 1919. The American Senate worried about the obligations they would subscribe to under the Covenant of the League of Nations, the collective security mechanism President Wilson had envisioned, which was part of the Treaty of Versailles. The United States subsequently signed a separate peace with the Weimar Republic in February 1921, which resembled the Versailles Treaty devoid of the League Covenant. With the American withdrawal of the security guarantee to France, the British guarantee lapsed as well, and the French found themselves in an uncomfortable position.7 In pursuing the German obligations under the Treaty of Versailles France found now a disinterested United States and an ambiguous Great Britain. The only certain ally France had left to impose the Versailles terms on Germany was Belgium, which had shared the same traumatic experience of foreign occupation as France had during the war.

7 Ross, The Great Powers, 45.
The political isolation of France resulted in a French eagerness to follow up on the provisions of the Versailles Treaty, and when in 1920 the fragile Weimar government sent in the military to defeat a communist uprising in the Rhineland, France immediately moved to occupy the cities of Frankfurt and Darmstadt. In January 1921 the Allies jointly confronted the Germans with an ultimatum to disarm their military to the numbers stipulated by the disarmament clauses of Versailles. The German government had no choice but to grudgingly comply, complaining that none of the other signatories had fulfilled the disarmament obligations stipulated by the Covenant of the League of Nations.\(^8\)

To complicate matters, in Eastern Europe, the new and enlarged Polish state launched in February 1919 a war against Russia, which was at the time still in a state of civil war. The Poles almost reached Kiev before they were repulsed by Russian forces and Allied forces intervened to impose a cease-fire. This expansionistic adventure by the Poles damaged the fresh ideals of Versailles and the League of Nations, which assumed that nations, once they had a state of their own, should not challenge other nation states. The Polish maneuver also damaged the geo-political situation of Poland itself. Already despised by the discontented German public, the Polish were now also on hostile terms with their other strong neighbor, Russia. Considering how the Weimar Republic, nor Lenin’s Russia, were members of the League of Nations, the Western Allies feared they would aggressively unite against Poland, without the League’s mechanisms being able to restrain them.\(^9\) If the feared Germans and the despised Russian communists would draw together, they might ally to redress the new international system, which was largely created without their consultation. The French, afraid of Russian communism, had lost a military ally on Germany’s eastern flank. To compensate, they completed a military convention with Poland in February 1921, promising to come to Poland’s aid in case of war with either its eastern or western neighbor.\(^10\)

The Weimar Republic and Russia indeed completed a separate peace settlement between themselves in 1921, and in April of the following year they found each other at a conference in Rapallo, Italy. Here the two powers renounced territorial and financial claims against one another and agreed on favorable trading conditions. In a secret military agreement, the Germans established factories for poison gas and armaments as well as training facilities for military personnel in Russia. These clear cut breaches of the Versailles Treaty, British historian James Joll argues, did not pass the Allied control commission unnoticed, but as the war became more distant and demands for troop withdrawal grew louder, there was fairly little the Allies could have done to thwart the Russo-German deal.\(^11\)

In any case, this marriage of convenience between the two outcasts of European politics provided Germany with the freedom of maintaining some sense of military potential and raw

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material, while Russia gained technical expertise and a market for its rich natural resources. To France and Great Britain, in any case, this must have seemed like a marriage made in hell.

Tensions grew when in February 1922 an American commission was set up to seek agreement with the Allied debtors who owed the United States for loans they had accepted during the war.\footnote{Ross, The Great Powers, 47} For France, this issue was connected to war reparations which were to be received from Germany, but on which a satisfactory agreement had not yet been reached either. Britain too connected the fulfillment of her loans to America to war reparations paid by the Germans, and thus the feeble German state became the center of a complicated international financial scheme. The Germans were having difficulties following up on their obligations regarding reparations, which in turn provoked France and Belgium, who feared the dissolution of Versailles. Lacking British encouragement for alternative solutions, France and Belgium turned to threats, claiming they would occupy the Ruhr if Germany did not comply with its obligations under Versailles.\footnote{Marks, The Illusion of Peace, 49-50.} Great Britain, which was fiercely against any military action, was too distracted to calm the tensions by her preoccupation with Turkish nationalism, which threatened to destabilize British interests in the Mediterranean. When the Germans finally defaulted on the delivery of timber in December of 1922, France and Belgium had no choice but to follow up on their threats and occupy the Ruhr.

After moving into the Ruhr on January 11th, 1923, the French and Belgian expedition forces were faced with a German policy of passive resistance. This led to a tightening of the military control in the region, at growing expenses. The occupation was meant to put the Ruhr mines under French control, and thus safeguard the economic benefits the French thought to extract from the reparations, but instead led to financial burden that weakened France’s economic position through inflation. For the Germans the costs were even more considerable.\footnote{Joll, Europe Since 1870, 285.} The stopping of production in the Ruhr and the railway strikes, which were part of the passive resistance they practiced, led to an infamous inflation rate which rendered any accumulation of German marks virtually worthless. This crisis strengthened the concentration and cartelization of German industrial life, which would later serve well to reinforce Hitler’s control over German society. In August the German government of Wilhelm Cuno resigned, his successor was Gustav Stresemann.

The Ruhr occupation left France thoroughly isolated. The United States expressed its discontent by withdrawing its army of occupation from the Rhineland, and Great Britain too condemned the move. The costs of the occupation proved too heavy for France and the occupation ended in the autumn of 1923. American historian and policy maker Henry Kissinger later pointed out that at this moment, it was evident that France was not capable of unilaterally defeating even a disarmed Germany.\footnote{Kissinger, Diplomacy, 267-268.} The divisions between France and
Great Britain were a sign for Germany that there were opportunities here to rise out of the isolation it was in, and Streseman was the man for the job.

Streseman sought to redress the more stringent harsher military and territorial provisions of Versailles through a policy of fulfillment of eased reparations. In pursuit of a new schedule for reparation payments, Streseman proposed international arbitration, which he knew would be more receptive to German grievances than a bilateral arrangement with France would have been. A committee was set up under the leadership of American banker Charles G. Dawes, which finally came up with a schedule for reduced reparations in April 1924. Under this schedule Germany would pay $1 billion over the next five years, of a $2 billion loan it was granted by the American government. The excess money from the loan would be invested in the modernization of German industry. France, isolated as it was at this point, had little choice but to agree. Thus the French, who had wanted to see a weak Germany, had to witness how the reparations scheme was rebuilding a strong Germany on its eastern flank.\(^{16}\)

Given its failure to cajole Germany into submission by itself, France was again actively seeking reassurance of its eastern border by the mid-1920s. In 1925 the first of the occupied zones of the Rhineland was to be evacuated, but because the Military Control Commission of the occupying forces reported unfavorably on German disarmament the evacuation was delayed. Nevertheless, the British showed little enthusiasm to maintain their forces in Germany, reasoning that given the level of German disarmament, despite the infringements on the Treaty of Versailles, the Germans were incapable of violating French security.\(^{17}\) The British were also unhelpful in reinforcing the collective security initiatives the French launched through the League of Nations, providing schemes for general disarmament and regional alliances. The British rejected these proposals on the grounds that through their imperial obligations they could not limit their commitments to one continent alone. In truth, the Dominions objected strongly to increased obligations under the League Covenant. The French therefore had to content themselves, for the time being, with their agreement with Poland, and a meager general arrangement forged with Czechoslovakia in 1924.

A spark of hope for stability came when Streseman proposed to guarantee Germany’s border with France in February 1925. The French seized on the occasion and extended it to include the border between Germany and Belgium. The French also tried to include Germany’s eastern borders into the arrangement, but Streseman would not offer any such guarantee.\(^{18}\) Britain and Italy were to serve a guarantors of the treaty, burdened with the responsibility of intervening if any of the signatories (Germany, France, or Belgium) flagrantly violated the borders as set by the Treaty of Versailles. In the case of an alleged violation, the matter would be forwarded for arbitration to the League Council in Geneva.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 272.
\(^{17}\) Ross, The Great Powers, 56-57
\(^{18}\) Marks, The Illusion of Peace, 67-69.
Benito Mussolini, who had come to power in Italy in 1922, tried to incorporate the Austrian-Italian border into the deal, but Stresemann would not entertain this idea unless a German-Austrian Anschluss would be considered. The idea was subsequently dropped. The treaty was signed on October 5th 1925 in Locarno, Switzerland.

The deal seemed to serve every party. Germany was finally accepted back as a member of the international community, symbolized by its accession to the League of Nations, which was the booty it got for its part in the Locarno agreement. Stresemann, by hinting at possible flirtations with the Soviet Union, even managed to attain Germany a seat in the permanent League Council (which now was dependent on German consent to reach its required unanimity vote) and exemption from participation in sanctions against other states. Great Britain was set in its traditional harmonizing role, imperative for tipping the balance of power on the continent in the direction it chooses. Italy gained international recognition as a substantial power by acting as a part of a mechanism which was to preserve peace in Europe. France and Belgium finally gained their security guarantee from Great Britain, though in an inferior form than they had aimed for in 1919. France, in any case, had little choice but to accept the treaty. With the franc still recovering from the Ruhr occupation debacle, it could not afford to alienate the Anglo-American financial community, which was already suspicious of French insistence on pounding Germany.

The Locarno Treaty seemed to reinforce the agreements made in Versailles, but in hindsight, it damaged them. Though Germany’s western borders were now guaranteed, its controversial eastern borders were not. Here truly lay the threat of German territorial revisionism, with large German minorities in Poland and Czechoslovakia, and with a string of small feeble states at Germany’s mercy. The fact that the Treaty of Locarno did not cover this terrain implied that this part of the Versailles Treaty was not secure, and therefore open for revision. Furthermore, by entrusting Italy and Great Britain with the security of Western Europe, the great powers revealed how little confidence they had in the collective security mechanisms of the League of Nations. The Locarno Treaty was thus, after the stringency of Versailles, another step away from the idealism that was supposed to have launched the League of Nations. Perhaps, however, Locarno also provided some necessary realism considering the tensions that pervaded Europe.

The rest of the 1920s were characterized by relative calm. The Dawes Plan served well to finance the economic recovery of Germany (and the rest of Europe), and strategic stability seemed to finally settle in Europe. France completed an agreement guaranteeing Yugoslavian security in 1927, which completed its net of alliances in Eastern Europe. Exemplifying the riches of those years, France’s foreign minister Aristide Briand and American Secretary of State Frank Kellogg agreed on a pact to renounce war as a policy option. On the latter’s initiative, the Briand-Kellogg Pact was extended to apply universally, and with sixty-five signatories (including Germany, the Soviet-Union, Japan, and Italy) the
pact served to outlaw war. In times of prosperity, such idealistic initiatives may provide some comfort, but they rarely last when rough times reappear. And rough times always do.

Disintegration of the Equilibrium

The few years of prosperity Europe enjoyed after the Great War ended in the closing months of the 1920s. After the New York stock exchange collapsed on October 29th, 1929 it did not take long for the crisis to spread worldwide. The major capitalist states responded to their agricultural overproduction and decline of international trade by pursuing a protectionist policy through the raising of tariffs and aiming at self-sufficiency for their economies. This reaction, British historian Richard Overy contends, was understandable, but destroyed any chance of reviving the world economy through collaboration. Indeed, it had not taken long for the unified front implied by the idealistic Brian-Kellogg Pact to crumble once governments had to choose between national interest and international cooperation.

The situation was further aggravated for the European powers by the recall of American loans. American investors, already skeptical about investing in Europe through the slow repayment of Allied war debts and the investments that turned sour during the German inflation crisis, immediately stopped investing in the European economies, this brought the economic system in Europe to a virtual halt. As the Germans now lacked the loans to pay off their war reparation bills, the British and French lacked the money to pay off their war debts to the United States. In order to give the European powers some breathing space, President Hoover reluctantly offered a one-year moratorium on reparation and war debt payments in June 1931. The following year, in June and July 1932, the participants in the Young Plan, which had come to replace the Dawes Plan when it expired in 1929, met in Lausanne. Here, it was agreed that there would be a three-year moratorium on the resumption of German reparation payments, after which, if the Germans were capable of doing so, a final, reduced, payment would be made. The French, sensing that if a moratorium on German reparations would be agreed upon, the resumption of payments was unlikely to occur, insisted that war debt obligations to the United States had to be reduced in exchange for French approval. The Americans, at the time caught up in Presidential elections, would not agree to this proposal, but since the first moratorium had already suspended German payments, the Germans were not likely to resume payments in any case. The French therefore defaulted on their war debts at the end of 1932, and so did the other European powers, except Finland, in the following year. The disgruntled new American President Franklin D. Roosevelt, responded by ignoring European interests in his economic policy. At the world economic conference in London in July 1933, Roosevelt announced his

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21 Overy, *The Inter-War Crisis*, 46.
22 Ibid., 42-43.
refusal to cooperate in a scheme for exchange rate stability, and therewith ruined the conference that was supposed to stabilize world economy. The whole episode left much ill-will between on the one hand France and Great Britain, and on the other the United States, and reinforced American reluctance to enter into European political affairs.\textsuperscript{23}

The tensions between the Great Powers were further aggravated by Japanese aggression in the Far East. In a time of growing protectionism and diminishing trade, the Japanese economy was hurt worse by its lack of natural resources. Cut off from the world market, the Japanese army ventured to occupy the material-rich Chinese province of Manchuria in September 1931. This move was in clear breach of the Covenant of the League of Nations, as well as in violation of the Washington Naval Treaty, completed between France, Italy, Great Britain, Japan, and the United States in 1922, which included a clause safeguarding Chinese independence.\textsuperscript{24} The League of Nations did not manage to prevent the Japanese from annexing the province, and only managed to produce a commission to investigate the case. On the commissions’ report the League Assembly did not vote until February 1933 when the conquest of Manchuria had already long been completed. The failure of the League of Nations to even threaten Japan with sanctions clearly revealed its impotence as a collective security system. The Great Powers with interests in the Far East, the United States and Great Britain, were too preoccupied with the convulsions of the Great Depression to intervene in a far away continent. The Japanese aggressive assertiveness in the Far East was to give them many more headaches in the years to come.

Germany, like Japan, was also hit harder by the Great Depression than were its rivals. Germany, largely dependent on foreign loans and lacking colonies to trade with, fell into a deep hole of unemployment and poverty. Matters were made even worse by the German trauma of hyperinflation, which led the German government to pursue a tight economic policy. Furthermore, German Chancellor Heinrich Brüning tended to rule by decree, with President Hindenburg’s approval, thus preparing the German public for the sidestepping of democratic institutions in moments of crisis, a mechanism of which Hitler too would later gratefully make use. As long as the crisis endured, Adolf Hitler’s national socialist party (NSDAP) was profiting in the elections. Providing scapegoats for the misery of the German people, namely Jews, Marxists, and the Treaty of Versailles, and economic autarchy as the solution, his electoral support soared.\textsuperscript{25} The economic slump swept Hitler into power. During the mid to late 1920s, when Germany prospered, his party was obscure and small, but every year the economic crisis endured and toppled governments the votes for his party rose, making the NSDAP the largest party in Germany by July 1932. Though with signs of slow recovery showing in the second half of 1932, and subsequently a decline

\textsuperscript{23} Ross, \textit{The Great Powers}, 73-74


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in votes for the Nazi party in the November elections, it was too late to stem the tide. Hitler was installed as Chancellor in January 1933.

The British and French governments in the meantime, had found a new way to ease the tensions in Europe, as well as saving on their expenses. Reasoning that the powerful armaments lobbies, and the arms race between the European powers, had led Europe to the First World War, they prepared public opinion for the Geneva Disarmament Conference, which was to be held in early 1932. Encouraged by the large peace movements in the two countries, and the prospects of government savings on the military budget, the public happily took the bait. At the same time, however, the British government, in the wake of its inability to prevent Japanese aggression in the Far East, recognized its military weakness. Having already subscribed to the disarmament policy, it could hardly reverse its chosen policy and maintain credibility. The French and British governments therefore entered the conference in February 1932 determined to pursue a peaceful Europe through disarmament. Despite a deadlock in the early stages of the conference, by December 11th, the French, British, German, Italian, and American governments declared that all nations, armed and disarmed alike, would be granted equal armament rights in a new international system that would guarantee security for all. France thus finally subscribed to equal armament rights for Germany. The following years would be devoted to the pursuit of a system that would guarantee European security despite an equally armed Germany.

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27 Marks, The Illusion of Peace, 142-143.
2. Returning the Eagle His Wings: Hitler Pulling the Strings

When Adolf Hitler became German Chancellor on January 30th 1933, he found Germany in a weak condition. Though the worst of the Great Depression’s convulsions had passed, and the burden of reparation payments shed, German society was in political and economic turmoil. The street violence of Nazi thugs would not be difficult for Hitler to quell, but as all other nations, Germany faced a more challenging problem with its dire economic situation. Germany, in January 1933, contained 6,013,600 registered unemployed on a population of 62 million.29 Hitler, nevertheless, did not budge from his ambitious program of reestablishing German superiority, which he had unfolded in his book Mein Kampf, published in 1924. Strongly influenced by the German school of geopolitical thinkers led by Karl Haushofer, Hitler believed nations to be organisms, whose strength was derived from their geographical, demographical, economical, and military circumstances.30 The strength of nations therefore did not depend on the exploitation of far away continents (as was the case with the British Empire), but of the domination of a nation’s immediate neighbors by securing living space (Lebensraum). To Hitler, the survival of the German master race was threatened by a number of enemies who had to be defeated, namely Jews and Marxists (whom he often considered to be one and the same). For the German people to thrive, Hitler foresaw the conquest of living space in Eastern Europe, most notably targeting the weak states erected there after the First World War and Russia. His ambitions therefore lay in the east, but he was aware of France’s suspicions and considered France to be unreasonably bent on thwarting German expansion. According to Hitler’s analysis, France was an inherent enemy due to its geo-strategic considerations, the Soviet Union an inevitable one due to the future needs of the German state. Hitler thought of the other two powerhouses in Europe, Great Britain and Italy, as potential allies.31 What is remarkable, is how consistent Hitler was in pursuing the aims he had unfolded in the 1920s. The only thing he was not certain of was how and when to secure his objectives. Germany, in 1933, was disarmed and economically feeble, shackled by the treaties of Versailles and Locarno. This chapter describes how Hitler overthrew these restrictions between 1933 and 1936.

Assuming Control

Hitler, soon after taking office, set out to consolidate his power. On February 3rd he met with the heads of the German army in an attempt to secure their support for his policies by promising them to rearm the German military. In his speech to the generals, Hitler told them that his main aim for Germany is to regain political power in the international arena.

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For this purpose, the economy had to be revived, Versailles had to be defeated by relentlessly insisting on equal rights at the Geneva Disarmament Conference, and the armed forces had to be rebuilt through the reintroduction of conscription, not through a merger with the SA (Sturmabteilung), which since 1921 had served as the Nazi party’s private militia. The regaining of political power was intended “for the conquest of new living space in the east and its ruthless Germanization”. Hitler at this occasion also noted the danger of a possible pre-emptive strike from France, in collaboration with one of her eastern allies (probably Poland), therefore extreme caution was warranted in the pursuit of these aims.

Throughout 1933 Hitler expressed himself fearful of a French intervention. In the hope of (temporarily) appeasing France, Hitler agreed to Mussolini’s proposal for a Four-Power-Pact in March. Here, he hoped to secure French and British consent for the revision of the treaties that perpetuated unequal treatment of Germany in European affairs. As the negotiations progressed, however, France and Britain showed consistent cohesion in purpose, which resulted in the pact being no more than a useless proclamation of good intentions, pledging that treaty revisions would only be pursued through peaceful means.

Also in March, Polish Marshall Jozef Pilsudski, apparently in response to the advent of the new Nazi government, grouped his troops along the Polish-German border. At the time, rumors of a preventative French-Polish war against Hitler spread, and Hitler made sure he did nothing to provoke a Polish attack. In fact, in the subsequent months, Hitler induced Nazi’s in the Free City of Danzig to cease their violence for elections in April (which they won) and issued a communiqué in May assuring the Poles that he would not transgress existing treaties. Thus, Hitler managed to stave off the tensions introduced on the international scene by his persona from erupting before the time was right.

To undermine the French, likely to form a vigilant obstacle to Hitler’s plans, Hitler decided to target France’s allies, of whom he knew none were completely dependable. His first opportunity arose when British Prime Minister James Ramsay MacDonald submitted a draft convention to the Disarmament Conference on March 26th 1933, proposing to limit continental armies to a maximum of 200,000 men and banning heavy armaments such as tanks and offensive aviation forces within five years. The proposal amounted to an envisaged reduction of the French army to the prescribed number, and the raising of the German army to match it. Hitler’s first reaction was to reject the plan, since such limitations would thwart his plans for radical rearmament, but this would entail the risk of sanctions and international isolation. Therefore, Hitler held a speech on May 19th commending the plan as a possible solution to tensions in Europe. However, leaving the door open to reject the plan

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32 Excerpts from Adolf Hitler’s first speech to the Generals, on 3 February 1933, can be found in Anthony P. Adamthwaite, The Making of the Second World War (London 1977) 120-121.
after all, Hitler added that if the matter was decided without Germany's approval, Hitler would have to pull out of the League of Nations.  

German generals were slow to realize the potential of the MacDonald plan. A military strategy drawn up in 1928 required 300,000 men to hold a defense against France, for which the MacDonald plan already provided two-thirds. With some hard bargaining the additional 100,000 men could be secured, and the heavy weapons clause was of no concern in 1933 since the German economy was in no state to rearm the heavy divisions of the army in any case. The German concurrence with the plan, however, would prove ineffective if the French would not accept the plan. France was willing to comply, provided that the convention would be more stringent and action would be undertaken against illegal German rearmament. Under French scrutiny, and dreading detection and further isolation, the Germans ended in the summer of 1933 the secret military cooperation they had enjoyed with the Soviet-Union since the Treaty of Rapallo.

In September the British signaled their unwillingness to apply sanctions against covert German rearmament, which made the French more determined to pursue more rigorous terms than the MacDonald plan had envisioned. The French amendment proposed to divide the future convention into two four year periods. In the first period the states with restricted armaments (Germany) would be allowed some measure of rearmament while supervisory measures were tested, and if these measures were satisfactory, the stronger states would disarm in the second period. Hitler, on learning that the British government supported the French amendment, called a cabinet meeting where he declared his intolerance towards the French amendments of the MacDonald Plan. Since the supervisory measures envisaged could only be applied to Germany, and there was no guarantee the heavily armed Powers would disarm during the second period, Hitler reasoned, the convention was obviously intended to keep Germany weak. With the support of President Hindenburg, Hitler pulled Germany out of both the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations on October 14th. In a public statement Hitler announced his move to be motivated by the “unreasonable, humiliating, and degrading demands set by the other Powers in the Geneva Disarmament Conference”. In a subsequent proclamation Hitler’s propaganda minister Goebbels announced Hitler’s desire for peace and understanding. In a plebiscite the following November, 95.1 percent of the German electorate expressed their support for Hitler’s decision.

Hitler’s resolve to abandon the Disarmament Conference incurred few risks, considering that participation was voluntary. Leaving the League of Nations had been done before by Japan, Brazil and Argentina, none of whom were presented with any repercussions for their actions, which also encouraged Hitler’s move. In the end, the

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provision of the Treaty of Versailles still applied, with or without Germany in the League of Nations. Hitler, in an attempt to show his peaceful colors, approached France separately with disarmament proposals in December. The ‘disarmament’ memorandum proposed to limit German rearmament to France’s level, which unquestionably was not what the French had in mind.\(^{39}\)

To convince the world of his peaceful intentions, Hitler offered both Poland and Czechoslovakia non-aggression pacts. Knowing that these two countries would be startled by Germany’s withdrawal from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference, Hitler hoped to thus prevent a preventative attack against Germany. Of the two, only the former took the bait. Fearful of being excluded from an agreement on treaty revision, and of a Germany unrestricted by the League’s mechanisms, Poland entered negotiations with Hitler’s Third Reich. Poland retained the right to adhere to its existing commitments, referring to its alliance with France, and the Declaration was signed on 26\(^{th}\) of January, 1934. The most obvious victim to this agreement, besides France whose eastern alliance system had now lost the sting of its most vigilant member, was the Soviet Union. The USSR subsequently negotiated with France over a possible military alliance. Hitler was not concerned with the Soviet threat, and apparently reacted with little dread to the news of the Franco-Russian overtures. As he saw it, the Soviet Union was more worried about Japanese encroachment in the east, than of the Polish-German rapprochement.\(^{40}\) Thus, by the end of his first year as Chancellor, Hitler had managed to reduce the League’s hold over Germany, as well as damage France’s faith in the Disarmament Conference and its eastern alliance system. This, however, was just a preview of what was to come.

*Preparing in Isolation*

After consolidating his eastern border through the non-aggression pact with Poland, and thus (temporarily) securing his western border because a unilateral French intervention seemed unlikely, Hitler could focus more closely on domestic politics. At this stage, his policy objectives contained the premises rearmament and the consolidation of his own position as the supreme German leader. Also, he hoped to export the Nazi revolution to his Austrian brethren. The drive for rearmament met with opposition from Hitler’s own generals, who naturally supported rearmament, but not at the accelerated pace Hitler envisaged. They insisted on adherence to the original plan of expanding the army to 300,000 men by 1938, whereas Hitler wanted to achieve this by April 1935 so as to present the world with a *fait accompli*. The head of the *Truppenamt*, general Ludwig Beck, protested to no avail that such a rapid expansion was practically impossible and would not pass foreign scrutiny unnoticed. The army, in any case, was under pressure to strengthen itself, as its rivals, the SS (*Schutzstaffel*, an elite paramilitary organization in the Nazi Party) and the SA

\(^{39}\) Leitz, *Nazi Foreign Policy*, 41.
\(^{40}\) Robertson, *Hitler’s Pre-War Plans*, 25-27.
(Sturmabteilung, an enormous militia of Nazi street fighters) were increasingly threatening the army’s position as the nation’s legitimate bearer of arms. British historian Peter Calvocoressi, in fact argues that Hitler bolstered the SA to pressure the army into complying with Hitler’s plans. Finally, a trade off was made. Hitler’s plans for rearmament were implemented after the order was given on June 6th 1934, and on June 30th the SA leadership was decimated in a nation wide purge of dissenting officials, in what became known as the night of the Long Knives. On the 3rd of August, the day after President Hindenburg died and Hitler took his place, the army pledged allegiance to Hitler personally. In Peter Calvocoressi’s words “By this oath the army equated the guardianship of the German state with obedience to the command of Hitler, who was henceforward not only Führer but also President and Supreme War Lord.”41 In Germany, Hitler’s tyranny was now indisputable.

In the meantime, Nazi subversion, inspired and supported by Germany, had reached Austria. Here, Chancellor Engelbert Dolphuss was caught in a cross fire between German and Italian influences, while trying to deal with Social Democratic and Nazi revolts against his leadership. Dolphuss complained to Italy, Great Britain and France about Nazi plots to overthrow his government, but before they could agree on a common line, the Austrian Social Democrats tried to seize power. Goaded by Mussolini, who aimed to preserve Austria as his own sphere of influence, Dolphuss used force to crush the uprising, which bolstered the Austrian Nazi Party to which many Social Democrats subsequently defected. On February 17th 1934, Italy, France and Britain issued a joint communiqué which condemned any violations of treaties concerning Austria’s independence. Nazi hopes were further aggravated by the Rome Protocols, which in March concluded economic agreements between Italy, Hungary, and Austria. Hitler, at this point fearing a French-Italian front against Germany, decided to go to Italy to meet Mussolini in person to discuss the tensions in Austria, where Nazi terror continued unabated. The two Fascist leaders met for the first time in Venice in mid-June. Hitler promised Mussolini not to meddle in Austrian affairs, but found himself more determined to undermine Dolphuss due to the derogatory comments he had suffered from Mussolini.42

Nazi’s in Austria, supplied with German weapons and explosives, amplified their reign of terror in July, to which Dolphuss responded with more suppressive measures and punishments. Finally, on July 25th, Dolphuss and most of his cabinet were murdered as Nazi insurgents attempted to seize control. Led by Kurt von Schuschnigg, however, government troops soon managed to restore order. Mussolini, who was enraged by the murder of Dolphuss, sent four divisions to the Austrian border, which caused some panic in Berlin, and made Hitler realize that it was too early for an Anschluss. The German press bureau’s public announcement of rejoice at Dolphuss murder was quickly altered into a condemnation, the Austrian Nazi leader Theodor Habicht was removed, and German Vice-

42 Robertson, Hitler’s Pre-War Plans, 39
Chancellor Franz von Papen was sent to Austria to mend Austro-German ties. The abortive Nazi coup led to world wide condemnation and in the summer of 1934, Germany was the most isolated it had been since Hitler had become Chancellor.

Though in a precarious position internationally, Hitler had managed to solidify his power domestically, as described above. Also in the economic sphere he had managed to get Germany back on top. In the summer of 1934, Germany counted approximately 2,4 million registered unemployed, which is a drop of 3,6 million unemployed since Hitler became Chancellor one-and-a-half years before. However, as economic historian Dan P. Silverman argues, much of Germany's economic recovery can be attributed to the natural improvement of economic cycles as well as seasonal labor, still the achievement remains impressive.

Much of Hitler's public work programs invested in the 'motorization' of Germany. The use of cars was stimulated through tax relieves, encouragement of enrollment in the Nazi Car Corps, and increasing the efficiency of road administration. The car industry furthermore touched on many other branches, since research and resources were required to boost the industry. Highways (Autobahnen) were constructed which made transport by car more efficient. Between 1932 and 1934 the car industry expanded times two-and-a-half.

Between 1933 and 1936 Hitler also invested heavily in the aviation industry, once more exemplifying his fascination for modern technology. In comparison with other industrialized nations since the lowest point of the economic crisis, unemployment in Germany had dropped by 60 percent in 1935, whereas Great Britain had only conquered 15 percent of the unemployed, and Roosevelt’s New Deal policy in the United States had hardly made a difference.

An observant reader may note that the public work programs in which Hitler invested were of strategic value. Indeed, the production of strategic materials in Germany soared from 1933 on. During 1934 Hitler gradually ended the public work programs, so as to gradually replace them with rearmament programs. In March 1934 Hitler placed the first order with Krupp weapons manufactory for 100 light model tanks, to be followed up by another 650 the next year. In early 1934, the German army already had forty-four aviation units, which under secret cover with aviation schools, managed to continue the training of German pilots who could no longer train in the Soviet-Union. Through the 'Replacement Shipbuilding Plan', drawn by Admiral of the Kriegsmarine Erich Raeder and approved in May 1934, the German navy sought parity with its French counterpart and called for the construction of eight battleships, three aircraft carriers, and seventy-two submarines.

Though conscription was forbidden for Germany by the Versailles Treaty, the document

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43 William L. Shirer, Opkomst en Ondergang van het Derde Rijk (Amsterdam 1959) 304.
44 Overy, War and Economy, 39.
46 Overy, War and Economy, 72-73, 78-80, 181.
47 Silverman, Hitler's Economy, 226.
48 Ibid., 223.
49 Peter Jackson, France and the Nazi Menace (New York 2000) 133.
made no mention of National Labor Services, for they did not yet exist in 1919. Through this loophole, Hitler in 1934 instituted obligatory recruitment into the National Labor Service (Reicharbeitdienst) for 18-year-olds, where they had to spend six months training in a rigid disciplined mass organization. The Hitler Youth (Hitler Jugend), which trained youths between the ages of 12 and 18, saw its membership rise from 100,000 in 1932 to 3.5 million before membership was made compulsory in 1936. The covert rearmament expenses were paid for with funds seized from ‘enemies of the state’ (Jews) and Mefo bills, government negotiated bonds that were to be redeemed by future tax revenues. Silverman attributes much of the economic recovery of German society to the confidence Hitler inspired in businessmen by coercing the work-shy, smashing the labor unions, and the prognosis of future orders for rearmament.

Despite the economic successes and secret rearmament of Germany, permanent state secretary Bernhard von Bülow dreaded detection of Hitler’s treaty violations. In August 1934 he expressed his concern, stressing that

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\text{in judging the situation we should never overlook the fact that no kind of rearmament in the next few years could give us security (…) we shall for a long time be hopelessly inferior to France in the military sphere (…) in view of our isolation and our present weakness, economically and as regards to foreign currency, our opponents need not even expose themselves to the hazards, the odium and the dangers of military measures. Without mobilizing a single man or firing a single shot, they can place us in the most difficult situation by setting up a financial and economic blockade against us, either covert or overt.}\]

There was no cause for von Bülow’s anxiety. It seemed that militarily, for the time being, no Power was willing to confront Germany directly, and economically France, Italy, and Great Britain were too preoccupied with their own domestic misery to threaten the German economy. If anything, German corporations had penetrated western economies, especially the American. Through cloaking, big German corporations had secretly infiltrated American businesses and directed their policies behind the scenes, thus, for example, undermining the production of strategic materials.

\[\text{Defeating the Treaties}\]

In the autumn of 1934, France, aware of Germany's growing secret rearmament, made new attempts to encircle Germany. Britain, however, insisted that the French proposal for an ‘Eastern Locarno’, where the USSR, Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Baltic States guarantee each other’s security against one another, include Germany. Hitler responded that this

\[\text{50} \text{ Barton Whaley, Covert German Rearmament (Maryland 1984) 44-45, 50.}\]
\[\text{51} \text{ Silverman, Hitler’s Economy, 236, 242.}\]
\[\text{52} \text{ Adamthwaite, The Making, 129.}\]
\[\text{53} \text{ Gerard Aalders, Operatie Safehaven (Amsterdam 2006) 88-90.}\]
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initiative was only an attempt to entangle Germany back in the League of Nations, and did not provide for equality since Germany was still not allowed to rearm. France’s subsequent attempt to conclude a bilateral agreement with the Soviet-Union, which had acceded to the League of Nations in September 1934, caused little panic in Berlin.\(^{54}\)

January 1935 finally brought the Saar plebiscite, which was to determine the fate of the region as agreed upon in Versailles. Great Britain acted as a neutral supervisor, invited by both France and Germany, thus giving the impression that Locarno was as alive as it had been a decade before. The population of the Saar overwhelmingly chose inclusion in the Third Reich. The French, already expecting this setback, had cultivated their relationship with Italy in the final months of 1934 to restrict Germany in other ways, and published on January 7\(^{th}\) the Rome Agreements. The agreements stressed that no country was entitled to unilaterally revise treaties, mostly referring to the inviolability of Austrian sovereignty. In the case of such a unilateral revision, Italy and France would consult each other on what sanction to impose. Great Britain later acceded to the Agreements. This initiative did not stir much anxiety in Hitler either, and for good reason. First because the negotiations between France and Italy had been rather rocky, and second because on a mission for the British Prime Minister, Lord Allen told Hitler that the Rome Agreements and hostility to Germany caused worries in the United Kingdom itself. Hitler seized on the opportunity to convey to Lord Allen that he wanted nothing but peace for Germany for the next fifty years, and proposed negotiations between Great Britain and Germany on arms limitations, to which France and Italy could later accede.\(^{55}\) To discuss these negotiations, Hitler invited British foreign secretary John Simon to Berlin in March.

Two days before the planned visit of Simon the diplomatic world was rocked by a bombshell on 7 March as Hermann Göring announced the existence of the German Air Force (Luftwaffe), Simons visit was subsequently postponed. The next week, in response to the extension of mandatory military service in France, Hitler announced the reintroduction of conscription. Hitler stipulated that his army would consist of thirty-six divisions, approximately 500,000 men, which was fifteen divisions more than he had argued for in disarmament negotiations. The French and British offered little more than minor objections, and the latter even asked if Hitler was still willing to meet their secretary of state, to which Hitler agreed.\(^{56}\) The next day, on March 17\(^{th}\), Germans all over the country celebrated, as the humiliating demilitarization of Versailles was finally rebuked.

From fear of foreign intervention Hitler had long denied the existence of Germany’s covert rearmament program. Now that the program was out in the open, Hitler made sure to exaggerate German power as much as possible to discourage external intervention as Germany was still feeble and vulnerable. Thus, when Simon finally came to Berlin, flanked by secretary for League affairs Anthony Eden, Hitler told him that the Luftwaffe had

\(^{54}\) Robertson, Hitler’s Pre-War Plans, 46-47
\(^{55}\) Ibid., 54.
\(^{56}\) Shirer, Opkomst en Ondergang, 308-309.
achieved parity with the Royal Air Force, while providing figures illustrating the Luftwaffe’s strength. The figures Hitler presented, where the Luftwaffe’s strength in fact exceeded the RAF’s capacity, were based on nothing but bluff. In the weeks after the announcement of the Luftwaffe’s existence, Göring had the limited air forces Germany possessed fly virtually without pause, to give the impression of a massive air squadron. Of course the implication was that the German air force could bombard British cities, since the assumption was prevalent at the time that ‘the bomber always gets through’.\textsuperscript{57} German foreign minister Konstantin von Neurath later explained that the British diplomats were perceptibly shocked by the display of German power, and before they left it was agreed that Hitler would dispatch a mission to London for a naval agreement. Thus, though Hitler had one-sidedly shredded Versailles, he still seemed on friendly terms with its most important guarantor.\textsuperscript{58}

The French, in the meantime, had labored to find a replacement to guarantee the borders in eastern Europe for the uninterested British and found their ally in the Soviet Union. It was already obvious that the Franco-Soviet Treaty would be concluded (which was signed on May 2\textsuperscript{nd}) when Italy, France, Belgium, and Great Britain, in the spirit of the Rome Agreements, met at Stresa on April 11\textsuperscript{th}. Hitler had offered non-aggression pacts to all of his neighbors in the aftermath of his rearrangement announcement, knowing that this would make Britain less stringent with Germany at the conference. Indeed, at the conference, French entrenchment was watered down by British and Italian refusal to fall in line. The Stresa Conference produced little more than a statement reinforcing the Italian and British guarantee of Locarno, lamenting German unilateralism, referring possible sanctions to the League’s Council, and calling for an air pact, to limit military aviation in Europe. The Germans were satisfied, since the conference produced no tangible measures to be taken against Germany, they credited London for France’s failure to encircle the Reich.\textsuperscript{59}

Despite Germany’s isolation, Hitler had already targeted his next victim, the Treaty of Locarno. If he could seize the demilitarized Rhineland, this would both provide Germany with valuable strategic materials, as well as gain strategic leverage over France by putting German forces on her border. With the remilitarization of the Rhineland, Hitler could fortify his western border which would make him impervious to his western rivals, unless they were willing to wage another world war. In the spring of 1935, however, Hitler deemed the violation of another treaty too risky, and therefore, on May 21\textsuperscript{st}, he held a speech reassuring the world of his peaceful intentions. Hitler promised to leave Germany’s eastern neighbors and Austria untouched, and to observe Germany’s obligations under the Locarno Treaty, though he left himself a loophole by asserting that an “element of legal insecurity” had crept into the treaty by its distortion through the Franco-Soviet alliance.\textsuperscript{60} On the same occasion, Hitler also announced, that Germany was unable, and did not aim to become a maritime

\textsuperscript{57} Whaley, \textit{Covert German Rearmament}, 56-57.
\textsuperscript{58} Robertson, \textit{Hitler’s Pre-War Plans}, 57.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 60-61.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 62.
power, and therefore proposed to limit Germany’s naval armaments to 35 percent of Britain’s naval strength (which he had already begun building though the Replacement Shipbuilding Plan of 1934). The British seized on the occasion and concluded the Anglo-German Naval Treaty in June. William L. Shirer, British author of *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, argues that naval rearmament, at only a third of British strength, still meant (at least in the short run) unlimited German maritime rearmament, as Germany needed to catch up. The British thus gave the Germans the explicit right to rearm, even possess the through Versailles prohibited submarines, without consulting their Stresa partners. It has also been argued, by American historian Joseph A. Maiolo, that Hitler considered the Anglo-German Naval Naval Treaty as a demarcation of spheres of influence. By conceding British superiority on the seas and restricting German rearmament mostly to land forces, Hitler thought Britain conceded continental Europe to Germany, while the British gained unchallenged superiority over the oceans. Later when London continued to meddle in Hitler’s European affairs, when Europe was on the brink of war, Hitler ignored the restrictions he had agreed to on naval armaments and demanded that his shipyards build him a more powerful fleet.

The Anglo-German Naval Agreement was a considerable blow to the Stresa Front, which further disintegrated when Mussolini invaded Abyssinia in October 1935. As Italy quarreled with France and Britain over this flagrant breach of the League’s Covenant, Hitler knew the moment was opportune for his seizure of the Rhineland. Germany remained neutral in the Abyssinian debate, for which Mussolini rewarded Berlin in January, by telling German ambassador Ulrich von Hassel that he had no objections to Austria becoming a German satellite. Mussolini, who by February was threatened with possible oil sanctions against Italy, realized that a German treaty violation would make Germany the black sheep of Europe again, and thus would distract attention from Italy’s atrocities in Africa. Mussolini sent out feelers on the 11th of February to ask von Hassel what Germany would do if the Franco-Soviet alliance was ratified by the French Senate, the following month. Apparently Hitler took this as encouragement, because on February 12th he decided to remilitarize the Rhineland following ratification by the French Senate.

In mid-February 1936, Hitler received word of a British initiative for a Working Agreement between France, Germany, and Great Britain. This agreement would amount to Germany, in return for an air pact and the pledge not to seek revision of treaties by force, being rewarded some modifications of the Locarno Treaty, apparently referring to the remilitarization of the Rhineland. The proposal was not yet concrete, and Hitler therefore did not yet have to agree to anything, but he did draw the lesson that the British were not

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64 Robertson, *Hitler’s Pre-War Plans*, 70-71.
committed to the demilitarized zone at all costs.\textsuperscript{65} With regards to France, Hitler was aware that the question was not if she \textit{could} stop German forces, French military superiority was still overwhelming, but the question was if Paris \textit{would} stop German forces from advancing into the demilitarized zone. Hitler realized Paris was unlikely to act unilaterally, and having received reassurances from both Italy and the United Kingdom that the demilitarization of the Rhineland was to them not of strategic essence, he pressed ahead. On March 4 the Foreign Affairs Committee of the French Senate agreed in principle to the Franco-Russian Treaty, on March 5 Hitler told his Chief of Staff Werner von Blomberg to seize the Rhineland on the 7\textsuperscript{th}. Stressing that it were the French who breached the Treaty of Locarno by distorting the mechanism through their alliance with the Soviet Union, Hitler used only 20,000 men to reoccupy the demilitarized zone.\textsuperscript{66} France, with a standing army of 500,000 men, could not secure British support and did nothing to stop him.\textsuperscript{67} Once German forces had settled in the Rhineland, it would indeed take a war to remove them, which, as the days passed, made French action increasingly unlikely. Finally, Hitler’s sovereignty over the whole of Germany was complete.

As always, Hitler balanced his treaty violation with peace offerings. He proposed to demilitarize both sides of the Franco-German border, non-aggression pacts with Belgium and France, as well as to return Germany to the League of Nations. Hitler, of course, knew he would never implement these proposals, if only because the French would refuse to demilitarize their side of the border.\textsuperscript{68} The year 1936 later witnessed Hitler host the largest sport event in history, the ‘Peace Olympics’ in Berlin, a peaceful manifestation which he balanced in the subsequent months by breaching the non-intervention agreement in the Spanish Civil War and gearing the German economy into a full-scale war-machine through the first Four-Year-Program.\textsuperscript{69}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Ibid.} Ibid., 73, 79.
\bibitem{Leitz} Leitz, \textit{Nazi Foreign Policy}, 44.
\bibitem{Kissinger} Kissinger, \textit{Diplomacy}, 304.
\bibitem{Shirer} Shirer, \textit{Opkomst en Ondergang}, 319.
\end{thebibliography}
3. Stuck in a Trap: The Third Republic’s Deathbed

After the First World War and the Treaty of Versailles, French fear of German resurgence never vanished. The French did not forget that it took them a coalition with Great Britain, Belgium, and the United States (counting only the Western front) to bring Germany to its knees in the Great War. Throughout the 1920s, the intelligence agencies of France’s Third Republic, such as the Deuxième Bureau, reported that the sense of humiliation ran deep in the German national spirit and that overturning the defeat of 1918 was a task to which the whole populace was committed. French military analysts based their assessments on a stereotypical framework which labeled the German people war-hungry, aspiring to dominate, and extremely responsive to higher authorities and therefore excellent material for a society in war. This image of an aggressive Germany combined with Germany’s economic and war potential (the German population of 62 million vastly outnumbered France’s 36 million in 1932), scared French policymakers into armed vigilance over German recovery. France’s military position in relation to Germany was further exacerbated by a decline of its birthrate during the war years, which was expected to hit France’s conscription army in 1935. Then, military analysts stipulated, France would be able to call six million men to arms, against twelve million Germans. However, despite highly exaggerated estimates of the number and strength of active paramilitary groups in Germany, for the time being, Germany was disarmed and therefore incapable of threatening France. It were these strategic estimates that dominated France’s military thought when Hitler became Chancellor in early 1933.

Measuring Up the Adversary

On the eve of the German invasion of France in 1940, the Nazi propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels reportedly said that if he had been French premier in 1933, he would have responded to Hitler’s appointment by demanding that either Hitler be removed, or he’d march on Berlin. However enlightened Goebbels may have been in hindsight, in 1933, French politicians did not consider removing Hitler by force. Politics of disarmament, internationalism, and collective security ruled in France. In 1932, every political party in the French elections had endorsed disarmament, the left wing parties even insisting on undertaking disarmament unilaterally, without security guarantees. The new French government, which had taken office in December 1932, was left-wing oriented and headed by Edouard Daladier. Daladier and his foreign minister Joseph Paul-Boncour remained committed to disarmament and internationalism despite intelligence reports warning of the

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70 Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace*, 49-51.
71 Ibid., 47-49, 55.
72 Leitz, *Nazi Foreign Policy*, 40.
73 Jackson, *France and the Nazi Menace*, 53-54.
dangerous events unfolding in Germany. French intelligence services had warned French politicians for Nazism since Hitler’s first major electoral victory in 1930. Based on a close reading of *Mein Kampf*, intelligence reports stressed that Hitler would undertake to seize full control of German society, dispose of democracy, and rearm, despite his probable proclamations of peaceful intentions. Paul-Boncour responded to the warnings of Hitler’s intentions that if Hitler would pursue such a program, this would only be beneficial to France, as Germany would be discredited in world opinion.\(^{74}\)

It was in the prevalent mood of disarmament and endorsement of the League of Nations as a collective security mechanism that French politicians ignored the warnings of their military intelligence services. The relationship between the army and the civil service was severely strained in these years, as politicians chose as its defense policy disarmament and collective security instead of armed suasion, at the army’s expense. The intelligence services, already inherently disposed to giving ‘worst case’ assessments, tended to exaggerate their estimates of the threats facing France in order to secure higher funds for the military. The distorted information they subsequently presented was then easier for politicians to ignore, as the reliability of the intelligence assessments was compromised. Paul-Boncour, restricted by the burden of the economic slump and subscribing to disarmament, cut the defense budget in the fiscal year of 1933-1934 by 25 percent.\(^{75}\)

The French army was not in the best shape to begin with. Since 1928, France’s war strategy was based on the assumption that the next war France would fight would be a lengthy defensive war of attrition against Germany. As the experiences of the First World War had revealed, depths of economic perseverance were imperative for a nation’s ability to conduct a war. As in that war, France expected to hold its own behind its defensive lines, for which the construction of the famous Maginot-Line was begun in 1930, while exhausting the enemy through a naval blockade, for which France was dependant on Great Britain. France’s budget, despite cuts in the general defense budget, always reserved a steady portion for the navy, which after all was indispensable to the French strategy. The navy thus was in relatively good shape, though dependent for its success on British support, which the British were reluctant to give. Seeing how the navy got fixed funds, the army consequentially had to bear the brunt of the defense cuts. The army in 1933 had no armored divisions and the air force, which came into existence as a separate military arm in that year, could not determine whether it existed to support the army’s ground operations or for independent strategic bombing missions.\(^{76}\) The French army was further weakened by its own mobilization plans, which would take two weeks to be executed. Furthermore, all the standing troops were necessary to execute day-to-day defensive plans, and therefore the army had no operational flexibility as long as full mobilization was not complete. Even theoretically, a pre-emptive strike was therefore not an option for France, nor fighting a

\(^{74}\) Ibid., 56-59, 67.

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 66-68.

limited war. France, after having surrendered the legal option of a military offensive at Locarno, had now also relinquished all offensive initiative by its own military plans. Perhaps the French army had no choice, as the funds it received in the early to mid 1930s were barely enough to cover day-to-day expenses, let alone invest in expensive pre-emptive offensive capabilities whose conduct would be illegal anyway.

General Maurice Gamelin, second army general in command, assessed the responsibilities the French government had imposed on its army, despite its policy of disarmament and its cuts in the defense budget. The French army had to contain both German and Italian expansionism, and it had to do so without any help from its allies, in any case in the opening days of the war. France had to be capable of defending itself, as well as Belgium and Switzerland. Its eastern allies could not be expected to do any more than concentrate on their own defenses, the success of which would be determined by the attitude of the Soviet-Union. In the Middle East, French interests depended on the attitude of Turkey, and in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and Austria, on the Italian mind-set. Obviously, these responsibilities were out of touch with the capacity of the French army.

In March 1933, for the first time since Hitler had come to power, an international initiative by Mussolini called the attention of the greatest European Powers. Mussolini, hoping to divert German attention from Austria to Poland, and hoping to satiate the revisionist appetites of his ally Hungary, proposed a meeting with Germany, Britain and France, to discuss treaty revision. France, sensing that this initiative would not serve its interest, especially since territorial revisions would come at the expense of its East European allies (namely Poland, Rumania, Czechoslovakia, and Yugoslavia) undertook to alter Mussolini’s proposals. After French amendment, the proposal for treaty revision was accepted, provided that the League of Nations approved the revision in question and that all parties included consented. The Four Power Pact, initialed on June 7th, was so bland that it was never ratified or put into force.

The Poles, however, had not been pleased by this proposal. After not being consulted on the December 1932 declaration which subscribed to equality in arms for Germany, the Four Power Pact again seemed to leave out Poland, whom treaty revision certainly concerned. In March, rumors of a possible preventative war launched by Poland against Germany circulated in the German press. The Polish Foreign Minister Colonel Jozef Beck, denied the rumors, telling the French ambassador that “those who accuse the Polish government of desiring a preventive war, an idea which it has never even contemplated, might just as well accuse it of throwing itself into the arms of Germany.”

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77 Young, In Command, 39-40.
78 Eugenia C. Kiesling, Arming Against Hitler (Kansas 1996) 182.
79 Young, In Command, 49-50.
81 Excerpts from the telegram sent by France’s ambassador Laroche to the French Foreign Minister Joseph Paul-Boncour after his meeting with Colonel Jozef Beck can be found in Adamthwaite, The Making, 121-2.
nevertheless been suggested that the Poles spread this rumor themselves, in order to force on Hitler a German-Polish rapprochement.\footnote{Adamthwaite, The Making, 38.}

In the meantime, the Disarmament Conference dragged on. As we have seen, France amended the MacDonald-Plan into a scheme providing disarmament after two four-year periods. The French presented this proposal despite their awareness of German covert rearmament. France intelligence agencies, aided by sources in Germany, reported German mobilization plans as well as rearmament and Luftwaffe schemes. They were also aware of the potentials of the Hitler Youth and the National Labor Service, as well as the operations of industrialists such as I.G. Farben and Krupp. In September the intelligence services warned that Germany might leave the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations in order to escape international tutelage.\footnote{Jackson, France and the Nazi Menace 60.} French politicians, fearing Britain would blame France for the failure of the Disarmament Conference, passed on the dossier concerning covert German rearmament to their British colleagues in September at a joint meeting of cabinet ministers. The documents exposed Germany’s secret short-service enlistments (which enabled Germany to build up reserves), the disproportion between non-commission officers (NCO’s) and privates (which provided Germany with a large establishment of officers to lead the army once conscription was reintroduced), the existence of an illegal general staff (\textit{Truppenamt}), and the secret arming with forbidden weapons on Russian soil.\footnote{Whaley, Covert German Rearmament, 52.} The British, dreading the collapse of the Disarmament Conference, ignored the dossier.

When Hitler indeed pulled Germany out of the Disarmament Conference and the League this caused little surprise in France. Despite British and American demands that France would come to terms with Hitler, there was little more they could have done. Since the start of the conference, France had offered Germany equality in arms, did no more than complain about secret German treaty violations through rearmament, and reduced its own arms.\footnote{Young, In Command, 45.} In response to Hitler’s departure from collective security, France could not start rearming itself. The Great Depression was taking its toll, Germany at this point was not the greatest problem.\footnote{Jackson, France and the Nazi Menace 78.} Alliances, therefore, had to compensate for the failure of disarmament. It is at this point that the Soviet-Union, spurred by Japanese aggression on its eastern flank, was sounding out the French for an alliance. Paul-Boncour, sensitive to possible objections of his East European allies who were fearful of Soviets meddling in European affairs, insisted that the Soviet-Union had to enter the League of Nations before it could make an arrangement with France. This, however, would take some time.
Encircling Hitler

After political tensions had mounted in 1933, in the beginning of 1934 pressures in the Third Republic rose to a boiling point. After charges of corruption were brought against members of the Chamber of Deputies, especially from the Radical Socialist Party, Paris was struck by widespread demonstrations that turned into riots as right-wing groups demanded a purge of corrupt public officials. The period of left-wing domination of government ended when Gaston Doumergue, subscribing to a policy of political reform and economic recovery, became the new Premier. Under his center-right regime, with Louis Barthou as foreign minister, the army supposed to be in a position to make more headway than under its left-wing predecessor.

General Gamelin in January called for the establishment of a strategic front to encircle Hitler, for which alliances ought to be concluded with both Italy and the Soviet-Union. Italy could ensure free passageway for France through the Mediterranean, and serve as a bridge between France and its eastern allies. The Soviet-Union, though strength wise not held in high esteem, possessed the largest land and air force in the world and could supply France’s eastern allies with weapons. This front, Gamelin reckoned, would isolate Hitler completely and certainly serve as an effective deterrent against German aggression.

In Barthou, Gamelin had found the right man for the task. A right-wing cynic, Barthou did not dwell on illusions as disarmament and collective security. Soon after becoming foreign minister, Barthou set out to deliver Gamelin his strategic front. However, it did not take long for Barthou to find himself hampered by circumstances. Poland, in January, had expressed its doubts about its alliance with France by signing the Polish-German non-aggression declaration. Furthermore, it seemed that Germany was rearming fast, as was evident by the sharp increase of the Nazi defense budget published in April. The French cabinet, in response to the German defense budget announcement, issued the ‘April Note’ on April 17th, declaring that

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Even before seeking to discuss whether an agreement can be reached on a system of guarantees effective enough to enable the signing of a convention which would legalize Germany’s substantial rearmament, France must place in the forefront of its preoccupations considerations of its own security.
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The April Note was more damaging to France than anything. Though the declaration was a boost for France’s eastern allies, its belligerent articulations implied French responsibility for the failure of the Disarmament Conference, and showed France unwilling to conciliate with Germany. To make matters worse, Belgium, the country where France envisioned a war with Germany would be displaced on account of the Maginot-Line, told Barthou it would not

87 Joll, Europe Since 1870, 349-350.
88 Jackson, France and the Nazi Menace, 63-64.
countenance French troops on its soil unless Germany invaded it. Belgium, for whom the current security arrangement with France had exacerbated tensions between Flemings and Walloons, instead insisted it would act under Locarno if Germany flagrantly breached the treaty. Belgium, instead of a full military alliance, hoped to make the Treaty of Locarno the cornerstone of its policy towards France.

Also in Eastern Europe, France seemed to be losing ground. As the economic Depression in France persisted, France shielded itself from foreign competition. France’s ally’s in Eastern Europe were victimized by France’s preferential treatment of its colonial partners instead. France’s East European trading partners could not get financial aid, nor find an outlet for their goods, as French finance and agricultural ministries protected the French economy from imports, despite objections from the foreign and war ministries. Consequentially, Germany concluded trade treaties with Yugoslavia, Rumania, and Poland, which in France was seen to be precipitating political influence. Also of importance was the lack of productive capabilities of the French industry at this juncture. Where trade agreements, with Rumania for example, envisioned the trading of Rumanian agricultural products with weapons, the French arms industry proved incapable of supplying the goods. Here too, the Nazi’s entered the arena and concluded arms deals in 1937-1938, where France had failed in the preceding years. In these years, both Great Britain and Germany, who both had managed to defeat the lowest points of the Great Depression, traded more with France’s East European sphere of influence than did the French. Indeed, the strategic front Gamelin had envisioned had only become more distant since Barthou had become foreign minister.

In May 1934 Barthou finally managed to start building up the alliance system he envisioned, through negotiations with the Soviet foreign minister Maxim Litvinov. The two ministers proposed a multilateral security system in Eastern Europe, modeled after Locarno. Both France and the Soviet Union would guarantee the borders of the Baltic States, Rumania, Finland, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Germany. To supplement the treaty, France and the Soviet Union would sign a bilateral mutual assistance pact, where France would guarantee Soviet borders, and the Soviet Union would guarantee France’s Locarno borders. On June 5 the French cabinet approved the proposals, the only dissenter was colonial minister Pierre Laval.

The proposals found mixed reception in Europe. Czechoslovakia, Rumania, and Yugoslavia looked favorably on the proposals, and the Czechoslovaks even announced they would sign a bilateral mutual assistance pact with Soviet Union themselves if the comprehensive settlement would fall through. The British too, after some reluctance, seemed to encourage the initiative. However, the Polish and German governments were skeptical. Poland fearing either German or Russian troops on its soil, did not want either of

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91 Ibid., 115.
92 Ibid., 118.
these countries to guarantee its borders. Also, Warsaw did not want to jeopardize its new relationship with Germany. Hitler, for his part, had a different program. He argued that this was yet another scheme to encircle Germany. Reasoning that he would not sign a comprehensive settlement that did not allow Germany equal armament rights, Hitler managed to win himself some time. Barthou countered by offering to reopen rearmament negotiations with Germany if Hitler acceded to the East European security proposal, but he knew Hitler would reject him. For France, this seemed a win-win situation, the treaty would either encourage German cooperation, or discourage German recklessness. If Germany acceded to the pact, East European security would be guaranteed, if Germany refused, it would be isolated and encircled.  

Barthou’s plan, however, did not incorporate Polish aloofness. The Poles refused to accede to the pact, even when confronted with the daunting possibility of a Franco-Soviet alliance as an alternative. In September, Barthou’s initiative was boosted by Soviet accession to the League of Nations, but it was to no avail. Both Germany and Poland rejected the Eastern Locarno proposal in the same month.

In the meantime, Europe had been shocked by Nazi excesses in both Germany and Austria in the early summer of 1934. Barthou had demonstrated a receding willingness to include Hitler in his East European settlement after the purge of the SA. In July, following the brutal murder by Nazi’s of the Austrian Chancellor Dolfuss, the French foreign minister found a new opportunity to forward the encirclement of Germany. Mussolini had expressed his outrage at the Nazi violence and had even sent troops to Italy’s border with Austria, certainly he would be interested in an anti-German coalition. There was, however, one outstanding issue between France and Italy, the friction between Italy and France’s ally Yugoslavia. In order to work out the differences between Italy and Yugoslavia, Barthou had invited the Yugoslavian King Alexander to Marseille. There, on October 9th, both the King and Barthou were assassinated by the Croatian nationalist terrorist organization Ustasha, which was sponsored by Italy.

In November, Doumergue’s government was toppled over its domestic policy (it had never realized the institutional reforms it had envisioned), and was replaced by a center-left government led by Pierre-Etienne Flandin. Barthou was succeeded by Pierre Laval, the colonial minister who had opposed Barthou’s overtures to the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, Laval’s policy did not significantly divert from Barthou’s, though his attitude was different. Laval and Flandin were more conciliatory towards Germany than Barthou had been. As his policy priorities, Laval wanted to ensure Austrian independence, conclude an alliance with Italy, and pursue Barthou’s Eastern Locarno proposals, to which he hoped Germany would accede in return for armament rights. As a token of his good intentions, and in reference to the upcoming Saar plebiscite, Laval told the German ambassador that he considered the

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93 Young, In Command, 71-72
94 Ibid., 72-73.
Saar to be German territory which should return to Germany. Also, Laval thought that the rapprochement with the Soviet Union might prevent agreement between France and Germany, and therefore held off negotiations for the bilateral pact Barthou had agreed to. Nevertheless, Laval did sign the Franco-Soviet protocol in December 1934, in which both countries stated they would consult each other on matters concerning East European security.

In January 1935, Laval ventured to Rome, where he concluded the Rome Agreements. The Rome Agreements comprised of two parts. First, an agreement over Africa, where Italy denounced any rights on valuable Tunisia, in return for a seemingly worthless chunk of desert along Eritrea, Addis Abba, and Libya. The second component addressed Austrian independence, which Italy and France agreed to guarantee. Italy and France also agreed to cooperate in the case of German treaty violations. It seemed Laval had made a good deal. The worthless soil he had ceded in Africa certainly did not seem to be worth this much Italian benevolence. But Mussolini had plans of his own.

*The Break Down*

In 1935 the dreaded first year of France’s sharp demographic decline in conscript aged males commenced. To counter the limited number of enlisted men, conscription was extended in March from one to two years. After Laval had announced that he was willing to include German armament rights into a comprehensive settlement on (East) European security, Hitler knew he had to move. Hitler used the French conscription extension as a pretext for his announcements in March, first of the existence of the Luftwaffe, second of the reintroduction of a German conscript army. Neither of these came as a surprise in Paris. The French had been aware of German covert rearmament, and German intentions for overt rearmament, for a long time. The March announcements, however, did rob France of a bargaining chip in a potential deal with Germany. Since they had already conceded the German right to rearm under certain conditions (a guarantee of French security), in the announcement of December 11th 1932, they had no intention to thwart Hitler by force. Since Great Britain was opposed to the extension of its commitments in Europe, France had also little expectations of the conference in Stresa, where it would discuss with Italy and Britain how to respond to the German treaty violation. Indeed, the Stresa Conference produced little more than a condemnation of German unilateralism without any tangible sanctions. France had to look for new leverage over Germany. It was at this point, that the proposed bilateral mutual assistance pact with the Soviet Union once again became useful to Laval. Immediately after Hitler’s announcements, negotiations were opened with Moscow.

Though the Franco-Soviet treaty was signed in May, and soon was followed up by a similar Czechoslovakian-Soviet treaty, the agreement was immediately recognized to be

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96 Young, *In Command*, 79-80.
97 Ibid., 80-82.
flawed. The treaty was only meant to serve to goad Germany and Poland into accession to the Eastern Locarno Treaty. Now this had failed, the French were stuck with the ally they did not really want. Many in French military and political circles were suspicious of communist intentions, fearing socialist subversion of their forces, and the possibility of the Soviet Union provoking the capitalist states into a bourgeois’ war. In addition, the Red Army’s strength was not thought to be very strong, as Russia had lost to Germany on the Eastern front of the First World War, and the Soviet leader Jozef Stalin was decimating the army through his purges of suspected dissenters. Furthermore, the strategic sting was removed from the arrangement because France refused to consider any military provisions in the treaty from fear of alienating Germany, as well as France’s most important associate Great Britain. Also, Poland and the East European neighbors of the Soviet Union, did not permit Soviet troops on their soil, thus eliminating the possibility of the Soviets coming to France’s aid for a two front war against Germany.\textsuperscript{98} Finally, the treaty was further compromised by Stalin’s expressed distrust of Western, including French, intentions.\textsuperscript{99} Thereby, the treaty could not emulate the strategic alliance concluded between France and Imperial Russia before the Great War, and as we have seen, the alliance stimulated little effect in Berlin.

A more serious threat to German security was caused by the Franco-Italian staff talks, which were launched in mid-May. France had held off Italian proposals for military contacts in early 1935, fearing this would forestall rapprochement with Germany, but after March Laval gave the army permission to negotiate with its Italian counterpart. The convention, signed between Italian and French military leaders in late June, included provisions regarding the exchange of land and air force detachments at the outset of hostilities between either of the countries with Germany, as well as the guarantee of each other’s borders in Africa and the Alps. General Gamelin, who had come to replace Maxime Weygand as the French Chief Commander in early 1935, was satisfied. France’s East European allies could now, in case of war, be put to maximum use, as both French and Italian troops could launch strikes at Germany’s south-eastern and eastern flanks. However, Laval, who in June had replaced Flandin as Prime Minister while also retaining his position as foreign minister, kept the Franco-Italian convention a secret. He feared upsetting Germany and getting France embroiled in a commitment which might drag it into war, as had happened in 1914. Consequentially, the deterrent impact of the convention was diminished by its lack of publicity.\textsuperscript{100}

The French thus had gained some confidence in their strategic potential. Their self-esteem, however, was again damaged when they received notice of a possible Anglo-German treaty on maritime armaments. The French defense policy, which had always funded the navy to the strength of the Italian and the German disarmed naval forces combined, was

\textsuperscript{98} Kissinger, Diplomacy, 296-297.
\textsuperscript{99} Alan Bullock, Hitler and Stalin; Parallel Lives (London 1991) 652.
\textsuperscript{100} Young, In Command, 90-91.
damaged by the British sanctioning of a German navy at 35 percent of Britain’s strength. France could no longer hope for parity with the combined forces of Italy and Germany. The Anglo-German Naval Treaty that was signed in June did not envision any restrictions on German land and air forces, who thereby apparently were permitted to arm without restrictions. Since the British had not agreed on mechanisms to monitor German compliance with the treaty, the British had gained nothing for their consent for German rearmament but the vague guarantee of German self-control.\footnote{Jackson, \textit{France and the Nazi Menace}, 138-139.} Needless to say that the British bilateral agreement with Germany strained its ties with France.

The British-French relations were further tested by the approaching Abyssinian crisis. In the summer of 1935 it became clear that Italy would seize Abyssinia, the last independent country in Africa. Great Britain, where support for the League of Nations was highly popular, demanded that France would support London in opposing Mussolini. French political leaders were in a quandary, as both their allies against Hitler were now posed against each other. At no point, however, did there seem to be a doubt that the French would choose their most effective partner on whom French security policy was based, Britain, against the partner with whom they had completed a convention only recently, Italy. Laval, nevertheless, tried to maneuver between the two, hoping to avoid a break down in alliances.

In September the French ambassador in London asked the permanent under secretary for foreign affairs, Sir Robert Van Sittard, how far the British government would go in pursuing sanctions in response to violations of the League Covenant. The French query was mainly aimed at violations concerning the European status-quo, and basically meant to ask what the British government would do in the case of German aggression. The British responded, two weeks later, that they reserved the right to determine their attitude when a violation occurred.\footnote{Excerpts from both the French request, and the British response can be found in Adamthwaite, \textit{The Making}, 145-147.} Such an ambiguous attitude could hardly be called a security guarantee, yet the British demanded in October staff talks between the British and French forces to discuss possible actions in the Mediterranean against Italy. The French, aware that they could not afford to lose the British as their allies, decided to enter the staff talks without enticing the British to seek war. Therefore, during the negotiations, French military officials showed themselves willing to cooperate, but stressed the incapacity of French forces to wage war at this particular point.\footnote{Young, \textit{In Command}, 112-114.}

The British consequentially distrusted French intentions. The distrust was exacerbated by Mussolini’s insistence that he had secured Laval’s approval for the conquest of Abyssinia during negotiations for the Rome Agreements. In an exchange of letters with Mussolini, Laval claimed that when he told Mussolini he could have a “free hand” in this part of Africa, he meant that Mussolini was free to establish economic superiority over the
region. Mussolini replied that Laval had conceded Abyssinian independence to him in a
verbal contract, which was not included in the written agreements, which Laval denied.\textsuperscript{104} The controversy over the issue exists till today, but in any case the matter reflected poorly
on the French. British suspicion of the French was also aggravated by Laval’s insistence on
keeping the door open for rapprochement with Berlin. Britain feared that if France would
come to terms with Hitler, it would abandon Britain in its confrontation with Italy. Though
Laval insisted he would undertake no initiatives towards Berlin without consulting his
British allies first, France’s reliability was doubted.\textsuperscript{105}

In the meantime, a new initiative was launched to solve the Abyssinian crisis
diplomatically. Though Britain had expressed its support for the League’s mechanisms, it
too considered a compromise with Mussolini preferable. The British foreign minister,
Samuel Hoare, and the French Premier Laval, devised a plan offering Mussolini dominance
over a portion of Abyssinia, thus at least salvaging sovereignty for a part of the country. The
Hoare-Laval plan was leaked to the press on December 8\textsuperscript{th}, and caused public outrage.
Hoare was forced to resign and was replaced by Anthony Eden, who returned to strict
adherence to the League’s mechanisms.\textsuperscript{106} Oil sanctions were contemplated but not
imposed. The crisis had forced France to abandon its Italian ally in favor of Britain which
repaid France with distrust. Despite France’s choice to oppose Italy, Mussolini could
complete his conquest of Abyssinia uninhibited in May 1936.

The costs of the crisis did not end for France with the loss of Abyssinia. As we have
seen, the rupture in the Stresa front made Hitler’s designs on the Rhineland all the more
immediate. From late 1935 on, French intelligence reports indicated that Hitler intended to
seize the Rhineland as his next treaty violation. In January 1936, General Gamelin said at a
meeting of the Haut Comité Militaire, that Germany would reoccupy the demilitarized zone at
the first possible occasion, in order to fortify Germany’s western flank, so he could have his
way in Eastern Europe without worrying about a French attack. Gamelin further warned
that France was in no position to stop him since troops had been deployed along the Alps
and in the Mediterranean colonies in view of tensions with Italy.\textsuperscript{107} French military forces
were weakened in the north-east by the threat of a war with Italy, and military confidence
had been further broken by the military-civil tensions of the passed years and the cuts in
the defense budget. The completion of Hitler’s grasp over German society in 1934 had
rendered intelligence reports unreliable, as they were based on guesses of German strength
since no longer information on German military and industrial capacity was published.
These guesses were consequentially exaggerated, based as they were on worst case
scenario’s. The Deuxième Bureau in February 1936 estimated German strength at 500,000
soldiers, supplemented by 30,000 military police and 20,000 SS members, who could be

\textsuperscript{104} Excerpts from the correspondence between Laval and Mussolini can be found in Adamthwaite, The Making,
149-151.
\textsuperscript{105} Young, In Command, 108-109.
\textsuperscript{106} Kissinger, Diplomacy, 299-300.
\textsuperscript{107} Excerpts from Gamelin’s speech can be found in Adamthwaite, The Making, 152-154.
supported by another 200,000 men serving in the National Labor Service.\textsuperscript{108} These estimates were correct, except for the ability to deploy the National Labor Services, since the Germans lacked the capacity to effectively arm these men.

French military intelligence was aware that Hitler would probably use the ratification of the Franco-Soviet treaty as a pretext to remilitarize the Rhineland. When he did, on March 7\textsuperscript{th}, no one was surprised. The French cabinet faced with the crisis was led by Albert Sarraut. He headed a caretaker administration installed to bridge the gap until elections after Laval's government had fallen in January for its inability to conquer the slump. The Sarraut-cabinet lacked the popular support necessary to make important decisions, and when the ministers met hours after the remilitarization was announced none proposed to call for the supposed necessary mobilization of the army. The cabinet meeting dissolved inconclusive, and was adjourned until the next day.\textsuperscript{109} The military leaders, in a meeting on March 8\textsuperscript{th}, concluded that unilateral French military action against Germany would result in a bloody stalemate, even after full mobilization. Assistance from the Locarno guarantors, Britain and Italy, was necessary to overcome the German forces, but the generals doubted either one of these countries would come to France's aid as long as the Abyssinian crisis endured. The conclusion was that military action, at this point, was not an option.\textsuperscript{110}

The French cabinet therefore decided to send a complaint to the League of Nations Council, thus making the German move just an alleged breach, instead of a flagrant violation, according to the Locarno treaty. The option of military sanction was thus virtually ceded.\textsuperscript{111} The following week, on March 10\textsuperscript{th}, French foreign minister Flandin met with the Locarno guarantors in order to gain at least some assurances from France's partners. At the meeting in London he indignantly reasoned that France had been cheated and demanded to be compensated. He told the British representative that French military leaders were already drawing up offensive war plans, though they were only drawing up schemes for a moderate operation. The British, who wanted to avoid a war over the Rhineland, which was to them of little importance, promised to guarantee Belgian and French security. Finally, France had secured the British guarantee they had so desperately sought for many years.

Following the Rhineland remilitarization, France would finally abandon the gold standard and begin its recovery from the debilitating effects of the Great Depression. Léon Blum's Popular Front would win the French elections and undertake to rearm later that year.\textsuperscript{112} The French industrial capacity, however, proved incapable of keeping up with the army's weapon orders until 1938. By then it was too late. The French Third Republic would be overrun in six weeks by German forces in 1940. It would never recover its greatness again.

\textsuperscript{108} Jackson, \textit{France and the Nazi Menace}, 169-171.
\textsuperscript{109} Young, \textit{In Command}, 121.
\textsuperscript{110} Excerpts from the meeting of French military leaders on March 8\textsuperscript{th} 1936 can be found in Adamthwaite, \textit{The Making}, 154-155.
\textsuperscript{111} Young, \textit{In Command}, 121-122.
4. Between Predator and Prey: The British Quandary

Much as France, Great Britain found itself deeply scarred after the First World War. The British attitude towards the Treaty of Versailles was in 1919 dominated by fear of another war, and vengefulness towards the Germans against whom Great Britain had fought so bitterly. In those days, it was not hard for the British leaders, supported by a sour public opinion, to follow the French in their insistence on a harsh settlement against Germany. Soon after the treaty was signed, however, some leading publicists (most notable J.M. Keynes) and politicians turned against the treaty. British public opinion would follow in the decade to come.

In 1919, British weariness of war, and the need to recover from the stringencies of a war-economy, led to the formulation of the Ten-Year-Plan.113 This annually renewed declaration, in line with the rhetoric of disarmament, signified that Britain did not foresee itself engaged in a war for the ten years to come. Defense expenditure was, in accordance with this statement, limited to the bare necessities.114 It was in this spirit that Great Britain, despite its global commitments, agreed to limit its navy’s strength to parity with the second strongest navy, that of isolationist America, in the Washington Naval Treaty of 1922. In the early 1920s, the conclusion was driven home that British trade was dependant on a healthy German economy. This led to trade agreements between London and Berlin, as well as the extension of loans when the Weimar economy found itself in trouble in the mid-1920s.115 As Anglo-German relations grew closer, British public opinion increasingly resented French hostility towards the Weimar Republic. As time went by, it seemed that the heavily armed French were the ones keeping tensions on the continent alive. These developments, as noted by the American historian William R. Rock, laid the foundations for both a split in the Anglo-French alliance, as well as the British appeasement policy that was pursued in the late 1930s.116

The End of Disarmament

By the early 1930s, Britain, as most nations, was battling the depths of the economic crisis. Though the Great Depression had not hit the United Kingdom as hard as it did other nations, in the years 1931-1932, the slump’s zenith counted approximately three million unemployed.117 The British government was, however, unlike the American and German governments, reluctant to intrude in the economy, and refused to intervene with large scale public work programs. Instead, after interventions such as the abandonment of the gold

117 Newton, Profits of Peace, 36.
standard, protectionism, devaluation, and a deflationary policy, recovery was visible from 1932 on, with a steady growth of the economy of four percent a year.\textsuperscript{118}

In the meantime, however, another problem had emerged. The Manchurian crisis led to demands of the British public for action against Japanese aggression. These were the strongest years of the peace movement in Britain, which included both Pacifists and Internationalists, supporting both the League of Nations and Disarmament. The League of Nations Union (LNU), for instance, was the support body of the League of Nations and counted in 1932 over a million members from across the political spectrum.\textsuperscript{119} The British had, however, few means of opposing Japan. The Washington Naval Treaty had given Japan superiority in the Far East, and due to cuts in the defense budget, the only British naval base in the region, in Singapore, was still under construction. Furthermore, the Power most appropriate to ally with Britain to oppose Japanese encroachment in China, the United States, called for action, but refused to cooperate militarily. In addition, British trade relations had been troublesome in Manchuria in the last few years. The British had more to gain from cooperation with their Japanese trading partners than from opposing them.\textsuperscript{120} The British secretary of foreign affairs, Sir John Simon, therefore had to balance closely between British interests and the approach favored by public opinion. By referring the matter to the League of Nations, and sanctioning the Lytton Committee to investigate the matter, he managed to win time. The Committee’s report in late 1932, finally, reported Japanese grievances to be justified, though their resort to force to be in violation of the League’s Covenant. Japan, in response to the League Assembly’s condemnation, retreated from the League and made a separate peace with China. For the British, this was a satisfactory end to the crisis, which managed to prevent military intervention, imposing sanctions, or losing Japan as its trading partner. However, the presence of an aggressive, expansionist Japan in the vicinity of British Far East interests was worrying to all in London.

In the meantime, the Disarmament Conference in Geneva had commenced. The conference, besides being troubled by the chaos caused by the Great Depression and the Manchurian crisis, basically came down to one point; France would not allow for Germany to rearm, unless it got satisfactory security guarantees from Britain. Great Britain, however, had ventured to decrease its armaments in line with the Ten-Year-Plan, and did not seek any more commitments to further strain its limited capacities. In a Cabinet meeting on December 15 1931, in preparation of the Disarmament Conference, the British government agreed that it could not enter into any more commitments which might drag it into another European war.\textsuperscript{121} This decision basically concluded the Disarmament Conference before it had begun. Before the conference was officially brought to an end, however, the world was

\textsuperscript{118} Silverman, \textit{Hitler’s Economy}, 229.
\textsuperscript{119} P.M.H. Bell, ‘Peace Movements’, in Boyce and Maiolo, \textit{The Origins}, 278.
to witness a diplomatic exchange which lasted for over two years, and which was supposed to give the impression of the Great Powers pursuing a new and peaceful world order.

Until the publication of the MacDonald Plan in 1933, the British government, from fear of renewed French security demands, undertook no constructive initiatives to break the deadlock that dominated the conference in the first year it convened. Britain, arguing it had already disarmed in the 1920s, opted for other states to disarm (or rearm in the case of Germany) to the same level as Britain. But disarmament, at this point, was not what was on the mind of the Government in London. In the face of Japan’s seizure of Manchuria, the British government in fact sought to rearm, which was also apparent in the discontinuation of the Ten-Year-Plan in 1932. Given the public support for the Disarmament Conference, however, the British government could not yet openly rearm. The ploy in Britain’s conduct at the Disarmament Conference was that the British proposals always seemed to carry provisions which gave Britain an edge over their rivals. The British, for instance, expected for outlands of their Empire to be allowed separate military capabilities apart from Britain itself. London furthermore proposed that countries would retain their 16-ton, ‘defensive’, tanks, of which Britain had plenty, and abolish heavier, ‘offensive’, tanks. This behavior amounted to the isolation of the British delegation in Geneva, whose proposals could hardly be taken serious by the other participating countries.

British historians D. Richardson and C. Kitching argue that when the MacDonald Plan was finally introduced, it merely served to prevent Britain from being blamed for the stalemate that hampered the conference’s progress. The eagerness to avoid responsibility for the conference’s failure was also the reason why London ignored French reports of German secret rearmament. To Britain, in any case, it seemed France, through her intransigent refusal to replace Versailles’ disarmament clause, was responsible for the tensions in Europe, and the German need to rearm in secret. For Britain to join France in sanctions against German disarmament violations would imply that London consented to France’s insistence on the perpetuation of Germany’s disarmed status. As Britain did not agree with France’s belligerent posturing, it did not care to share the responsibility for sanctions against Berlin. As we have seen, due to its lack of verifying mechanisms, France could not agree to the MacDonald Plan as it stood, and its amendments were too much for Hitler to swallow. For the British government, however, the amendments effectively shifted the blame for scuttling the conference to French intransigence, and therefore the choice was easy to support the proposals from Paris. Hitler’s subsequent departure from both the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations was greeted in Britain with mixed feelings. Public opinion seemed to acknowledge the legitimacy of Hitler’s grievances, but his departure from the League was seen as a potential threat to peace in Europe. Considering

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122 Richardson and Kitching, ‘Britain and the World Disarmament Conference’, 44.
123 Ibid., 51.
the attitude of the British public, the government now had to find a way to convince France to legalize and regulate German rearmament.124

Rearmament

It seems that leading British politicians from the start were suspicious of Adolf Hitler. They were, much as their French colleagues, aware of his extreme pronunciations during his earlier years as a politician, and not much fooled by his more discrete posture since he became German Chancellor. British ambassador to Berlin, Sir Horace Rumbold, in June 1933 dispatched to London how Hitler was steadily taking control of German society, and even reported how police officers had told him they no longer questioned orders but simply followed them, much as they had done in 1916.125 Foreign secretary John Simon too noted a difference in the European order since the advent of Hitler. For him, the Four Power Pact with Italy, France, and Germany, of April 1933, signaled a much needed rapprochement with Italy, even though the actual declaration was seriously weakened due to a lack of support in British public opinion for diplomacy outside of the League’s mechanisms.126

In light of the developments in Europe and the Far East and the abandonment of the Ten-Year-Plan, a Defense Requirements Committee (DRC) was called into being in February 1934. The DRC was a civil-military committee burdened with the task of assessing British military capabilities and deficiencies. In its first report, the DRC concluded that Germany formed the largest long term threat to British security and pressed for increases in the defense budget.127 This was a view shared also by Sir Robert Vansittart, permanent under secretary for foreign affairs. In April 1934 he identified Germany’s priorities as first, fusion with Austria, second, rectification of Germany’s eastern border, and third, expansion to the south, the east, and overseas colonies. Vansittart, nevertheless, assumed that Britain would still have plenty of time before Germany was ready to wage war.128

The potential German threat was clear, but the British military capabilities were not prepared to meet the threat. British strategy, much like the French, was based on the assumption that Britain would fight a long war of attrition. Considering how Britain was geo-strategically conveniently isolated from the rest of the continent, Britain had only retained a marginal land army for the purpose of policing duties in the Empire. The Navy, on the other hand, had been kept relatively strong, despite the cuts in the defense budget in the 1920s. Nevertheless, the capabilities of the Royal Navy were hardly sufficient to cover its

125 Excerpts from Sir Horace Rumbold’s dispatch to London of June 30 1933 can be found in Adamthwaite, The Making, 122.
126 Excerpts from a letter sent by Sir John Simon to Austen Chamberlain can be found in Adamthwaite, The Making, 124.
128 Excerpts from the memorandum written by Sir Robert Vansittart on April 7th 1934 can be found in Adamthwaite, The Making, 125.
extensive commitments around the globe.\textsuperscript{129} The Royal Air Force (RAF), finally, had also been drastically cut in size after the First World War, but was able to keep alive as a separate arm of the military by conducting policing duties in the colonies.\textsuperscript{130}

There were many inconsistencies in the British grand strategy. To bolster its own efficacy in the competition for budgetary resources, each military arm had its own operational doctrine forwarding the importance of its own arm. The Royal Navy, since it had no rival in home waters, as Italy and France were war time allies and Germany was disarmed, concentrated its doctrine on the Pacific.\textsuperscript{131} There, however, as we have seen, it lacked a naval base. Also, Britain lacked the resource to cover its three main theatres of operation; home waters, the Pacific, and the Mediterranean. Therefore, the British had part of their fleet guarding the home isles, and a part covering the Pacific, and relied on the French to cover the Mediterranean in the case of hostilities. The Royal Navy, therefore, still lacked the capabilities it hoped for, and was, despite its relative wealth, pressing for a higher budget. The RAF, for its part, had exaggerated its cost-effectiveness by asserting that ‘the bomber always gets through’. By 1923, studies had shown that in the case of an aerial bombardment over London, Britain should expect to suffer fifty casualties for each ton of bombs dropped over the city. For good measure, in 1925 it was shown that the French air force would be able to drop on London 150 tons of bombs a day at a steady rate.\textsuperscript{132} This efficiency of the bomber was expected to turn modern warfare upside down and make navies and land forces irrelevant as wars would be decided by swiftly knocking out the adversary’s urban centers, behind enemy lines.\textsuperscript{133} The observant reader may note that the doctrine of aerial bombardment was an offensive one, not exactly in line with the defensive British grand strategy. Nevertheless, British policymakers were plenty impressed by the stipulations of the air force advocates. In the 1930s the RAF became the first priority in British defense spending. Between 1933 and 1938 the RAF’s budget was quintupled, against doubling of the meager army and comfortable navy’s budgets.\textsuperscript{134}

The British government only grudgingly conceded increases in the defense budget from 1934 on. The British Cabinet led by Chancellor of the Exchequer Neville Chamberlain argued that to fight a lengthy war of attrition, a healthy economy was required. The economy thus became the “fourth arm of defense”.\textsuperscript{135} It was argued that rearmament would destabilize the British economy, as much of the raw material needed for weapon production would have to be imported, which might damage the value of the British pound. The

\textsuperscript{129} Posen, \textit{The Sources}, 141-143.

\textsuperscript{130} Baylis, Wirtz, Cohen, and Gray, \textit{Strategy in the Contemporary World}, 142-143.

\textsuperscript{131} Posen, \textit{The Sources}, 162.

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid., 145. During the Battle of Britain, the Luftwaffe managed to deliver 150 tons of bombs a day. By this time, however, the extent of the exaggeration of the bomber’s effectiveness had been uncovered. Casualties were closer to seven than to fifty, for each ton dropped.


\textsuperscript{134} Posen, \textit{The Sources}, 157, 171.

\textsuperscript{135} Maiolo, ‘Armaments Competition’, 291.
insistence on a sound economy was fitted in with the policy of deterrence pursued by the English government. It assumed that the appearance of a strong Empire and a healthy economy would deter potential aggressors from opposing British interests. Even the rearmament launched in 1934 was meant to serve to dissuade possible enemies, instead of being put to actual use in war. Much of the expenses on the RAF were spent on first line planes, serving as 'window dressing', reserves were mostly neglected.136

In the meantime, in light of Nazi atrocities in Austria and the appalling Night of the Long Knives, the British were reconsidering their alliances. France seemed to be a secure ally, though Vansittart warned against taking the French for granted.137 British policy in the early 1930s had not exactly been encouraging to French friendship. But truth was that the British in any case had little faith in French strength and value as an ally, since France in early 1934 seemed both internally unstable and strategically dependent. Furthermore, France’s insistence on a weak Germany clashed with British trade interests. In April 1934, Permanent under secretary for the Treasury, Sir Warren Fisher, opted for rapprochement with Japan, in view of possible German resurgence. He insisted that Britain lacked the Naval strength to both fight Japan and Germany. In his view, the only hurdle to British-Japanese rapprochement was American opinion. Since the United States took little interest in British security matters, Fisher saw no reason why not to keep British policy under American tutelage.138 In October, Chamberlain expressed a similar attitude toward British relations with the United States and Japan, but his proposals were dismissed after the Americans were further antagonized by the virtual Japanese monopolization of oil in Manchuria.139 Sir John Simon, in November, insisted that Britain agree on a policy with regards to German rearmament. He proposed to legalize the obvious German secret rearmament in order to induce Hitler to return to the League of Nations. He also suggested that Britain should encourage Hitler to enter into France’s Eastern Locarno proposals, though he considered it was unlikely that Hitler would follow up on this due to his aversion of multilateral agreements.140

Not only British politicians worried about the emerging German threat, the British financial community too was worried about Hitlerism. In 1931, when German banks were fighting for their survival, British creditors granted the Germans a postponement on their loans of the 1920s. The so-called Standstill Agreement was renewed annually until 1939. Nazi policy flew in the face of the liberal London bankers, who threatened the Germans with a unilateral clearing, which would involve the sequestration of German balances. However, intensive lobbying from the Treasury and large firms with interests in Central Europe, fearing the loss of trade with the recovering German economy, managed to avert the end of

136 Posen, The Sources, 150-152.
137 Ibid., 155.
139 R.A.C. Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement (London 1993) 44.
the Standstill Agreement and in fact formalize Anglo-German financial relations in the Payments Agreement.\textsuperscript{141}

In early 1935 Simon set out to implore Hitler to join Britain and France in a comprehensive settlement which was to end the tensions in Europe. He aimed at legalizing German rearmament, in return for which Germany should enter into the Eastern Locarno negotiations, return to the League of Nations, and agree on disarmament proposals, most notably an air pact. Hitler agreed to meet Simon in early March, but as explained above, postponed their meeting to announce the existence of the Luftwaffe and the reintroduction of conscription. When Konstantin von Neurath thought he noted panic in Simon’s expression when the foreign secretary finally met Hitler, von Neurath may well have been right. Anxiety had hit the British Cabinet hard. In May Stanley Baldwin, successor of the passive MacDonald as Prime Minister, told the House of Commons that German air capabilities led to the conclusion that Britain had “already lost the air race.”\textsuperscript{142} The Air Staff and Joint Planning Committee reported in the summer that Britain was defenseless to a German air attack and that Britain in its current state was likely to suffer a knock-out blow from a German air attack in the case of war. If so, Great Britain would lose the war even before it could mobilize, let alone implement, its strategy of a long war of attrition. The newspapers joined in the panic, proclaiming widely exaggerated figures of German strength, the \textit{Observer} even noting that the Luftwaffe’s strength exceeded the RAF’s by 4:1.\textsuperscript{143} Considering these reports and that the RAF’s strength probably still well exceeded the Luftwaffe’s, it can be concluded that Hitler’s deceptive policy of exaggerating the Luftwaffe’s strength worked very well.

\textit{The Stresa Front and its Collapse}

Following Simon’s visit to Berlin in late March, and Hitler’s revelations, the British Cabinet had to consider its policy for the upcoming Stresa Conference. The Cabinet agreed that if asked by Italy and France to take a firm stance against Hitler and stop all dialogue with him, the British government should refuse. Also, though Britain should consider no action against Germany except threatening her, the ministers agreed that

\begin{quote}
if France or Italy asked us to join them in a statement that we would not stand a breach of the peace anywhere, that meant in effect an undertaking that we would be prepared to take forcible action anywhere... We ought not to agree to such a proposition unless we were prepared to take action anywhere, e.g., in the
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{141} Newton, \textit{Profits of Peace}, 59-60.
\textsuperscript{142} Benny Morris, \textit{The Roots of Appeasement} (London 1991) 53-54.
\textsuperscript{143} Morris, \textit{The Roots}, 55.
\end{flushleft}
event of trouble in Memel. There was general agreement that we ought not to accept further commitments.\textsuperscript{144}

At the conference, the British representatives managed to avert any French calls for sanctions, which finally resulted in the weak document that caused little fear in Berlin. The British, at this point, were still preoccupied with their attempt to limit German rearmament, and did not want risk the settlement they hoped to conclude. To the British government, German rearmament after the breakdown of the Disarmament Conference was only natural. French intransigence had led to the German treaty violation, now, the British hoped a conciliatory approach through negotiations would lead to German moderation in their maritime rearmament.\textsuperscript{145} As noted previously, in June the Anglo-German Naval Treaty was concluded.

The Anglo-German agreement was the first crack in the Stresa Front. The imminent Italian attack on Abyssinia, apparent to all observers, would soon devastate what was left of it. Already at Stresa, the British delegation had warned Mussolini that the British public opinion would not stand for Italian aggression against Abyssinia. The Italian delegation replied that the British government had not listened to public protests against Japanese belligerence in the Far East, and that it did not expect the British to act against Italy either.\textsuperscript{146} The passivity of the British government in the case of the Manchurian crisis, however, made action at the next violation of the League’s Covenant all the more pressing. In July 1935 the Peace Ballot was published. The Peace Ballot was a nation-wide survey to which almost half of the electorate responded. Of the approximately eleven million replies; 10,642,560 thought Great Britain ought to remain in the League; 9,627,606 supported the imposition of collective economic sanctions against a violator of the League’s Covenant; and 6,506,777 supported the collective use of military means to oppose an aggressor, against 2,262,261 who opposed the use of military force.\textsuperscript{147}

The British government realized that if it wanted to prevent itself from being forced to impose sanctions on Italy through the League, it had to buy off Mussolini. In June, Vansittart recognized that the redistribution of the world’s lands was still not over, and since the British Empire had been well endowed, he argued Britain better trade a piece of British Somaliland for Italian restraint to prevent a violent collision.\textsuperscript{148} Abyssinia was thus recognized to be of no vital interest to the British Empire. Following up on Vansittart’s advice, Anthony Eden traveled to Rome in an attempt to come to terms with Mussolini. He offered the Italian dictator to partition Abyssinia, where Abyssinia would gain an outlet to sea through British Somaliland. Mussolini, however, sought to distract public attention from

\textsuperscript{144} Excerpts from the Cabinet Papers of April 8\textsuperscript{th} 1935 can be found in Adamthwaite, The Making, 137.
\textsuperscript{145} Rock, British Appeasement, 37.
\textsuperscript{146} Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement, 47.
\textsuperscript{147} For the full Peace Ballot survey, please see Adamthwaite, The Making, 140-142.
\textsuperscript{148} For the minute from Sir Robert Vansittart to the secretary of state for foreign affairs Sir Samuel Hoare, see ibid., 138.
the economic ills Italy was suffering; he needed military victory, not to cheat another nation through diplomatic bargaining. Mussolini rejected the British offer, leaving Eden to return to London empty handed and embittered.

Though the British could not come to an agreement with Rome, it was clear that British public opinion would not stand for British inaction while the League’s Covenant was being flouted. Given these circumstances, the British Chiefs of Staff met in August to discuss their position. To his dismay, First Sea Lord Admiral Sir A. Ernle Chatfield found out that the army and the RAF were in even poorer condition to engage the Italians in the Mediterranean than was the Royal Navy. He urged Vansittard to keep in mind that the Italians could be defeated, but the Royal Navy needed plenty of time in advance to prepare operational plans and the use of bases of Mediterranean allies. As the fleet was on leave, Chatfield urged the Cabinet to postpone the danger of hostilities or consider the risk of defeat. To the army, in any case, it was beneficial to exaggerate Italian strength. The British military did not seek to spend its limited resources on some far away land whose seizure by Italy was perfectly compatible with the ‘scramble for Africa’. They did not desire to become the policing force of the very institution on whose behalf the British military was disarmed to the bare minimum of its standards. Also, it was deemed that a British intervention to protect Abyssinia might very well precipitate aggression by Japan or Germany, as these countries would seize on the occasion of British entanglements in the Mediterranean. It was obvious that the British military had no hope of engaging these three countries at the same time.

The British Cabinet, accepting both the public’s demand for action and the anxiety for war, concluded that it should play along with the League’s mechanisms, imposing sanctions, and hoping to stay out of war. It expected that if it pursued collective sanctions, the French would sooner or later lapse on their commitment to the League, from fear of losing their newly acquired Italian allies. The blame for the ineffectiveness of the League’s sanctions would therefore lie on the shoulders of Laval and his Cabinet, and not with the British government.

On September 11th, one day after France requested to know what Britain would do in the case of a Covenant violation in Europe (by Germany), British foreign secretary Sir Samuel Hoare, who had replaced Simon for his failure to oppose Japanese aggression, held a speech in front of the General Assembly of the League of Nations. Hoare declared that “the League stands and my country stands with it for the collective maintenance of the Covenant in its entirety, and particularly for steady collective resistance to all acts of unprovoked

149 Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement, 48.
150 Excerpts from Admiral Sir A. Ernle Chatfield’s letter of August 8th 1935 to Sir Robert Vansittart, can be found in Adamthwaite, The Making, 142-143.
151 Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement, 49.
152 Posen, The Sources of Military Doctrine, 148-149.
153 Excerpts from a letter from secretary of state Sir Samuel Hoare to the British ambassador in Paris, Sir George Clerk, describing British policy on Abyssinia, can be found in Adamthwaite, The Making, 143-144.
aggression.” For Hoare, this meant that Britain would oppose Italy if the League as a collective would cooperate, meaning if France would agree to impose sanctions. Less than two weeks after Hoare’s speech to the Assembly, Britain responded to the French request concerning treaty violations in Europe that Britain reserved its right to determine its course of action when treaty violations occurred, making the likelihood of French sanctions even slighter. By making clear that their commitment to uphold the Covenant in Europe was at best vague, Britain thought to make sure that France would not abandon their secure Italian ally. The British Cabinet, however, was mistaken if they thought France would abandon her commitments to the League in order to preserve Mussolini as its strategic partner. The French declared to follow Britain’s lead in imposing sanctions on Italy.

In the meantime, Hoare’s speech was welcomed with great enthusiasm by British public opinion. A great many newspapers in the United Kingdom supported the imposition of sanctions, mostly claiming that, besides the moral indignation to Mussolini’s Covenant violations, the precedent of an Italian success would damage collective security and present Hitler with great temptations. The few newspapers who opposed Britain’s support for League action were the Saturday Review, the Observer, and the Tablet. For them the main concern regarding British-Italian antagonism was the damage it would do to the Stresa Front. Hoare’s speech had firmly secured the public’s support for the government’s League policy, which in October saw sanctions imposed on Italy in the form of embargoes of rubber, weapons, metallic ores, and loans. By the time of the general elections of November, all the parties had subscribed to the popular course on which Baldwin’s Cabinet had set out. Baldwin’s government was subsequently re-elected.

Though popular support was won, the Abyssinian crisis was far from resolved. The British Cabinet still faced a hostile Mussolini, and the French appeared evasive on their ability to take part in possible military action against Italy. Realizing that the next sanction imposed by the League would be an oil embargo, which was likely to trigger an Italian ‘mad dog’ effect in the Mediterranean, a solution had to be found fast. Given Italian hardships in the opening months of the war, it seemed the right time had come to propose Mussolini a compromise. The plan with which Eden had traveled to Rome in June was revived, and discussed in early December between Hoare and French prime minister Laval. On December 8th, however, the plan was leaked to the press, which led to a public outcry of offense in British public opinion, that had just recently supported firm League actions in the November elections. Baldwin’s Cabinet quickly abandoned the plan, claiming that Hoare had suffered a nervous breakdown and had been acting on his own. Hoare in the ensuing weeks resigned, keeping discrete over the Cabinet’s true policy. It has been rumored that Hoare was offered a quick return to an important Cabinet position if he took sole

154 Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement, 50.
155 For a review of the British newspaper’s reactions to British response to Italian aggression, see Morris, The Roots, 88-96.
156 Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement, 51-52.
responsibility for the plan. Indeed, Hoare returned to the Cabinet as First Lord of the Admiralty in June 1936.

Realigning himself with the League’s popularity, Baldwin appointed Anthony Eden, a strong supporter of collective security, as secretary for foreign affairs. In early 1936 Eden pressed in the League for oil sanctions against Italy. The French foreign minister Flandin, however, responded that first he wanted to try and settle with Mussolini, and inquired on Britain’s position in the case of a German reoccupation of the demilitarized Rhineland. The British foreign ministry thought that it could circumvent France’s anxiety if it could devise a proposition to Hitler, where he would be offered the remilitarization of the Rhineland in return for arms limitations, most notably including an air pact. The scheme was presented to the German ambassador, Leopold von Hoesch, in early March. Hoesch responded that he would communicate the offer to Berlin and present Eden with the German response the next day. When Hoesch arrived at the foreign ministry the next morning, March 7th, he told Eden that the Franco-Soviet Pact had trampled the Treaty of Locarno, and that German forces were reoccupying the Rhineland as they were speaking. On the other hand, Hitler did look favorably on an Air Pact, would like to agree on a replacement of Locarno, and would offer non-aggression pacts to each of his eastern neighbors.

Eden found Hitler’s offers most appealing, and urged the French ambassador, whom he met later that day, not to take any action that could endanger Hitler’s goodwill. It is remarkable to note, as did the French ambassador, that Eden was looking how to secure a new arrangement with Germany., instead of considering how to stop Hitler. Apparently, however, no one in Britain contemplated military action to oppose Hitler from retaking what was considered to be Germany’s back garden. The newspapers seemed to agree that Berlin’s repudiation of the Franco-Soviet Pact as an infringement on Locarno was illegitimate, but insisted on the justness of the remilitarization. Though some of them warned that this might lead to further German aggression, none of them opted for military sanctions. The House of Commons on March 9th and on March 23rd pronounced themselves to be committed to do anything to keep Britain outside of a European war. In any case, Britain would not have been capable of expelling Hitler’s forces from the Rhineland since it lacked the ground forces for such an operation.

Since no one in Britain wanted to wage war over the Rhineland, and the British government wanted to explore Hitler’s offers for a general settlement, the most important thing seemed to prevent France from attacking Germany. At the meeting with the other Locarno guarantors, however, Eden stumbled on a firm stance by France, and Flandin even mentioned that the French military was already drawing up plans for an offensive. In an effort to moderate French belligerency, Eden reassured Flandin that Britain would

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158 Parker, Chamberlain and Appeasement, 54-55.
159 Ibid., 61.
160 Ibid., 62.
161 A review of the British newspaper’s opinions in the months preceding the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the days after March 7th 1936 can be found in Morris, The Roots, 96-106.
guarantee France and Belgium’s borders against German aggression. The modest staff talks between the French and British army delegates he agreed too were meant as a sop to French demands.\textsuperscript{162} In a speech before the British parliament, Eden subsequently downplayed the security guarantee extended to France and argued to have both avoided war and preserved the endeavor to secure lasting peace on the continent.\textsuperscript{163} His speech earned him a standing ovation.

The issue of oil sanctions against Italy was neglected and eventually forgotten in these tumultuous days, and Mussolini proceeded to crush the Abyssinian army with the aid of outlawed poison gas. In May the Abyssinian Emperor, Haile Selassie, fled the country and Mussolini could claim his victory. Hitler sent Ribbentrop to London in late March to discuss his peace offerings. Hitler proposed to sign non-aggression pacts with his eastern neighbors, enter negotiations on arms limitations, not to reinforce his troops in the Rhineland if France did not reinforce their border strength, and to return to the League of Nations. Eden was delighted with the proposals and told Ribbentrop that he was interested to hear on what terms Germany would enter into these agreements. But subsequent follow-ups by Berlin were delayed due to French elections, the Spanish Civil War, and other convenient excuses.\textsuperscript{164} For Britain, and France, which by this point had subscribed to British policy, it was easier to believe follow ups were delayed than to accept that negotiations had broken off. It lasted well into 1938 before London realized Hitler did not intend to ever present his terms for peace. By this time, the British Cabinet led by Neville Chamberlain had undeniably succumbed to the logic of appeasement.

\textsuperscript{162} Posen, \textit{The Sources of Military Doctrine}, 169.
\textsuperscript{163} Parker, \textit{Chamberlain and Appeasement}, 65.
\textsuperscript{164} Ibid., 67-68.
5. Concluding Analysis

Between the years 1933 and 1936, Hitler effectively overturned the weak position to which Germany was condemned by the Treaty of Versailles. Certainly, he did not accomplish this on his own. The critics of the peace settlement emerged soon after the treaty had been signed in 1919, and it was the doubt that these criticisms created that enabled for treaty revision to become a topic of discussion in European politics. Gustav Streseman was the first German statesman who managed to bolster German strength after the Great War, and thus increased the pressure on Versailles. Together with leaders from Italy, Belgium, Great Britain, and France, he signed the Treaty of Locarno, which was the first document that revealed that Versailles alone could not carry the European balance of power. The arrangements of 1919 were further dented by the hardships of the Great Depression, and the consequential emphasis on national economies in those countries that were supposed to uphold Versailles. Under the leadership of Heinrich Brüning, Germany disposed of the reparation payments to which she was condemned for her responsibility for the First World War. Thus, when Hitler became Chancellor in 1933, Versailles was both open for discussion and Hitler’s predecessors had already cast off the war-guilt clause by ending their reparations-payments. It was nevertheless to Hitler’s credit that Germany, without consent from the Great Powers in Europe, broke loose from her restrictions on armaments and reoccupied the demilitarized Rhineland. This paper examined why France and Great Britain, considering how they did not concede these violations of Versailles to Hitler, did not prevent Hitler from trampling on the treaty that was to guarantee European peace.

English historian A.J.P. Taylor argues that Hitler, despite following up on many of the intentions he had pronounced in Mein Kampf in the 1920s, did not have a definite conception of where he would take his foreign policy. According to Taylor, Hitler continued Streseman’s policy of redressing the unequal settlement of the Versailles Treaty. He also argues that “in principle and doctrine, Hitler was no more wicked and unscrupulous than many other contemporary statesmen. In wicked acts he outdid them all.” Thus, it seems that Taylor implies that other European statesmen had no reservations about pursuing their national interest the way Hitler did, it was only the execution in which they differed. Though Taylor may be right in his assessment of British and French politicians pursuing their national interest as their first priority, certainly, their conception of a just balance of power differed significantly from Hitler’s judgment. French politicians did not seek to dominate Europe, but merely sought to dominate Germany in order to guarantee their own security. In fact, France would have settled for parity with Germany, through disarmament, if her security would be guaranteed by Britain. British politicians, for their part, thought British national interest would be served by an equilibrium in Europe, not by British rule. For this

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166 Ibid., 100.
reason they endorsed German demands for equality, and did not seek to keep the “greatest long term threat to British security” disarmed. Taylor’s claim that Hitler was just as unscrupulous in doctrine as his European contemporaries must therefore be discarded, even when Hitler’s mad racial beliefs are ignored.

In the *Penguin History of the Second World War*, Peter Calvocoressi, Guy Wint, and John Pritchard claim that the western democracies credited Hitler with moderate aims, following the examples of Stresemann and Brüning.\(^\text{167}\) However, the problem was not that France and Britain were deluded by Hitler’s peaceful statements, they were not. Aware of his revisionist intentions, they lacked the national support to oppose him forcibly. They just hoped he would settle, through compromise, for a moderate version of his aims. In 1933, both Britain and France were preoccupied with disarmament, whereas Germany, even before Hitler, sought to rearm. The question, however, was whether the European Powers could agree to what level Germany would rearm. Historian William R. Rock argues that French and British politicians sought an agreement on disarmament to strengthen moderates in Germany in the face of growing Nazi pressure.\(^\text{168}\) According to Rock’s argument, French and British benevolence must have been at its height in 1932, before the Nazi’s took control. As we have seen, however, concrete disarmament proposals were not presented until the MacDonald Plan of spring 1933. Rock’s suggestion therefore does not add up.

Whereas Hitler’s predecessors had sought French and British approval for limited German rearmament, Hitler aimed to avoid an agreement so that his rearmament effort could be undertaken unconstrained. The break down of the Disarmament Conference in October 1933 served his purpose. The responsibility for the collapse of the conference was shared by all three countries concerned. Hitler, of course, did not seek a settlement to keep Germany’s armaments limited. As argued above, Britain did not pursue a settlement, unless it benefited from it itself. Accepting that the other participating countries would not concedet to such an agreement, London merely aimed to avoid blame for the conference’s failure. France, for her part, insisted on security guarantees before she would agree to disarmament. Her prerogative were understandable, but it also provided Hitler with a useful pretext to scuttle German participation. The Disarmament Conference was therefore a cause to which none of the crucial participants were committed. It is not surprising that the conference did not produce any tangible results.

Hitler’s role in the Disarmament Conference was undoubtedly to his satisfaction, as was the process of the consolidation of his power in Germany. Hitler’s economic achievements in his first years in power strengthened his power base, in the short run in Germany, in the long run internationally. Economic historian Dan P. Silverman argues that due to the decline in unemployment and strengthening of the state owing to rising tax revenues, Hitler’s power in Germany was consolidated. Because Germany’s economic


collapse had been more devastating than in its neighboring countries, its recovery seemed all the more spectacular.\textsuperscript{169} Whereas politicians in Britain and (especially) France were toppled over the economic ills of their societies, Hitler remained in place. Having defeated the worst convulsions of the economic crisis, Hitler proceeded to destroy his national rivals. By the late summer of 1934 it seemed unthinkable that Hitler could be removed from power in Germany by internal forces. In the long run, the strategic industries in which Hitler had invested, aviation and motorization, helped to intimidate British and French politicians into overestimating German strength. The strength to which he had managed to bolster the German air force in the limited time between his accession to power and the unveiling of the Luftwaffe, though partially bluffed, managed to cause panic in the British Cabinet. Furthermore, by completely controlling the whole of German society, Hitler managed to conceal the true modest extent of Germany’s war potential from foreign intelligence services’ scrutiny. The estimates, based on the limited information the intelligence services managed to gather, subsequently deluded the services to greatly exaggerate German strength and added to the reluctance of the Western democracies to forcefully confront Hitler.

Peter Jackson in his book \textit{France and the Nazi Menace}, blames the French Military Intelligence for distorting information for political gain.\textsuperscript{170} Indeed, in their struggle against the prevailing mood of disarmament, French intelligence services compromised their professional integrity by exaggerating German strength in the hope of securing more funds for the military. But considering the peril with which France would be faced according to their assessments, it is certainly understandable that they did everything they could, including distorting intelligence material, to attract political attention to the danger. It is equally understandable that French governments, witnessing how the Depression and ideological divisions were ripping France apart, gave higher priority to the already existing problems, instead of the impending German threat. In any case, between 1932 and 1936, subsequent French government were sacked over their economic policies. Apparently the constituents too were most concerned with economic policy.

When German trade penetrated south-east Europe from 1934 on, France, debilitated by the Great Depression, lacked the ability to prevent German economic encroachment in its sphere of influence. Britain, also an important trading partner for the south-east European states, did not care to stop the expansion of German trade, since British economic wellbeing would benefit from a healthy German economy. The growth of German economy was thus accommodated by France’s economic weakness, and British economic dependency.

The growing German economy led to Hitler’s increasing ability to invest in (covert) armament, a frightening realization of which the French were aware. For France to allow for Germany to rearm in fact amounted to France ceding the control over her own security. Due to the potency of the German war machine, France would virtually become as vulnerable to German aggression as the Low Lands were. However, the degree to which France would be

\textsuperscript{169} Silverman, \textit{Hitler’s Economy}, 226, 240.
\textsuperscript{170} Jackson, \textit{France and the Nazi Menace}, 68, 109.
defenseless was eclipsed by two misperception. First, the assumption that the Maginot-Line could avert a German frontal attack. Second, that, as in the First World War, with the help of Great Britain, France could repulse a German offensive. Politicians in France may have made a more forceful stand against German rearmament if they had known that the Maginot-Line would be ineffective against the German Blitzkrieg, which simply circumvented the fortifications in 1940, and that the expeditionary forces Britain committed would turn out to be hopelessly inadequate.

Perhaps, however, France had already relinquished the management of her own security after the abortive Ruhr-occupation of 1923. As pointed out, at this crossroad in history it was proven France was incapable of forcing even a disarmed Germany into submission. The economic upheaval that followed, both in France and Germany, and France’s subsequent international isolation, led to the Treaty of Locarno, where France formally forfeited the option of an offensive. Through the military plans drawn up in 1928, and with the construction of the Maginot-Line, the French military too joined the line as set by the agreements made in Locarno. Without full mobilization, France now no longer had the capabilities to launch a limited offensive against Germany, as it had in 1920 and 1923, and would henceforth rely on other European Powers, namely Great Britain, to uphold French security. The events that played out between 1933 and 1936 were no exception to this, as at every crisis France turned to Britain for support. Each time when the British refused to forcefully aid the French, France’s assertiveness ground to a halt.

According to American historian Eugenia Kiesling, the French army was stuck between the dire need for more funds in the face of overwhelming German superiority, and the need to boost national confidence to support the army in the case of war. Taylor points to a similar predicament, describing general Gamelin’s optimistic statements that the French army was ready to face every challenge, while having to impress upon the politicians that if he would not get a substantial increase in funds, the army would be of no use. In this, Taylor sees reflected “France’s conscious determination to maintain her traditional position as a Great Power and her unconscious, but more genuine, resignation to a modest, defensive position.” The clear discrepancy between France’s commitments & pretence, and its capacity to actually deliver is also pointed out by Peter Jackson. He concludes that France’s alliance system and posturing can be explained through French desperate aspirations to maintain its front as a Great Power. Though Jackson accurately notes France’s inability to keep up with its commitments, France’s alliance system was not constructed in order to increase Paris’ control over eastern Europe, but to create the impression of France’s ability to wage a two-front war against Germany. The very fact that France was dependant on the weak states in the East to create the impression that it could defend itself, reveals the extent to which the former Great Power had sunk. As pointed out

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171 Kiesling, *Arming Against Hitler*, 79.
by Kiesling and Taylor, even maintaining this impression was a difficult task for the French military.

The weak objections of the French politicians after Hitler’s subsequent treaty violations, through rearmament and the remilitarization of the Rhineland, were not engendered by shock, but comprised instead of resignation to the defiance they had long expected and could not prevent. Kiesling argues that France was stuck in its institutional conventions, it lacked revolutionary leadership to pull French politics out of passivity and oppose Hitler forcibly.\(^{174}\) Indeed, what France desperately needed was a leader who could take charge and restore French control over her own security, much as Winston Churchill did for Britain in 1940, and general Charles de Gaulle would do for France after it had faced the traumas of Nazi occupation. But in the inter-war years a political ambiance of pacifism, internationalism, and compromise prevailed, and there was no room for hard-line politicians, except for those lingering in the depths of political radicalism. France, therefore was stuck with politicians who lacked the assertiveness required to face up to Hitler’s prowess.

English historian James Joll argues that the trampling of civil rights in 1934 in Germany and Austria led to the bolstering of Left wing groups around Europe, and especially in France.\(^{175}\) In France, in 1934, Gaston Doumergue’s centre-right Cabinet got the chance to oppose Hitler’s aggressive policies, but hampered by foreign minister Barthou’s assassination and the economic slump, it could not thwart Hitler’s indiscretions. It took, however, another year and a half, bridged by centre-left cabinets led by Flandin and Laval, before Leon Blum’s Left wing Popular Front government would win the elections in 1936. In any case, as argued above, France’s electorate seemed more preoccupied with the economic and political ills of its society than with international politics. Nevertheless, the inability of centre-right and centre-left to conquer both the ills of the Depression and Hitler’s aggression swept the Left wing coalition into power. Though Blum indeed directed France towards rearmament, it was too little too late. The events of May 1940 revealed the extent to which Germany’s war machine outclassed France’s. In any case, it is doubtful if France even in March 1936 could have defeated Germany on its own.

Both the French and the British grand strategies were not aimed at aggressive confrontations, but aspired to deter their adversary. On account of its alliance system in the East, the French thought they could intimidate Hitler through the possibility of a two-front war. The fact that France’s East European allies were incapable of waging an offensive war, as was France, must however have seriously hampered the deterrent effect of France’s strategy. Britain too, relied on its economic power, the Royal Navy, and the RAF to deter aggression on the continent. Both economic power and the navy, however, would only be effective in a long war of attrition, and the RAF was not equipped to actually launch an effective offensive, at least until 1938. The problem of these deterrent strategies was that

\(^{174}\) Kiesling, *Arming Against Hitler*, 188.

Hitler did not mind gambling. Disadvantaged by the international status-quo he was condemned to, Hitler had to take chances to turn the tide. He lacked the actual military potency to follow up on his implied threats, but luckily for him, his rivals’ strategies were based on active intimidation and passive deeds. Therefore, the risky steps Hitler undertook were not punished. It can be argued that rational statesmen would not jeopardize their careers the way Hitler did, which is also why his generals advised against his plans, but than, by standards of conventional politics, Hitler was not a reasonable man. It was exactly this revolutionary frame of mind that caught the French and British politicians off guard and allowed for Hitler to proceed unimpeded.

To Hitler’s advantage, the inequality of the Versailles Treaty influenced British perceptions of German grievances with regards to reparations, disarmament, and the Rhineland. The German aspirations to bolster its strength therefore got the benefit of the doubt, as the British hoped Germany was only trying to undo for the unfair treatment it had received since the First World War. The British historian Scott Newton also attributes the British attitude with regards to the Anglo-German Naval Treaty to the conviction that the Treaty of Versailles had been unfair to Germany.176 The Anglo-German Naval Treaty, however, seems to have been concluded, on British behalf, with other considerations in mind. The inability to wage maritime war with Japan, Italy, and Germany simultaneously, as well as an effort to impose at least some limitations on German rearmament, were the most important factors determining the British pursuit of the maritime agreement. Many British politicians did recognize that Hitler sought to revise the European status-quo, possibly beyond what they would allow for. However, they pursued his peace offers because they thought that the terms he set for a revised Europe were preferable to war. Only once it was clear that Hitler would not even settle for the revised Europe he had portrayed for the world himself did they realize that war was inevitable.

William R. Rock suggests Britain’s (early) appeasement policy sprang from British self-righteousness over its satisfaction with the European status-quo. Whereas other nations were gropping for pieces of land, Britain was satisfied with what it had and only sought to preserve its Empire.177 This attitude is evident in Vansittart’s June 1935 proposal to trade a piece of British Somaliland for Italian moderation in Abyssinia. Considering how Britain expected to lose a considerable portion of its Empire, if not all, in the next World War, it makes sense for them to be willing to sacrifice a small piece of land for peace. The policy continued to be pursued in the following years, with respect to Italy starting with Vansittart’s proposals, and revealed the same pattern of British willingness to trade land (in Eastern Europe) to avoid war. This policy of diplomatic damage control in order to avert war may indeed be called a policy of ‘appeasement’.

Also to Hitler’s benefit, British military doctrine was confused and ineffective. The deterrent capacity Britain aimed for was left wanting, as was evident in Italy’s resolve to

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176 Newton, Profits of Peace, 73-74.
177 Rock, British Appeasement, 52.
seize Abyssinia, despite London’s opposition. Furthermore, as pointed out by Barry Posen, Britain lacked a land army capable of opposing Germany’s expansion in Europe, and once Hitler had reoccupied and fortified the Rhineland, Britain’s strategy of a naval blockade was diminished in its efficacy.\footnote{Posen, \textit{The Sources}, 143.} Richard Overy explains that Hitler recognized the importance of economic wellbeing to wage war and aimed to seize the material resources of eastern Europe.\footnote{Overy, \textit{War and Economy}, 179.} As Germany would get its raw materials from the east, and not from the west, where the Royal Navy aimed to block German harbors, the British strategy of wearing down the adversary by depriving him of imported goods was seriously weakened.

Hitler was further aided by the moral rigidness of the British public, first in their opposition to British rearmament, which hampered British military capacity, second by their commitment to collective security schemes. James Joll considers the British and French attempts to thwart Mussolini’s designs on Abyssinia to be purely based on ethical considerations.\footnote{Joll, \textit{Europe Since 1870}, 360.} If Joll is referring to the indignation of British public opinion, he is right. Abyssinia represented no vital interest to either the British or the French Empire. In the scramble for Africa, Mussolini’s move was fair. But in the time of collective security and the League Covenant, British public opinion could not allow for their ideals to be flouted by considerations of national interest. Politicians in London were therefore forced by their constituency to act along the League’s mechanisms, even though they were reluctant to do so. The French subsequently had to join their British partners in their opposition to Mussolini in order to preserve some hope of securing Britain as a guaranteed strategic ally. The principle of collective security thus defeated national interest, since neither Britain nor France gained by losing Mussolini as a potential ally against Hitler.

American historian and (former) policymaker Henry Kissinger reasons that the Hoare-Laval plan was born out of the absurdity of the summer of 1935, when Britain had tried to appease Hitler while confronting Mussolini. According to Kissinger, the Hoare-Laval plan, by offering Italy a considerable part of Abyssinia when the war seemed deadlocked, was the last attempt to induce Mussolini to fall back in line with the Stresa Front. Kissinger reckons Mussolini would have accepted the plan too, and, had the plan not been leaked, the Stresa Front would have been saved.\footnote{Kissinger, \textit{Diplomacy}, 299.} Historian R.A.C. Parker conversely argues that if Laval and Flandin had supported the stern British League response to Italian aggression in Abyssinia, the Stresa Front might have survived. According to Parker, oil sanctions would have stopped Italy’s advance in Abyssinia, and eventually determined the outcome of the war. Mussolini, then, would have been humiliated and isolated, which would have left him vulnerable to British and French pressures to confront Hitler in March 1936.\footnote{Parker, \textit{Chamberlain and Appeasement}, 56-57.} I, however, insist that a British-French military confrontation with Mussolini, to which oil sanctions would likely have amounted, would make the survival of the Stresa Front even less
probable. Hostile attitudes from Britain and France would have only hurried the emergence of the Rome-Berlin axis, as Mussolini’s isolation would leave him just as susceptible to seduction by Hitler as to British-French pressure. Mussolini and Hitler were destined to ally in any case. Not simply on account of their Fascist doctrines, but because of their revisionism. France and Britain aimed to preserve the European status-quo, Germany and Italy sought to overthrow it. In that respect, Hitler had more to offer Mussolini than any of the Western statesmen. Therefore it was only a matter of time until Mussolini and Hitler put their differences aside (which they did when Mussolini conceded Austria to Germany in 1936) and ventured to divide Europe between themselves. Neither Kissinger’s insistence on the Hoare-Laval plan, nor Parker’s oil sanctions, could have prevented rapprochement between Hitler and Mussolini.

When Hitler finally reoccupied the Rhineland, the French army was convinced that a unilateral intervention in the Rhineland would lead to a bloody stalemate, and therefore it would not act without British support. The British, like the French, lacked the ground forces for a limited operation such as the eviction of German troops from the Rhineland would have been. An RAF bombing campaign would probably have been unwise as well. As was proven in the Second World War, strategic bombing would probably produce more (civilian) casualties than military successes. The British public opinion definitely lacked the will for pounding the German civilian populace into submission. The public condemnation to which a British bombing campaign would lead to an early abandonment of the offensive, and probably more sympathy for Hitler. The bombing of the Rhineland was therefore more likely to bolster Hitler’s cause than to damage it.

Historian Williamson Murray claims that the years 1933-1936 revealed Germany to be the long term victor of the First World War. However, if Germany emerged as the most powerful European state in 1936, it was because Britain and France allowed her to. The Treaty of Versailles effectively dismantled German strength. It was only once the restrictions agreed upon in 1919 had been shed without sanctions, that Hitler’s Germany could outgrow her western rivals.

British historian E.M. Robertson explains that the Rhineland reoccupation found the Locarno Powers at cross purpose. France did not want Germany on its eastern border, but was willing to sacrifice the Rhineland for a British security guarantee. Great Britain wanted Germany back in the League of Nations, and was intrigued by Hitler’s proposals for peace. Mussolini welcomed the German move as a distraction from Abyssinia. Indeed, it seems that given the political circumstances of 1936, an effective coalition against Hitler was highly unlikely. The Abyssinian crisis polarized relations between the Stresa Powers. In the opinion of Robert J. Young, expert on the French military, Great Britain egoistically pursued national interest and was insensitive to French feelings of insecurity. In addition, Britain

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184 Robertson, Hitler’s Pre War Policy, 80.
was inherently distrustful of France, especially during Laval’s tenure. France, for its part, did not want to estrange either Britain or Italy, and by refusing to unambiguously support either one of them managed to alienate both its allies. Italy, in any case, had very different designs than the western democracies, and by pursuing its expansionist policies effectively chose Hitler’s fascist revisionism over the decadent democracies. Thus Britain and France were confused, divided, misunderstanding each other, leaving Hitler to emerge victoriously from the various crises that Europe faced between 1933 and 1936.

In The Age of Extremes, written by the British historian Eric Hobsbawm, the chapter describing the years 1914-1945 is titled ‘The Age of Catastrophe’. In my opinion, this title best exemplifies the events that played out in those years. In the 1930s, extremes of all kinds, such as poverty, fascism, communism, racism, naivety, disarmament, rearmament, isolationism, all met to combine into a dustbowl of political insecurity. Richard Overy points to the various crises that pervaded international politics in the 1930s in his book The Inter-War Crisis. He adds that next to dealing with vagaries of the Depression and of pacifist internationalism in the face of fascist challenges, politicians in Paris had to defeat a communist uprising in Indochina, and Islamic revolts in Syria, Tunisia, and Algeria. British politicians, for their part, had to deal with insurrections in Egypt, India, Palestine, and Iraq. Indeed, the democracies had so many crises to deal with in these years that it is not surprising they did not manage to deal with them all effectively. In these circumstances, meeting the threat of a maniacal personality as Hitler’s ruling Europe’s potentially most powerful nation, proved too challenging a task. In the ambiance of the early- to mid-1930s, France and Britain lacked both the resources and support to resist Hitler’s assertiveness. Perhaps if they had known the magnitude of the crisis that would dominate Europe the first years of the following decade they would have intervened despite their reservations. But alas, they did not know. The ensuing Second World War would grow to outdo all previous interstate crises.

185 Young, In Command, 128.
186 Hobsbawm, The Age of Extremes, 19-222.
187 Overy, The Inter-War Crisis, 83.
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