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THE ORIGINS OF FRENCH APPEASEMENT, 1919-1936

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of History

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

By

Richard G. Ostrander

May, 1990

APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

THE ORIGINS OF FRENCH APPEASEMENT, 1919-1936

by Richard G. Ostrander

The Origins of French Appeasement examines the reasons behind France's failure to prevent Germany from dismantling the Treaty of Versailles in the years between 1919 and 1936. The thesis begins with an analysis of the first phase of French policy towards Germany, Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré's attempt at strict enforcement of the Treaty. Chapter Two explores the second stage of Franco-German relations between the wars, in which various French governments tried to reach a general diplomatic settlement with Germany over the course of the ten years from 1924 to 1934. The Origins of French Appeasement then traces the Third Republic's attempt to disarm Germany and its subsequent failure to prevent her rearmament. Chapter Five examines how the French High Command's strategic and tactical doctrines as well as adverse conditions within the Army itself contributed to French appeasement. Finally, the thesis concludes with a short study of the Rhineland Crisis of 1936.

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INTRODUCTION

It is inevitable that one regard the origins of the Second World War with a certain amount of incredulity, for perhaps no other war in the history of mankind could have been avoided as easily as that which began in 1939. At the end of World War I Germany lay defeated and powerless, and the Treaty of Versailles was to make this state of affairs a permanent feature of the new European status quo by instituting German disarmament as law. And yet, by September of 1939, Germany had torn Versailles to shreds and was making another bid for domination of the continent. Clearly, the Treaty had been violated, but the law had not been enforced; the transgressor had not been punished.

The role that France played in the Treaty's twenty year long demise is particularly mystifying. No European nation was more fearful of a German military resurgence or more desirous of security from such an eventuality than France. Although deeply skeptical of the Treaty's ability to provide their country with lasting security against future German aggression, many French statesmen in 1919 were forced to admit that Germany could be denied

the means to challenge the European order if Versailles was enforced to the letter of the law. In the first post-war years these same statesman pledged themselves to do exactly that.

It is precisely this fact which calls to mind one of the most fascinating paradoxes of modern European history: by the late 1930's France found herself confronted by the very situation she had once sworn to prevent, the rise of a powerful German military state. Even more amazing was the extreme passivity with which France reacted to that stunning and unprecedented series of German fait accomplis in the second half of the 30's: Hitler's announcement of rearmament and conscription in 1935; the remilitarization of the Rhineland in 1936; the <u>Anschluss</u> in March of 1938; the Munich crisis in September of the same year; and the absorption of the Czechoslovak rump state in 1939. Compounding the mystery of France's inaction is the fact that she possessed a clear military superiority over Germany during most of the 1930's.

Why did France fail so miserably in maintaining the security which she had won at such great price in 1918? What measures did she take to try to prevent the revival of German armed strength? Why were these solutions tried and not others? The purpose of this thesis is to provide answers to these questions. Dealing with the seventeen years between 1919 and March of 1936, it will examine

those events and attitudes in France which contributed to the erosion of French security as embodied in the Treaty of Versailles. This essay is not intended to serve as a broad chronological review of French history between the wars. Rather, its aim is to function as an analysis of a particular historical problem; specific events and personalities of the period will be dealt with only insofar as they illustrate the controlling idea of the thesis. Approaching the subject primarily from the viewpoint of diplomatic history, its goal is to explore the reasons behind the extraordinary weakness and passivity of French diplomacy towards Germany, as well as to trace the overall logic and structure of France's German policy from 1919 to March of 1936.

CHAPTER I

THE FRENCH RIGHT WING AND THE PROBLEM OF SECURITY, 1919-1924

Although the French people emerged triumphant from the First World War, in many ways their victory seemed more like a psychological defeat than a great military triumph. Now more than ever before they were aware of their own vulnerability at the hands of their neighbor to the east, Germany. To make matters worse, France's leaders had been frustrated in their efforts to guarantee their country's security at the Paris Peace Conference. Thus, rather than the confident frame of mind that one would normally expect of a victorious power, the mood which pervaded postwar France was one of pessimism and anxiety. Set against this backdrop of insecurity, this first chapter will examine the initial response of French leaders to the situation which confronted them in 1919. Dealing with the period of time beginning with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles and ending with the withdrawal of French troops from the Ruhr in early 1924, Chapter I will analyze the first of four phases of French policy towards Germany, the era of strict enforcement of the Treaty of

Versailles.

France Looks to the Future with Pessimism

Even though Germany was reduced to relative powerlessness by her defeat and the restrictions subsequently imposed upon her at the peace conference, the task of enforcing these terms in the years to come seemed an enormous challenge to France's leaders. Mathematics alone dictated their apprehension: there were sixty million Germans as opposed to only forty million Frenchmen, and this disparity would continue to widen in the future due to Germany's higher birthrate. In industrial potential--the very sinews of war--France was even more inferior. Together, these facts conbined to create the perception--very common among Frenchmen but largely unappreciated in the rest of the world--of the decline of French power in Europe.[1] The birth of the second German Reich and France's defeat at its hands in 1870 served notice to the French people that their country had been supplanted as the leading European power. However, few in France during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century realized just how great was the gap between the two countries in terms of military might. Only during the course of the First World War did the French come to fully appreciate Germany's far

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[1] Réné Albrecht-Carré, France, Europe and the Two World Wars. (Paris: Librarie Minard, 1960), 202.

superior military-industrial potential, and it was this fact perhaps more than any other which served to undermine their confidence in their ability to contain German aggression in the years to come.

It is difficult to overestimate the importance of the effect of World War I on the psyche of the French nation. The impact of the war traumatized France as it did no other country. She had entered the conflict with supreme confidence both in her martial prowess and in her prospects for victory, but she immediately found herself engaged in a precarious life or death struggle from which she barely emerged with her life and with a victory so costly as to be hardly worthy of the name. France had been saved only by her powerful allies and by a tremendous national effort which had perhaps been beyond her capabilities. And for these reasons, Germany's magnificent feat of arms impressed itself all the more deeply upon the French consciousness. Even though she was eventually defeated, Germany had challenged virtually every other major power in the world--and come within a hair's breadth of total victory. Thus, in spite of the fact of Germany's defeat and subsequent disarmament, never before had France seemed so vulnerable and Germany so powerful to French leaders as in 1919.

The Inadequacy of the Treaty of Versailles

The Treaty could do nothing to erase Germany's sizeable advantage in manpower and industrial might; all it could do was to guard against the possibility that these two key elements of military power might be translated from mere potential into an actual threat. In terms of French security, then, the clauses which stipulated Germany's disarmament constituted the very heart of the Treaty. No matter how much the French railed against the inadequacies of Versailles as a guarantee of their nation's security, there remained one irrefutable fact: as long as Germany was denied the physical means of aggression, then France would remain safe from another German invasion. Prompted by this logic, France's two great leaders of the center-right, Georges Clemenceau and Raymond Poincaré, vowed to execute the terms of the Treaty, deeply flawed though they were, as faithfully as possible.

While Clemenceau and Poincaré held the reins of power for much of the period from 1919 to 1924, one must point out that they represented only a tiny minority of French opinion on the Treaty. Among the nation's major statesmen, only André Tardieu and Georges Mandel, along with part of the center-right press, supported Clemenceau in his belief that Versailles could indeed be made to serve the interests of French security.[2] Virtually the entire remainder

[2]Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, Les Relations Franco-

of the French nation regarded the Treaty as next to useless as a safeguard against future German aggression.[3] France had given up her claims to an army stationed permanently on the Rhine and to a politically detached or separated Rhineland in exchange for an Anglo-American promise to come to her aid in any eventual conflict with Germany. But first America and then Britain had backed out of their guarantee, leaving France with only a fragile demilitarized zone and a temporary occupation of the Rhineland for protection. For Clemenceau such laments were irrelevant: the terms agreed upon at Versailles were the best that could be obtained given the political realities of the day, and there was simply nothing that France could do about it except to try to derive what security she could from the Treaty.

The architects of the Treaty for France, principally Clemenceau and Tardieu, did not fully appreciate the difficulties they would encounter in attempting to make Versailles serve as the instrument of their country's security.[4] Displaying a kind of oversimplistic legalism which would become typical of French diplomacy between the wars,

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Allemandes de 1914 à 1939, (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1965), 2:3.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Judith M. Hughes, To the Maginot Line: The Politics of French Military Preparations in the 1920's, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 134.

they tended to attach too much importance to the Treaty as a contract which Germany was obliged to honor rather than thinking of it as law which would have to be imposed upon an uncooperative subject. At the peace conference the French delegation was prone to gloss over the stubborn problems presented by treaty enforcement, hoping that these difficult issues would somehow resolve themselves in the future.[5] For example, French leaders were unable to reconcile the possibility that they might have to use military force to exact the terms of the Treaty with the fact of the army's impending demobilization. Would France be able to keep enough troops under the colors to mount coercive operations against Germany in the years to come? Would she have to mobilize in response to every minor infraction of Versailles? The French also had to take into consideration the growing Anglo-American sympathy for Germany. Could they risk alienating these two vital allies by using armed force to execute the Treaty? France embarked upon her experiment in treaty enforcement without ever coming to grips with these difficult questions--questions which would return to haunt her just a few years later.

Although the small circle of leaders centered around Clemenceau did pledge themselves to making Versailles work,

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[5]Ibid.

it is vitally important to remember that, at the same time, these men also believed that the Treaty could be made to provide France with security for probably no more than a generation. Nearly all Frenchmen agreed that while a German resurgence could perhaps be postponed for a few years, it could not be prevented in the long run.[6] "Not even during the first post-war years," observed the English journalist Alexander Werth, "did French opinion seriously believe that the Treaty of Versailles would or could last."[7] In fact, many in France denounced the Treaty as unenforceable even before it had been signed. During the peace conference itself Clemenceau had to face the stubborn opposition not only of the Anglo-Americans but of Marshall Foch, who insisted that it would be impossible to make Germany obey the terms of the Treaty as they then stood.[8] So colossal did the task of implementing Versailles appear to some statesmen that they seemed reluctant even to try. This extraordinary pessimism was to become one of the root causes of French appeasement.

For Clemenceau, then, the Treaty of Versailles necessarily assumed the form of a temporary, stopgap measure which would provide a "breathing space" before Germany's

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[6]Ibid, 83.

[7]Alexander Werth, Which Way France?, (New York: Harper and Bros., 1937), 15.

[8]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 123.

next bid to dominate the continent.[9] France had to use this precious span of time in order to, first of all, recover physically and psychologically from the wounds sustained during the war, and, secondly, to find a reliable, long-term solution to the security problem. Clemenceau himself had pinned his hopes for such a solution on the eventual return of the Anglo-Americans to the wartime alliance, an arrangement which he and most other French leaders regarded as the best possible guarantee of their country's security. The refusal of Britain and America to commit themselves to any French security system would set off a mad scramble within diplomatic circles to produce an adequate replacement for the lost Anglo-American guarantee. In their fruitless twenty year search for security the French would eventually experiment with--often simultaneously--virtually every conceivable response to Germany's challenge: treaty enforcement, conciliation, Franco-German rapprochement, alliances, disarmament, outright appeasement, and, finally, war. The dilemma of French security would remain the unanswered question of the interwar era.

Contrasting Views on the German Problem: Left vs. Right

While nearly all Frenchmen agreed that their country

[9] Ibid, 86.

had been cheated of its security at the peace conference, the right and left disagreed about the origins of this unfortunate state of affairs. The right vilified the Treaty because they considered it to be too "soft," or, in other words, because it did not go far enough in reducing the military threat posed by Germany. This was blamed--with much justification--on the blind incomprehension of the Anglo-Saxons, whose intransigent opposition to Clemenceau's plans ruined the chances for French security. On the left, the socialists insisted that Versailles was too "hard" in that it further inflamed Germany's hatred of France and antagonized her to such a degree that it left her determined to overthrow the new European order. Arguing that France's best guarantee of security lay in a Germany which was firmly rooted in democracy, the left maintained that the best course to take would be to help strengthen the fledgling Weimar Republic, thereby winning the trust and friendship of the moderate, democratic elements within Germany.[10] The way to do this, they argued, was to make concessions on those clauses of the Treaty which offended Germany the most. Both the left and the right would cling to their respective positions on the German question until the mid 30's when the two sides would undergo a role reversal on the issue.

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[10]Duroselle, Les Relations Franco-Allemandes de 1914 à 1939, 2: 3.

At bottom, each of these two opposing viewpoints was the product of a differing perspective of the nature and character of the German nation. In turn, both of these perceptions were colored to a large extent by party ideology. Because of their internationalist orientation in foreign policy, the left found it much easier to be charitable and forgiving toward Germany--especially when their brother socialists were in charge of the Weimar government. They were able to justify their generous attitude by subscribing to the theory of "the two Germanies."[11] By this it was simply meant that underneath the surface of the old, autocratic military state there lay another Germany, democratic and free, which was waiting to establish itself. But the emerging Weimar Republic was in grave danger of being subverted by the reactionary forces of the old order--an eventuality which, as the left pointed out with undeniable accuracy, would be directly contrary to the interests of France. The correct policy towards Germany then followed logically from this fact: by giving ground on the most extreme clauses of the Treaty, France could undercut the _raison d'être_ of those representatives of Germany's militaristic and imperialistic past who sought to turn the clock back to the days before 1914. Of course, all of this had to be done while

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[11]Arnold Wolfers, _Britain and France between the Two Wars: Conflicting Strategies of Peace since Versailles_. (Hamden, CT.: Archon Books, 1963), 59-60.

at the same time assuring French security, but a compromise was necessary nevertheless. Some gesture to Germany's great power status had to be made.

In contrast, the right's view of Germany was grounded in the fear and mistrust with which traditional French nationalists had always regarded their eastern neighbor. Condemning the socialist theory of the "two Germanies" as a dangerous myth, the right insisted that Weimar democracy was merely a thin veneer which masked the fact that nothing had really changed in Germany. There had never been a "revolution" in the true sense of the word in 1918, for the same officer caste still dominated the ranks of the civil service, the bureaucracy, the judiciary and the military. The army remained a "state within a state," the real power behind the government. The national psyche was still possessed by the need for order, power, force and domination, by that same ultranationalism which found its highest expression in the idea of German racial superiority. In short, this was the same "eternal Germany" which had been the bane of its neighbors since its birth in 1870. And it was this national superiority complex combined with the double humiliation of defeat and the Treaty of Versailles which made it inevitable that Germany would try once again to win what it considered its birthright: European--and then world--hegemony. According to the right, there could only be one possible French re-

sponse to such a menace: Germany would have to be kept weak.

This difference of opinion between right and left therefore produced divergent strategies for achieving French security. The socialists believed that Germany's hostile attitude toward the postwar settlement could be changed, and that France could play an active part in alleviating this hostility by being more conciliatory on issues such as reparations and disarmament. The right, on the other hand, maintained that only the German people themselves could limit their own ambitions, and that until such a transformation of the German temperament took place, the other European nations would have to forcibly contain Germany until her impulse for expansion played itself out. That she would eventually try to overturn Versailles was accepted as inevitable. There was nothing else to do but to watch, wait and be prepared for the moment when Germany would issue its challenge to the Treaty.

France Searches for Allies

Convinced of the Treaty's inadequacy as a safeguard against further German aggression and of their own inability to enforce its terms, the French therefore began to seek out substitute assurances of their security. The solution which the French turned to most frequently in their efforts to solve the security problem was the formation of alliances, both in their traditional form as

well as in the new guise of collective security. Throughout the interwar period French leaders of both the right and the left were to regard strong alliances accompained by joint military planning as the surest means of securing their country's safety against another German uprising. Accordingly, one of the principal occupations of French diplomacy during this era consisted of the enlistment of virtually every suitable European nation into a system of defensive alliances aimed at Germany. Unable to comprehend the anxiety and insecurity of a people which had just defeated its mortal enemy, many unsympathetic foreign observers (typically British and Americans) interpreted this "pactomania" as just another symptom of French paranoia and megolomania. However, one can better appreciate France's concern for the future by reviewing the European balance of power as it stood in 1919. Russia and Austria-Hungary had disappeared from the scene entirely; America had withdrawn completely from European affairs; Italy was dissatisfied and alienated, and Britain was moving further away from France each day. The French were therefore left without a single reliable major ally, and the prospects for obtaining one in the near future appeared bleak indeed.

Out of necessity, then, French diplomats confined themselves to the task of recruiting the only allies then available to them: the small successor states of eastern Europe (that is, Poland and the "Little Entente" countries

of Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia). As a replacement for the prewar alliance with Tsarist Russia or for that with Great Britain and the United States, these agreements were, of course, totally inadequate. But more importantly, these pacts would bear the seeds of disaster for France in that they legally and morally bound her to foreign commitments which she never intended to fulfill.[12] At the time that these alliances were concluded, nearly everyone in Europe assumed (with much justification) that they represented a pledge on the part of the Republic to uphold the independence of these four small eastern states in the face of Germany's expansionist ambitions. However, only those closest to the French foreign policy making process seemed to realize that exactly the opposite was true: the pacts with Poland and Czechoslovakia were negotiated primarily with the idea in mind that these two countries would be able to provide a crucial second front in the eventuality of another Franco-German conflict (the agreements with Romania and Yugoslavia were directed mainly at Germany's ally, Hungary).[13]

This amazing gap between what the French claimed to be their foreign policy and their actual motives behind the eastern alliances is just one of a series of contradictions

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[12]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 65.

[13]Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, La Politique Exterieure de la France de 1914 a 1945 (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1968), 193.

and inconsistencies in her defense strategy which would not be revealed until the outbreak of the Rhineland crisis in March of 1936. When Germany finally challenged France's commitments to Czechoslovakia and Poland in the last year of peace, the French were forced to make the agonizing choice between the embarassment of abandoning their allies or of going to war for the sake of what they considered to be non-vital national interests. The Munich crisis of September 1938 demonstrated the true priorities of French foreign policy to the world. France was saved from a similar debacle over Poland a year later only because she had long ago resigned herself to following Britain's lead in dealing with Germany.

The French Obsession with Great Britain and the League of Nations

France's growing dependence on Great Britain during the inter-war period is perhaps the best illustration of the desperation with which French leaders conducted their search for a solution to the security problem. The origins of this fixation can to a large degree be traced back to the French experience in the First World War, a war which would have ended disastrously for France had it not been for British manpower, materiel and money. This was to become a lesson which was learnt all too well. As seen from Paris, the truth was simple and undeniable:

France could not face Germany--even a defeated and powerless Germany--without British cooperation. After the war French leaders would find themselves almost as dependent upon Britain's diplomatic support in their efforts to obtain security as they had earlier been upon her military aid. For France, whose self-confidence was waning more and more with each passing day, the constant approval and support of a close ally was vital. Consequently, Britain's ever increasing opposition to French policy towards Germany was to have a devastating, demoralizing effect upon her former partner's resolve to prosecute the Treaty.

As a result of this obsession with Great Britain, French diplomats and politicians found themselves preoccupied with two major foreign policy goals throughout the 20's and 30's: first, the avoidance of alienating British opinion, and secondly, persuading Britain to commit itself firmly to French security strategy. Both of these goals, however, were incompatible with Clemenceau's and Poincare's plans to execute the Treaty of Versailles to the letter of the law. British public opinion increasingly began to look upon Germany as the unfortunate victim of a vengeful and imperialistic treaty and, conversely, upon France as a vindictive and cruel oppressor. During the early 20's Whitehall attempted to persuade the French to soften their stance towards Germany by offering to return to the prewar alliance.

In exchange, Britain asked that the French bring their policy towards Germany more in line with their own, and more specifically, that they renounce all expectations of receiving reparations.[14]

As dissatisfied as they were with Versailles and with their prospects for enforcing it, this was too high a price for the French to pay at that time. As long as Germany remained weak and there still existed some hope of extracting at least some measure of security from the Treaty, they could afford to refuse such a hard bargain.[15] However, once Versailles began to crumble in earnest during the mid 30's, the French became willing to follow in the wake of British appeasement in return for London's promise of a closer commitment to French security (an informal agreement was in fact worked out along these lines following the Rhineland crisis). Thus, after March of 1936 (if not earlier), the Republic's German policy was governed almost exclusively by limits defined by Britain. But whether or not French appeasement was masked by its British counterpart made little practical difference, for either way the results were the same: the Treaty continued to be dismantled and French security continued to be compromised.

Hoping that the new League of Nations would provide a solution to the security problem, France's leaders de-

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[14]Duroselle, <u>Politique Extérieure</u>, 185-186.

[15]Ibid.

veloped a fixation on the idea of collective security similar to that which they experienced with Britain, although not nearly as strong. In the first postwar years Frenchmen generally (although grudgingly) accepted the fact that they would have to bear the brunt of the twin burden of national defense and treaty enforcement, with perhaps Britain and the League making a partial contribution to the effort. Only a few extremists during these early years advocated either total reliance upon French military power or complete dependence upon collective security.[16]

By 1930, however, the French Army had demobilized and left the Rhineland, and Germany had finally become free of allied military control. The result of this changing strategic situation was that anxiety over national security increased markedly in France at this time. Accordingly, more and more Frenchmen began to look upon the League of Nations as a potential anti-German coalition which could guarantee their country's safety against another threat from the east.[17] This was a delusion which would severely undermine future French attempts to contain Germany. Time after time during critical junctures in Franco-German relations the French would refer serious violations of the Treaty by Germany to the League instead of using them as grounds for swift and decisive action

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[16]Ibid, 181.

[17]Albrecht-Carré, France, Europe and the Two World Wars, 202.

against the lawbreaker. Inevitably, these incidents were lost and buried in the swamp of the League's own impotence.

The Enslavement of French Foreign Policy

In looking at the Republic's relationship with the League and with her allies, one of the most significant trends of French foreign policy between the wars comes clearly into focus: the tendency to surrender freedom of action in foreign affairs to allies in exchange for their commitment to French security. This was a precedent set at Versailles by Clemenceau himself when he sacrificed Marshal Foch's plan to bring France's military frontier to the Rhine in favor of the Anglo-American guarantee. The choice presented to France at the Peace Conference amounted to essentially this: either she could attempt to implement her own security arrangements while foregoing the support of her wartime allies or she could accept their own peace terms along with their promise to protect her against any future German aggression.

For Clemenceau, the choice was easy. Could France, acting alone, keep Germany in check for any significant length of time? One had to say that such a prospect was problematic at best, if only for the reason that it had never been tried. But with Britain and America behind her, France would become more than a match for Germany--this was sure, this was certain. As the only reliable, long-term solution to the security problem, France had no choice but to

accept the Anglo-American guarantee, even if this meant that she would also have to settle for a weak, compromise peace treaty along with a much more restrained postwar German policy. "My dominant thought in going to the conference," said Clenenceau, "is that nothing must occur which shall seperate in the post-war period the four Powers which have come together in the war. . . . For the Entente I shall make every sacrifice." [18] This strategy would remain one of the principal leitmotifs of French foreign policy for the next twenty years. After surrendering her freedom of action to Britain and America at Versailles in exchange for the ill-fated Anglo-American guarantee, France would spend these two decades trying to strike bargains which would lure her former partners back into the wartime alliance (the most notorious of these being Foreign Minister Pierre Laval's deal with Mussolini which sparked the Ethiopian crisis of October, 1935). In the end, this course would lead to the enslavement of French foreign policy at the hands of both the League of Nations and, above all, of Britain.

Although the first four years of peace marked the beginning of France's progressive retreat from an autonomous foreign policy, this short span of time also represents the period of her greatest freedom of action in her relations with Germany. During these four years, French leaders tried

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[18] W.M. Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 1918-1939 (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd, 1943), 37.

to steer a middle course between their own national interests and those of Britain, attempting to enforce the Treaty as faithfully as possible without provoking a permanent rupture with their ally. Thus, at least until the beginning of 1924, France was willing to defy British opinion to a certain extent in her policy towards Germany. In spite of Germany's extreme military weakness, Marshal Foch's plan to disregard France's allies and unilaterally institute her own security system was never considered as a realistic option by the political establishment.[19] Faced with a choice between either complete submission to Britain or permanently alienating her through a radical policy of unconditional treaty enforcement, there could be only one possible path for France to take: that which led to London. Just how sensitive the French were to British opinion would be proven in dramatic fashion with the denouement of the Ruhr crisis in early 1924.

Allied Revision of the Treaty

Much of the reason why French leaders felt justified in eventually abandoning their efforts at treaty enforcement in favor of reliance upon Britain can be explained by Versaille's inadequacy as a long term guarantee of French security. As the historian William Jordan has observed:

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[19] Walter A. MacDougall, France's Rhineland Diplomacy, 1914-1924: The Last Bid for a Balance of Power in Europe (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), 97.

> The Treaty was distingusihed by the lack of balance between the obligations imposed on Germany and the guarantees instituted to insure their observance. It was constructed on the assumption that, after a brief span of time, the defeated state would act as its own gaoler for the convenience of the victors.[20]

This fact owed itself not so much to technical legal flaws or omissions within the text of the Treaty itself but to the subsequent failure of France to enforce certain of its key clauses. There were, for example, four important provisions which, if they had been adequately followed up, would seemingly have assured France of its security. Article 213 of the Treaty called for interallied and international control of the Rhineland; Article 428 stated that France was to have security through the disarmament of Germany, or, failing this, a permanent military presence on the Rhine; Article 429 stipulated that if the Allies thought that the guarantees against unprovoked Germman aggression were insufficient after the first fifteen years of peace, then they would be entitled to extend the military occupation of the Rhineland until this situation was rectified; and finally, Article 430 of the Treaty simply specified the Allies' right to reoccupy the Rhineland if Germany defaulted on her reparations payments after the evacuation of the occupying troops from the area.

During the course of the peace conference, when anti-German feeling was still strong among the three major allies

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[20]Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 84.

and the Anglo-American guarantee had not yet been withdrawn, it appeared as if the British and the Americans had every intention of honoring these crucial clauses. But as the rift between France and Britain widened and America disappeared from the scene entirely, it became clear to the French that the political and diplomatic realities of the day simply would not permit a literal, legalistic interpretation of the Treaty. In the face of Britain's growing sympathy towards Germany's plight, there could be no question whatsoever of reoccupying or prolonging the occupation of the Rhineland in order to enforce the Treaty after the mid 1920's. These insurance clauses of Versailles were therefore taken less and less seriously with each passing day by both the British and the French until they were finally ignored and forgotten altogether.[21] Once again, France's deference to British opinion lay at the root of French appeasement.

The Rhennish Solution

While the Treaty of Versailles provided no long-term solution to the security problem, it did equip France with one weapon which served as an excellent temporary defense against any possible German aggression. This was the military occupation of the Rhineland, which the French regarded as the only reliable guarantee of their country's safety against a German attack other than the Anglo-American alli-

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[21]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 157.

ance. With six divisions placed at strategic Rhine bridgeheads, France could not only prevent a German attack from the east, but she could also launch a swift preventive strike into the heart of Germany itself. However, as long as the Germans met their treaty obligations to a reasonable degree, this occupation could last no longer than fifteen years. At the end of this period the only guarantee of security that France would possess besides her own armed forces and those of her allies would be a fragile, demilitarized Rhineland--an obstacle which the French High Command considered as practically worthless.[22]

The impending evacuation of the Rhineland therefore represented a critical deadline for France, the time by which a solution to the seemingly insoluble problem of French security would have to be found. But for the remainder of the Third Republic's history, French leaders would find themselves unable to produce a security plan which even remotely approached the degree of safety offered by the occupation of the Rhineland. The enormous difficulty of this task discouraged the French in their search for such a solution throughout the interwar period. But in the 20's in particular, when Germany was relatively weak and the Rhineland was still occupied, French leaders proved to be especially lax in their pursuit of an alternate security system. One politician, Joseph Fabry, accused the Senate Army Com-

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[22]Ibid, 82.

mission of refraining from "seeing beyond the occupation of the Rhine," and charged that, in effect, the Commission was admitting that: "I am building my system on this occupation. This occupation is in effect for fifteen years: I refuse to look farther."[23] The thorny problem of the Republic's long-range security was an issue which, because of its apparent insolubility, most Frenchmen were reluctant to confront.

Separation of the Rhineland?

One way in which the French tried to solve the security problem in the early postwar years was to attempt to separate the Rhineland from Germany. The rationale behind this venture consisted of a mixture of equal parts of fantasy and Realpolitik. Detachment of the Rhineland, rich in population, resources and industry, would without doubt have weakened Germany economically and militarily. In addition, if French politicians and industrialists could persuade their Rhennish counterparts to integrate their economy with that of France, then Germany's sizable military-industrial advantage could be considerably narrowed. Some also argued--and not without some merit--that dividing Germany would remove the worst elements of "Germanism" from her people. After all, they pointed out, it was only after their unification that the Germans became a menace to civilization.

However, in their rather simplistic belief that the Anglo-Americans and the Germans--or even the Rhinelanders

[23]Ibid, 128.

themselves--would allow a partition of Germany, the advocates of a detached Rhineland were sadly mistaken. More realistic Frenchmen insisted that such a strategy would create the equivalent of a German Alsace-Lorraine, and some even suggested that an attempt to separate the Rhineland would so outrage the Germans that they would opt for a resumption of hostilities rather than submit to a division of their country.[24] A significant portion of French opinion also rejected the notion of severing the Rhineland from Germany on purely moral grounds, maintaining that such a course would violate the sacred republican ideals of liberty and fraternity.[25]

One way in which the partisans of a divided Germany tried to circumvent these objections was to support the native Rhennish separatist movement which sprang up immediately after the signing of the armistice in November of 1918. Emphasizing the Rhinelanders' cultural and historical links with France, some French leaders advanced the theory that the inhabitants of the region were really not Germans but rather a unique people--a sort of Franco-German crossbreed--and were therefore entitled to self-determination. At first the support for separatism on the left bank of the Rhine was both considerable and genuine, coming mainly from Catholics and industrialists who were anxious over the chaos reigning

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[24]Fred Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security against Germany, 1919-40"(Ph. D. diss., Yale University, 1950), 270.

[25]Paul-Marie de la Gorce, The French Army: A Military-Political History, trans. Kenneth Douglas (New York: George Brazilles, Inc., 1963), 153.

in Germany at that time. This support waned, however, as the political situation inside the country stabilized, and the movement began to sink rather quickly. It was at this point that the French increased their clandestine aid to the separatists (which was never more than halfhearted at best), appointing General Joseph Mangin as principal liaison to the group's leader, Dr. Adam Dorten. Unfortunately for the secessionists, however, the Americans soon discovered their ally's secret project, and after vigorous complaints were lodged with Clemenceau, the French were forced to abandon their support almost completely. In spite of the proclamation of a Rhennish republic at Wiesbaden on June 1, 1919, the separatist movement was all but exhausted. A massacre of Dr. Dorten's supporters by German nationalists in 1924 ended all hopes of Rhennish secession.[26]

The only other means of detaching the Rhineland from Germany was to make this objective a condition of the peace treaty itself, and in the first months of the conference the French delegation spared no effort to do exactly that. At first, both of France's great wartime leaders, Clemenceau and Marshal Foch, were in favor of severing the left bank of the Rhine from Germany. Clemenceau represented the extreme position on the issue, advocating that the Rhineland be separated in perpetuity and occupied until its inhabitants were ready to join France, which he estimated to

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[26] Jere Clemens King, Foch versus Clemenceau: France and German Dismemberment, 1918-1919 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 122.

be about thirty years.[27] In effect, this amounted to annexation, a term that few in France were willing to use in spite of the tremendous anger and bitterness which existed towards Germany at the time. Only the intransigent opposition of the Anglo-Americans to this plan and their subsequent offer to guarantee France's security softened Clemenceau's stance on this issue.

Marshall Foch's more moderate position on the Rhennish question called for the creation of an autonomous state on the left bank of the Rhine whose economy would be linked with that of France by means of a customs union.[28] Only the key Rhine bridgeheads were to be occupied, preferably for as long as possible. For Foch, this single condition constituted the sine qua non of French security: with a military frontier on the Rhine, France's future would be placed squarely in her own hands and not those of the Anglo-Americans. The failure to obtain this Rhine barrier, he maintained, would be "to commit a crime of lèse France."[29] Here lay the origins of the bitter disappointment of Foch's last years, as well as of his tragic feud with Clemenceau, the champion of the Anglo-American alliance. Clemenceau did obtain the right to occupy the Rhine bridgeheads for France at the peace conference, but Foch

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[27] Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 185.

[28] Ibid.

[29] de la Gorce, The French Army, 157.

would live to see the evacuation of the last French troops from the Rhineland a mere ten years later. In his harsh criticism of the Treaty and of Clemenceau's strategy, Foch would prove to be the prophet of disaster.

France Enforces the Treaty

While the occupation of the Rhineland lasted for only a decade, it played a vital role in France's efforts to enforce the Treaty during the first four years of peace. With their six divisions based on the Rhine and six others held in reserve just beyond the Franco-German border, the French could occupy any given town or area in the Rhine or Ruhr valleys in response to German violations of the disarmament or reparations clauses of the Treaty (they referred to this tactic as the taking of "pledges"). These operations sometimes focused on economic targets, or "productive pledges," in which case their object was the direct extraction of reparations in kind by the occupying troops. The French also took these opportunities to try to supplement their own economy by encouraging the local industrialists to ally with their French counterparts. Along these same lines, plans were developed for the "Ottomanization" of the German economy, in which a French or Allied commission would supervise and direct German industries (as Britain had done in the Ottoman Empire during the previous century), harvesting the resulting profits as payment toward re-

parations.[30]

Paradoxically, the taking of "pledges" was an effective but at the same time unsatisfactory method of bending Germany to the French will. These operations disrupted everyday life in western Germany to such a degree that the Weimar government invariably found itself with no choice but to cooperate with the Allies. Even the threat of this sort of coercion was often sufficient to persuade the Germans to honor their treaty obligations. In May of 1921, for instance, Prime Minister Aristide Briand was able to eliminate German obstruction simply by setting in motion the first step of the enforcement process, the calling up of reserve classes.[31]

However, the strategy of pledge taking also brought with it several important disadvantages. First of all, these coercive operations had the unwanted side effect of heightening the already considerable anti-French feeling which existed in Germany. Secondly, the taking of productive pledges (such as coal mines, railroads, forests, etc.) was an inefficient, unprofitable undertaking since local passive resistance and the difficulties involved with using soldier-laborers usually rendered the cost of extracting reparations greater than the receipts themselves.[32] Finally and most importantly for the French was the fact that the

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[30] Jordan, Britain, France and the German Problem, 120.

[31] Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 94.

[32] Jordan, Britain, France and the German Problem, 128.

British found this form of coercion particularly objectionable. But whatever its drawbacks, this method of treaty enforcement proved that France could indeed, with the requisite fortitude, impose its will upon Germany. Unfortunately, however, the French failed to fully appreciate the truth of this lesson (the great majority of historians have also been negligent in recognizing the validity of this point).

France launched three principal coercive expeditions into western Germany during the early 1920's. The first of these occurred in April of 1920, when Prime Minister Alexander Millerand sent French troops to occupy Frankfort in response to a German violation of the demilitarized zone. Then, in March of 1921, Briand ordered the occupation of the three Rhennish towns of Ruhrort, Dusseldorf and Duisburg in order to hasten tardy reparations payments. The invasion of the Ruhr Valley in January of 1923, however, constituted France's final, most ambitious, and most notorious attempt to coerce Germany by means of military force. At the very nerve center of German industry (the 1,800 square miles around Essen produced eighty per cent of the nation's coal, steel and pig iron and possessed ten per cent of its population), the Ruhr was an ideal target for the taking of a "productive pledge."[33] The French had often used the threat of its occupation to prod the Germans into obeying their treaty obligations, and now Prime Minister

[33] Albrecht-Carré, France, Europe and the Two World Wars, 136.

Poincaré intended to use this rich district as a site for the direct extraction of reparations in kind--particularly of coal.[34] In addition, he also planned to realize France's long-cherished goal of integrating her own economy with that of the Ruhr by coming to an agreement with the region's industrialists.

The Consequences of the Occupation of the Ruhr

At first glance, one might easily conclude that the occupation of the Ruhr was a French victory rather than the disastrous defeat which it has subsequently been labled. Initially, the Prime Minister received the overwhelming support of the French people.[35] In the Ruhr itself, the local government declared a campaign of passive resistance in response to the occupation, but Poincaré was able to break the strike by sending in French and Belgian laborers. Desperate German workers had no alternative but to return to their jobs. The Weimar government was forced to admit defeat, as were the Ruhr industrialists, who now agreed to make reparations payments directly to France.[36] On the surface it seemed as if the French had won a complete victory: they had shown the Germans that they had to submit to superior force and obey the terms of the Treaty. Certainly the Germans had caused the French great inconvenience with

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[34]Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 71.

[35]Duroselle, Relations Franco-Allemandes, 2:35.

[36]Ibid.

their passive resistance, but Poincare had proven that France could mete out much more trouble than could Germany.

But the view from Paris in 1924 was very different from what it might have been forty or fifty years later. What could from today's standpoint be seen as a resounding triumph was interpreted at the time as an all-around catastrophe. To begin with, the occupation could not even begin to pay for itself: it cost the French three billion francs per year to maintain, but at the same time they were able to extract only 1.8 billion francs per year in reparations from the Ruhr.[37] Consequently, the government found itself forced to raise taxes in order to make up the deficit--an extremely painful step for people who hate to pay taxes as much as the French do. Secondly, the invasion greatly exacerbated traditional German Francophobia. Germany's left wing, which up until now had been truly desirous of a Franco-German reconciliation, had been estranged from France by the occupation, and the right had become even more firmly entrenched than ever in its hatred for Germany's historic enemy.[38] To make matters worse, the Reichswehr used the widespread economic and political chaos caused by the invasion as a pretext for seizing power by emergency decree for almost half a year. But perhaps most disconcerting of all for the French was the fact that the British had been

[37]Georges Bonnet, Quai d'Orsay (Isle of Mann: Times Press and Anthony Gibbs and Phillips, 1965), 32.

[38]Duroselle, Relations Franco-Allemandes, 2:35.

outraged by the entire operation, which they regarded as merely another example of Gallic imperialism. Unfortunately for France, the situation was compounded not only by a chronic and very serious shortage of coal, but also by a severe financial crisis which threatened the nation at the end of 1923 and the beginning of 1924. The French were therefore rendered even more dependent than usual upon Britain since she possessed the only supplies of coal and cash which were available to them at that time.[39]

For all these reasons, then, French public opinion gradually turned against the occupation during the course of 1923. In spite of his great personal popularity, Poincaré was tagged with the sobriquet "Poincaré la guerre."[40] Thus, with one eye on the restless mood of the country and the other on the upcoming national elections, the Prime Minister was compelled to evacuate the Ruhr in January of 1924. The evacuation did not constitute a defeat in itself since the French would have left the Ruhr sooner or later in any event. But what did make the withdrawl one of the landmarks of French appeasement was the fact that Poincaré totally failed to follow up and exploit his initial victory. The plan to penetrate German industry was abandoned without having ever really been tried, although Poincaré had earlier attempted to transfer the management of the

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[39]MacDougall, France's Rhineland Diplomacy, 108.

[40]Charles Reibel, Pourquoi Nous Avons Été à Deux Doigts de la Guerre (Paris: Librairie Anthème Payard, 1938), 22.

Rhineland's railroads to an Inter-Allied Committee (the venture was predictably quashed by the British).[41] More importantly, the French signaled the end of their experiment in the direct collection of reparations when they agreed to let the Dawes committee of experts solve the problem of Germany's payment, which was promised in full at a later date.

In effect, the outcome of the Ruhr crisis spelled the end of France's unilateral efforts to enforce the Treaty at the point of a sword. With the internationalization of the reparations issue, the French relinquished their principal justification--German default--for mounting coercive operations in western Germany.[42] Although no formal decision was ever made to abandon the use of military force in order to uphold the Treaty, Poincaré's actions in January of 1924 amounted to a tacit admission that France would never again go to such great lengths to defend Versailles.[43] And, in fact, the occupation of the Ruhr would prove to be France's last truly active measure of enforcement until her reluctant declaration of war in September, 1939. It would be ten more years before the need to take military action against Germany would arise once more, and when that time came, France would find that her will to act had atrophied

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[41]Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 189.

[42]Duroselle, Relations Franco-Allemandes, 2:42.

[43]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 152.

almost completely over the course of the previous decade. Perhaps realizing the ultimate consequences of this new direction in policy towards Germany, Marshal Foch remarked upon the evacuation of the Ruhr: "Maintenant tout est perdu. Il est certain qu'il y aura une nouvelle guerre entre la France et l'Allemagne."[44]

France Seeks the "Effortless Peace"

In essence, the discontinuation of Clemenceau's strategy of strict enforcement of the Treaty was only one example of a trend in France's German policy which would last the entire length of the interwar period. This trend can perhaps be best described as a tendancy to seek what one historian has called "the effortless peace."[45] By this it is simply meant that the French were willing to enforce the Treaty as long as such an undertaking did not bring too many inconveniences with it; in other words, they wanted the fruits of Versailles (i.e., security) without the sacrifice and hard work which was required to obtain them. In 1923 nearly all Frenchmen agreed that Germany should be made to pay, but at the same time they were also unanimous in the opinion that the price which Poincaré was asking them to pay in order to collect this debt was much too high. The French people only reluctantly accepted the idea

[44] Reibel, Pourquoi Nous Avons Été à Deux Doigts de la Guerre, 19.

[45] Wolfers, Britain and France between the Two Wars, 121.

that the army would play the principal role in coercing Germany, and the general public always felt very uncomfortable with the strategy of using soldiers against civilians for non-military purposes.[46] In addition, this sort of policy also meant that not only would France be unable to fully demobilize, but that several reserve classes would have to be called up from time to time as well--all of which would have to be paid for with increased taxes. For a nation which had just experienced four years of the most terrible warfare in history, such a burden soon became intolerable. In too many ways the tactics of treaty enforcement represented an extension of the hostilities which had begun in 1914, and by 1924 the French wanted more than anything else simply to forget the war. Faced with this sort of massive and deep-rooted opposition to the occupation, there was little else that Poincaré could have done except to surrender to the reality of the situation. This was a lesson which would not be lost upon French leaders in the future. As A.J.P. Taylor put it: "The occupation of the Ruhr provided, in the long run, the strongest argument in favor of appeasement."[47]

It was the end of one era and the beginning of another. The elections in the spring of 1924 reflected the weariness of a nation still at war: the right wing "Bloc Nati-

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[46]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 132.

[47]A.J.P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York: Atenum, 1961), 50.

nale," which had swept all before it on a tough-on-Germany platform in 1920, was now supplanted by the Cartel des Gauches, a left coalition based on the prospect of a Franco-German rapprochement. For the next ten years French policy towards Germany would concentrate on trying to change German attitudes towards France through conciliation and concession. Thus ended the only period in the entire interwar era in which the French made a serious effort to enforce the Treaty and contain Germany. It had taken extraordinary, determined leaders--Foch, Clemenceau, Poincaré, Millerand--to achieve even a glorious failure in treaty enforcement, and now these men had left the scene for good. What, then, could be expected from men such as Edouard Herriot and Aristide Briand, to say nothing of the rising new generation of French leaders such as Edouard Daladier and Pierre Laval?

CHAPTER II

THE FRENCH LEFT WING AND THE PURSUIT OF SECURITY, 1924-1934

The occupation of the Ruhr marked the beginning of the end for Poincaré and the Bloc National, as well as for their experiment in the strict enforcement of the Treaty of Versailles. After the evacuation of the Ruhr in January of 1924, the exponents of coercive operations were forced to admit that the use of such a strategy had become impossible under the political and economic conditions then prevailing in Europe. Now, after four years of criticizing the center-right's German policy from the floor of the National Assembly, the left finally received an opportunity to prove that they possessed a more effective solution to the security problem. Under the guidance of three of the left's most prominent personalities, Aristide Briand, Edouard Herriot and Edouard Daladier (plus that of a renegade conservative, Pierre Laval), this new policy towards Germany would remain in operation almost without pause for the next ten years. And although the cause of French security had already suffered several major defeats during the Clemenceau-Poincaré era, much more extensive damage would be done to the Treaty in the ten years from 1924 to 1934. The gradual erosion of

Versailles which began soon after its signing was greatly accelerated by this new German policy, a strategy of compromise and concession which would prove to be irreversible long after its futility had been demonstrated. The purpose of Chapter Two is to examine how the left's novel approach to the German problem constituted one particular form of French appeasement. As one of the principal themes of this chapter, special attention will be paid to French efforts to reach an entente with Germany, and particularly to the two most prominent examples of these attempts, the Treaty of Locarno and the Disarmament Conference of 1932-1934.

The Left's Strategy towards Germany

The essence of the left's new strategy can perhaps be best described as "selective enforcement" of Versailles. More specifically, this meant sacrificing those features of the Treaty which French leaders felt were either unenforceable or of secondary importance (usually in exchange for German promises to abandon hopes of future treaty revision) while defending those elements which they saw as central to French security.[1] In effect, this policy was simply an attempt to preserve the essence of Versailles--security-- at the expense of what would eventually fall by the wayside in any case. Accordingly, French governments in this era vacilated between the carrot and the stick in their dealings

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[1]Arnold Wolfers, Britain and France between the Two Wars: Conflicting Strategies of Peace since Versailles (Hamden, Ct.: Archon Books, 1963), 59-60.

with Germany, giving ground on nonessential or indefensible issues and standing fast when German attempts at revisionism approached too near the all-important priority of national security.[2]

At first glance, the rationale behind this strategy seems sound. For the men of the left, France had received the worst of both worlds when she signed the Treaty of Versailles. Its basic and most serious flaw, they maintained, consisted of the fact that the Treaty was overambitious to the degree that no one could seriously expect France to achieve more than a small fraction of what Versailles had originally set out to do. At the same time, however, it infuriated the German people by reducing their country to the status of a second class power--a humiliation which the Germans, accustomed to their role as world leaders, would never accept. According to leaders such as Briand or Herriot, it was precisely this fact which lay at the root of the bad behavior exhibited by Germany during the first five years of peace. Rather than rousing Germany's hatred and defiance by trying to exact the terms of an unforceable treaty, the left felt that French security could be obtained much more easily and directly simply by working towards a new era of Franco-German friendship. The way to go about this, they asserted, was to make some concessions to Germany's psychological needs as a great power--all, of course, within the framework

[2]René Albrecht-Carré, France, Europe, and the Two World Wars (Paris: Librairie Minard, 1960), 150.

of French security.[3]

The False Basis of the Left's German Policy

While possessing a certain degree of outward logic, this new policy towards Germany actually consisted of a long and tenuous chain of dangerous presumptions which, in the end, added up to a disastrous misreading of German intentions. First of all, the left made the fatal mistake of assuming that French security could be reconciled with German revisionism, or, in other words, that Germany would be content to limit her own ambitions to a level which would be acceptable to France. In accordance with this belief, the French were forced to place a great deal of trust in Germany's promises of future cooperation--promises which were, of course, later betrayed completely with catastrophic consequences for France. And secondly, the left wing was greatly mistaken in thinking that it could modify Germany's behavior by using selected features of the Treaty as bribes for her good conduct while choosing to conserve others. Assuming that they could control events by turning the flow of concessions on or off like a faucet whenever they chose, the French never seemed to realize that it would be impossible to dismantle one part of the Versailles structure without eventually bringing the whole edifice down with it. Setting out to manipulate the Germans, it was the French who would become the ones who were being manipulated.

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[3]Wolfers, Britain and France between the Two Wars, 59.

The eventual failure of the left's German policy can to a large degree be attributed to a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of men like Briand and Herriot not only of their German counterparts, but also of the "German problem" itself. This was a misinterpretation which Weimar leaders would take advantage of time and time again, accepting generous French concessions on the Treaty while never intending to honor the agreements made in exchange for them. France's error, then, was one of misplaced trust, of misjudging the nature of German diplomats and diplomacy. In spite of the fact that Germany had done very little to prove that she would not be a danger to both French and European security in the future (rather, she had done much to prove just the opposite), the left wing clung to the theory of the "two Genmanies." When dealing with Weimar leaders such as Ebert, Scheidemann, Cuno or Stresemann, their opposite numbers in Paris tended to see only fellow socialists and republicans while glossing over other, more alarming details. For example, they overlooked the fact that these men were first and foremost German nationalists who not only sympathized with the Reichswehr and its aims, but had also participated in manufacturing the myth of the "stab in the back," the belief that the German Army had been betrayed rather than defeated.

Stresemann and His Diplomacy

The French proved to be particularly unobservant in the case of Gustav Stresemann, the Weimar chancellor and

foreign minister who, along with Briand and Austin Chamberlain, won the Nobel peace prize for engineering the Franco-German rapprochement of the second half of the 1920's. What the left chose to ignore about this supposed "good European" was the fact that, in actuality, he represented the embodiment of the typical "good German." As a monarchist, ardent nationalist and friend of the military, Stresemann never ceased to wax nostalgic over the old imperial Germany or romanticize its military accomplishments, and even defended Germany's conduct during the war as well as her war aims. He maintained a friendly relationship with the Hohenzollern Kronprinz throughout the 20's and, for a time, also with Ludendorff and the other leaders of the Kapp Putsch.[4] Such information should have served as adequate warning as to the true character not only of Stresemann himself but of his foreign policy as well. Unfortunately for France, however, these signs were overlooked by the leftist leadership of the day--with the result that it would be thoroughly duped by German diplomacy for five crucial years.

The degree to which French socialists misjudged Stresemann and his objectives can be better appreciated by arriving at a fuller understanding of his foreign policy. In a now infamous letter to the Kronprinz of April, 1925, Stresemann outlined the most pressing diplomatic priorities of the day in order of importance: (1) the departure of the allied occu-

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[4]Hans W. Gatzke, _Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany_ (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1954), 5.

pation from the Rhineland; (2) a favorable resolution of the reparations problem; (3) protection of German nationals living beyond the borders of the fatherland; (4) revision of the eastern frontiers; (5) various other matters such as union with Austria, the return of the Saar, German disarmament and rearmament, and the elimination of the war guilt clause and the demilitarized zone, all of which Stresemann thought could be won in due course through League channels.[5] These goals obviously add up to no less than the complete destruction of the Treaty of Versailles and the turning of the clock back to August, 1914. This constituted the essence not just of Stresemann's foreign policy, but that of every German leader from Ebert to Hitler--indeed, it was the only possible foreign policy for any German minister who wished to remain alive and in power.

No German government between the wars ever tried to conceal these ambitions from the French. In fact, they were trumpeted openly, loudly and often. But at the same time, these disturbing declarations were issued side by side with honeyed assurances of Germany's desire for a Franco-German reconciliation and seemingly sincere promises to seek resolution of her grievances through the peaceful process of international cooperation. And because this was exactly the kind of thing that an exhausted and war-weary France wanted to hear, most Frenchmen tended to pin their hopes on Germany's words of comfort rather than sound the alarm over her ominous

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[5]Ibid, 113-114.

plans for treaty revision. Accordingly, Stresemann tried to limit his assault upon the Treaty to a level which would not strain relations with France excessively, but which would satisfy the revisionist appetites of the all-powerful military and other dangerous right wing extremist groups. While Germany was weak, Stresemann reasoned, she had no choice but to approach the ultimate goal of Versailles' destruction by initially seeking its partial fulfillment (for this reason he declared his foreign policy to be one of "Erfüllung", or "fulfillment"). This strategy would buy time for Germany until she could gain enough economic, diplomatic and military strength to challenge the Treaty openly and unilaterally through intimidation. "We must regain our power," said General Hans von Seeckt, the brilliant commander of the Reichswehr, "and as soon as we do we naturally will take back everything we lost."[6] There exists no more succinct or accurate summary of German foreign policy between the wars than this single terse statement.

French Weakness in the Face of German Diplomatic Initiative

The success of Stresemann's foreign policy (as well as that of his successors) was due in large part not only to the skill and boldness of German diplomacy, but also to a corresponding weakness on the part of the French. One would expect that France, with its great and victorious army, would have been negotiating from a position of strength and that Germany, with no military threat to reinforce its diplomatic

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[6] Ibid, 12.

efforts, would have been bargaining from a grave disadvantage. But a curious role reversal between the two sides took place in 1924 with the departure of Poincaré and the Bloc National and the arrival of Briand and the Cartel des Gauches. As one French politician put it, Germany now became the "demandeur" instead of the "defendeur" (actually, this was not the appearance of a totally new trend but rather the acceleration of one which had existed ever since 1918).[7] More and more the French let themselves be intimidated in negotiations with their opposite numbers, surrendering ground needlessly to an opponent whose power was much more potential than real. With the beginning of German rearmament in the early 1930's this problem would become even more acute. Its root cause was fear--fear of Germany and of the awesome power that she represented. One French diplomat, Georges Bonnet, communicated this sense of awe in his memoirs when he wrote:

> We were frightened to enter into direct negotiations with the country we had defeated. Faced with the Germans we developed a sort of inferiority complex. Even a Poincaré or a Briand felt uneasy about dealing with them unless Britain was also present.[8]

The fact that the French were able to be intimidated in such a manner can also be attributed in part to the diplomatic style of the Germans, a mixture of charm and belicosity which alternately lulled and frustrated its victims. The soothing, hypnotic effect of the first part of this dual

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[7]Pierre-Etienne Flandin, Politique Française, 1919-1940 ((Paris: Les Éditions Nouvelles, 1947), 48.

[8]Georges Bonnet, Quai d'Orsay (Isle of Mann: Times Press and Anthony Gibbs and Phillips, 1965), 101.

strategy has already been mentioned. Except for the right wing, whose traditional nationalism entailed an instinctive distrust of all things German, few in France recognized the true intentions of this aspect of German diplomacy. One of the most prominent voices who warned against being seduced by offers of Franco-German friendship was André François-Poncet, France's ambassador at Berlin from 1933 to 1939, and perhaps the most prescient of all observers of Germany in the interwar years. Accurately diagnosing these overtures as little more than propaganda, François-Poncet cautioned that their real purpose was to "endormir nos méfiances, rassurer nos craintes, et nous empecher d'organiser une résistance à leurs offensives."[9]

The French were only all too well acquainted with the other face of Germany's interwar diplomacy--a face which they unfortunately found to be much more typical of the German character. The strategy was unsophisticated but ultimately successful: the French were to be worn down by the constant and deafening repetition of German demands and grievances until they gave in out of sheer exasperation. Accordingly, Germany's foreign policy objectives were hammered into the French consciousness with such persistence and such unabashed nerve that they eventually came to acquire a sense of legitimacy--and even of inevitability-- in the eyes of the French. German leaders did not ask for concessions but rather insist-

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[9] France, Commission de Publication des Documents Relatifs aux Origines de la Guerre 1939-1945, Documents Diplomatiques Français 1932-1939, 1re Série, Tome 2 (Paris: Imprimerie National, 1963), No. 205, 464.

ed upon them as a right, and whenever the French yielded to Germany's demands, these concessions were snatched away with an air of surliness and hostility as French defeats and German victories.[10]

Once the Cartel began to indulge Germany in its revisionist ambitions, the floodgates of French appeasement were well and truly open. Wrote one officer on the staff of the Interallied Control Commission charged with overseeing the implementation of the Treaty:

> We always found in dealing with the German government that in the matter of concessions it was invariably a case of c'est la premiere pas qui coute--the cost always falling on us. The more we conceded, the more they asked.[11]
>
> We had no sooner made one concession than another was demanded; having made a surrender of a principle we were called upon to surrender every safeguard against its abuse.[12]

The resulting flow of concessions would wash away first the Treaty's reparations clauses, then those pertaining to Germany's disarmament, and finally, in the second half of the 1930's, its territorial clauses. Retreat became a habit for France, a backward momentum which the nation's leaders were unable to halt until it was far too late. Foreseeing the ultimate consequences of this trend, Clemenceau, in the last months of his life, would write in his bitter, painful book, The Grandeur and Misery of Victory: "with patience, a

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[10] Albrecht-Carré, France, Europe, and the Two World Wars, 186.

[11] J.H. Morgan, Assize of Arms: The Disarmament of Germany and Her Rearmament (1919-1939) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 186.

[12] Ibid, 339.

great deal of boldness, and some cleverness, it [Germany] will easily manage to obtain from the weak and irresponsible Governments that have been succeeding one another in France since 1920, the almost complete annulment of the Treaty."[13]

Locarno

One of the first and most noteworthy acts of French appeasement during the second phase of Franco-German relations (1924-34) occurred in October of 1925 with the signing of the Treaty of Locarno. The Treaty of Locarno has usually been misrepresented by both contemporaries and subsequent historians as the first great expression of the new spirit of European unity and cooperation. While this description may accurately characterize the English or French concepts of Locarno, it is in no way representative of Germany's motives for signing the Treaty. As far as Stresemann was concerned, Locarno's main attraction for Germany lay in the fact that it constituted a giant step towards the fulfillment of her single great foreign policy objective, the destruction of the Treaty of Versailles. Presented with an opportunity to make significant progress in the attainment of this goal without surrendering anything of consequence, Stresemann entered the conference with great ambitions. His most immediate concerns were to relieve tension with France and calm her fears of German rearmament, thereby eliminating once and for all any possibility of another French expedition into the Ruhr or the

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[13] Georges Clemenceau, The Grandeur and Misery of Victory, trans. P.M. Atkinson (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930), 349.

Rhineland.[14] Stresemann also sought two other very important objectives: first, a speedy end to the allied occupation, and secondly, allied agreement on the revision of the eastern borders, or at least the beginning of progress in this area.[15] Germany would achieve at least partial success in each of these goals as well as in others: it was to be a diplomatic victory as complete as any of Hitler's fait accomplis.

From the French point of view, the Treaty of Locarno satisfied the deep psychological need for peace and security which had not come to France with the end of the war. The occupation of the Ruhr had driven home the lesson that it was impossible for two great neighboring nations to live in such tension for any extended period of time, and in the broadest sense it was the task of the Treaty to redress this state of affairs by finally normalizing relations with Germany. On another level, Locarno represented nothing more than another attempt by France to solve the security problem. Essentially amounting to a nonaggression pact and defensive alliance system between the principal western European powers, the Treaty stipulated that if Germany moved against France (or invaded Belgium or crossed the demilitarized zone in the Rhineland in order to do so), then France's other Locarno partners would be obliged to come to her aid. And since these signatories included Great Britain as well as Italy, the French felt that they had gone more than halfway towards replacing the Anglo-

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[14]Gatzke, Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany, 34.

[15]Ibid.

American guarantee whose withdrawal had hurt them so badly just six years earlier. Thus, in direct contrast to the Germans (who saw Locarno only as a necessary first step towards the eventual destruction of the postwar European order), the French hoped that the Treaty would ensure the status quo in western Europe far into the future.[16]

France paid a heavy price for Germany's promise to respect western European boundaries. To begin with, Briand vowed that the occupation of the Rhineland would be terminated five years ahead of its scheduled ending in 1935--a move which deprived France of both a valuable weapon and an irreplaceable defense against Germany for five crucial years. In addition, the army of occupation was reduced in strength, and other changes were introduced in order to make the French military presence less offensive to the Rhinelanders.[17] In the area of German disarmament the French made several important concessions which would prove detrimental to their country's security. First of all, it was agreed to withdraw the Interallied Control Commission at the earliest possible date, and the French also relinquished their demand for a permanent committee of inspection which would verify the demilitarization of the Rhineland.[18] Secondly, Briand agreed to transfer the upcoming disarmament talks from military to civilian

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[16]Gatzke, <u>Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany</u>, 114.

[17]W.M. Jordan, <u>Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 1918-1939</u> (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd, 1943), 50.

[18]Ibid, 56.

hands--a measure which would be likely to lead to a more conciliatory French outlook on this issue.[19] Adopting an even more lenient attitude towards breaches of Versailles' arms clauses, Briand accepted Germany's promises that she would meet some as yet unfulfilled disarmament obligations and ignored other significant arms violations. In addition, the French made a major sacrifice in accepting Germany's demand that military planning and staff talks be forbidden between Locarno members, thereby rendering less effective any future joint operations with Britain and Italy. And finally, Briand agreed to accept the Young Plan, a scheme which settled the reparations problem very much in Germany's favor.

France's greatest loss, however, was contained in the Treaty's principal clauses. What was only implied after the evacuation of the Ruhr was now confirmed in writing: by agreeing to honor the territorial integrity of each Locarno partner, France had formally signed away her right to launch coercive operations against Germany. Moreover, if she did decide to take unilateral military action in order to enforce Versailles, then France now risked being branded as an aggressor by her fellow Locarno signatories as well as being subjected to their possible sanctions. Also, the Treaty carried two important implications which would further undermine Versailles' foundation. First, while Locarno did compel Germany to respect western European borders, it made no mention of

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[19]Gatzke, Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany, 43.

those of eastern Europe, where Germany was known to have grand designs. And because reference to Czechoslovakia and Poland was conspicuous by its absence, it appeared as if France might eventually consider--under the right conditions--the revision of Germany's eastern frontiers.[20] Even though French leaders would try for the next ten years to engineer an "Eastern Locarno" which would similarly freeze Germany's borders with Poland and Czechoslovakia, the Treaty of Locarno nevertheless points strongly ahead thirteen years in the future to Munich. On a more general level, Locarno encouraged German revisionism because it not only demonstrated France's willingness to compromise on Versailles, but also because it gave the appearance of being a replacement for the Treaty, which now seemed somehow obsolete or invalid.[21] Reinforcing this perception, Locarno also created the impression that Germany would now have to be paid in return for her good behavior rather than cooperate out of a sense of duty or under force of law. For all these reasons, A.J.P. Taylor would later describe the Treaty of Locarno as "the greatest triumph of appeasement" of the 1920's.[22]

Few in France at this time would have agreed with Taylor, for the second half of the 20's was dominated by

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[20] A.J.P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York: Athenum, 1961), p. 55.

[21] Lawrence Lafore, The End of Glory: An Interpretation of the Origins of World War II (New York: J.B. Lippencott and Co. , 1970), p. 42

[22] Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War, p. 55.

the "spirit of Locarno," a popular outbreak of goodwill, optimism, idealism, pacifism, internationalism and wishful thinking which helped blind France to the danger posed by Germany and her revision of Versailles. A natural reaction to the excessive Franco-German antagonism of the first half of the 1920's, the "spirit of Locarno" carried the nation to the opposite extreme, lulling France into a false sense of security by creating the illusion that the German problem had finally been solved. After Locarno it became unfashionable to question Germany's sincerity or her motives, or to point out her voluminous treaty violations, particularly in the area of disarmament.[23] Those who dared to draw attention to German transgressions (mainly rightists) were usually branded as warmongers. Guided by such attitudes, French leaders like Briand (whom Clemenceau called "le chef d'orchestre du defaitisme français") played directly into Stresemann's hands.[24] For France, it was an era of illusions.

The Strategy of the Franco-German Entente

The "spirit of Locarno" prepared the way for the second stage of France's German policy, the strategy of the Franco-German entente. The Treaty of Locarno itself represented only the first important step in the Republic's efforts to arrive at a balance of power with Germany which

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[23] J.H. Morgan, Assize of Arms, xiii.

[24] Clemenceau, The Grandeur and Misery of Victory, 367.

would satisfy both countries. This search for a compromise solution to the age-old Franco-German conflict would continue at least until April of 1934, and arguably up until the very beginning of the war itself. The basic idea behind such an entente was to guarantee French security by enmeshing Germany in a network of treaties and agreements which would confine her ambitions within limits acceptable to France. In essence, this strategy simply represented an attempt to reconcile French security with Germany's great power status. German cooperation in this plan was to be secured through offers of treaty revision as well as various other enticements, such as economic incentives. Ideally, these concessions were to have been limited in scale, stopping short of seriously endangering French security. Unfortunately for France, however, the events of the next fifteen years would prove the left's expectations to be totally unrealistic: Germany's ambitions would turn out to be almost limitless, and nothing that the French did would prove capable of preventing their realization.

The decade from 1924 to 1934 abounds with examples of French attempts to reach an accord with Germany. The most notorious of these (besides Locarno) took place in early 1926 at an innocuous roadside cafe in the Swiss town of Thoiry, where Briand and Stresemann met secretly to discuss another Franco-German deal. The proposed arrangement was atypical of others of its kind in two ways. First of all,

it involved the sacrifice of several clauses of Versailles not in exchange for the usual reassurances of Germany's good intentions, but for the sum of half a million gold marks. In return for this amount, the French government (which was experiencing a financial crisis at that particular time) was prepared to grant the termination of the occupation of the Rhineland, the return of the Saar and the withdrawl of the Interallied Control Commission, all to take place immediately.[25] The second reason why this proposed transaction differed from other Franco-German agreements of this era was its extraordinary unpopularity among the great mass of the French people. Even the delusion surrounding the "spirit of Locarno" could not obscure the extremely prodigal and one-sided nature of Briand's offer. When the details of the bargain reached the press, the resulting public outcry forced Briand to abandon his scheme.

The 1930's saw the rise of two French leaders who would preoccupy themselves to a large extent with the pursuit of a Franco-German entente: Edouard Daladier and Pierre Laval. In particular it was Laval's excessively practical, amoral approach to foreign affairs which would prove to be especially conducive to the trend towards accomodation with Germany, and in the mid 30's his conduct of the country's foreign policy would produce disastrous conse-

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[25] Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, Les Relations Franco-Allemandes de 1914 à 1939 (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1965), 2:48.

quences for French security. In 1931, Foreign Minister Laval began his diplomatic career by suggesting an arrangement which typified French efforts to reach an understanding with Germany during this era. Offering $150,000,000 worth of American, British and French credits to the financially beleaguered Weimar government, Laval demanded in return that Germany sign a nonaggression pact with France, freeze military spending for the next ten years, and renounce any intention of rearming, of revising her eastern frontiers or of forming a customs union with Austria.[26] Predictably, the offer was refused. Once again, the French had tried to bribe Germany into reaffirming what she had already promised in Versailles.

One of the most significant examples of French efforts to conclude an entente with Germany occurred in 1933 under the guidance of Prime Minister Daladier. This was the so-called "Four Power Pact," a proposed agreement between France, Great Britain, Germany and Italy which recommended that the four nations (1) consult on relevant questions, (2) try to act within the framework of the League Covenant in order to keep the peace, (3) examine the disarmament issue among themselves, and (4) consult on economic issues. In spite of its references to League procedure, the real importance of the accord lay in the fact that it represented an acknowledgement of German--and Italian--revisionist ambi-

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[26]Herbert Tint, The Decline of French Patriotism, 1870-1940 (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1964),188.

tions.[27] In essence, the Pact amounted to little more than an agreement between the four great western powers to decide European issues among themselves, in effect ignoring the wishes of both the League and the lesser nations, as was later done at Munich.[28] Although the Four Power Pact won a great deal of support in France, it was never ratified by the Chamber of Deputies and was immediately abandoned and forgotten after the fall of the Daladier government which sponsored it (Hitler having rejected the Pact as well). The journalist Genevieve Tabouis, one of the most acute observers of the European diplomatic scene between the wars, recalled the atmosphere which permeated the country at the time of the Four Power Pact:

> I reflected that there was an unmistakeable current of feeling in all sections, the Chamber, the Senate, the banks, among the French people, in favor of a political understanding, regardless of the price, with the two dictators--so long as war was averted. The little countries, it seemed, allies as well as the others, would have to look out for themselves.[29]

From Stresemann to Hitler

Although France's desire for an entente with Germany remained as strong as ever, the sudden worsening of the political situation in the Weimar Republic around 1929 signalled the end of the "spirit of Locarno" on both sides of

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[27] Duroselle, Relations Franco-Allemandes, 3:5.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Genevieve Tabouis, They Called Me Cassandra (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), 165.

the Rhine. The events now transpiring in Germany filled Frenchmen with apprehension for the future and demonstrated to many inveterate Locarnoites just how badly they had been deceived over the course of the past five years. 1928 saw the German military gain an even stronger hold upon the civil government as Marshal Hindenburg was elected president of the Republic. To make matters worse, the Ministry of War was given to a general. The death of Stresemann in 1929 brought the publication of his memoirs, a document which shocked many in France with its frank and revealing confessions of the true motives and objectives of German foreign policy. That same year witnessed the outbreak of a particularly violent eruption of German nationalism, in part manifested in the form of a rabid anti-French propaganda campaign and redoubled efforts to obstruct Versailles' execution. The next year Germany launched a campaign demanding the remilitarization of the Rhineland and the return of the Saar and the lost territories. Coming as it did immediately upon the heels of the evacuation of the last French troops from the Rhineland in June of 1930 (five years ahead of schedule, as was agreed at Locarno), the French were particularly shocked and disappointed by this response to their gesture of goodwill.[30] And just two and a half months later, France would receive the biggest shock of all: Hitler's National Socialists made huge gains in the September elec-

[30]Bonnet, Quai d'Orsay, 92.

tions, winning 6,356,000 votes and 107 seats in the Reichstag, up from only 800,000 votes and twelve seats in 1928.[31] Finally, 1931 saw Germany's first effort at revising the Treaty's territorial clauses when she attempted to form a customs union with Austria as a prelude to *Anschluss*. The crisis was defused by French financial and diplomatic pressure on both countries--one of France's last active measures of resistance to German revisionism during the interwar period.

Surprisingly, the advent of Hitler was greeted with relative calm in France.[32] This attitude of composure can to a large degree be explained by the fact that the French had become so shell shocked by the torrent of bad news from Germany that by the time Hitler took power in 1932-33 they had come to expect the worst from every German leader, no matter who he was.[33] After all, reasoned the French, Hitler probably couldn't be much worse than von Schleicher or von Papen, especially since he would almost certainly bring with him the same familiar revisionist foreign policy as his predecessors.[34] From the French point of view, then, there seemed to be little need to make any fundamental dip-

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Elizabeth R. Cameron, *Prologue to Appeasement: A Study in French Foreign Policy* (Washington D.C.: American Council on Foreign Affairs, 1942), 16.

[33] Alexander Werth, *France in Ferment* (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1934), 23.

[34] Tabouis, *They Called Me Cassandra*, 152.

lomatic adjustment in response to Hitler's advent.[35] To a certain extent, some in France even welcomed the Führer's arrival, believing that once he began to transform his bizarre ideas into reality, the Anglo-Americans would be so revolted by the resulting display of Nazi barbarity that they would renounce their sympathy towards German revisionism once and for all.[36]

The Disarmament Conference

One of the factors which led the French to receive Hitler's rise in such a cool manner was the approach of the long awaited Disarmament Conference, which finally got underway in 1932 after years of preliminary discussions. Although the events which had taken place in Germany during the past four years had greatly disappointed the French, they were still able to look ahead to the Disarmament Conference as the best--although perhaps the last--opportunity to reach a peaceful solution to the German problem. If Germany could be induced to sign an agreement which would permanently fix the level of her armed forces at a certain point (which the French hoped would be considerably less than or at least equal to their own), then the security of France would be assured. But if the Germans could not be persuaded to agree to such an arrangement, then an arms race

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[35] Maurice Vaïsse, Securité d'Abord: La Politique Française en Matière de Désarmament, 9 Decembre 1930-17 Avril 1934 (Paris: Éditions Peotone, 1981), 358.

[36] Tabouis, They Called Me Cassandra, 152.

would inevitably ensue--a race which the French knew they could never win against the vast power of German industry. This scenario offered only two possible responses: France could either do nothing and accept German domination of the continent or else launch a preventive war while she still possessed a military advantage over Germany.

The roots of the Disarmament Conference lay buried thirteen years in the past, in the Treaty of Versailles. The relevant clause of the Treaty, Article thirteen, stated that the disarmament of Germany was to be merely a prelude to the general disarmament of all the major powers at a later date.[37] Although the clause was originally inserted at the behest of President Wilson mainly in order to make the fact of their own disarmament more acceptable to the Germans, it also corresponded to the desire of each of the Allies to eventually reduce their military burdens to the lowest possible level.[38] However, the French concept of disarmament differed fundamentally from that of the Anglo-Americans in two important respects: first, it stipulated that Germany's demilitarization was to be permanent, and secondly, that the Allies' own eventual disarmament (or at least that of France) would be halted at a level still considerably above that of Germany's military strength as specified

[37]Wolfers, Britain and France between the Two Wars, 41.

[38]Thomas E. Boyle, "France, Great Britain and German Disarmament, 1914-1927" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, 1972), 13.

by Versailles.[39] Thus, the French hoped to gain permanent security against Germany by institutionalizing the artificial military superiority originally conferred upon them by the Treaty. Vowing never to disarm until their country's security had been assured, the French leaders of the day insisted upon "securité d'abord."[40] "Arbitrage, securité, désarmament"--this, they insisted, was the crucial sequence of events for France during the first half of the 30's.[41] These two catchphrases would quickly become the all-pervasive leitmotifs of French policy at the Disarmament Conference.

However, once the Conference got underway in February of 1932, the French found that a huge gap separated their own ideas on disarmament from those of the other great powers, and especially from those of Germany. As the months wore on, it became increasingly obvious to French leaders that they would have to modify their position if they hoped to reach any kind of arms accord with Germany at all. Therefore, towards the end of 1932 the French delegation was forced to make a major retreat by accepting Germany's demand for equality of rights in the matter of armaments. The Germans now made all further progress in the negotiations dependent upon the fulfillment of this single condi-

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[39]André Tardieu, France in Danger! A Great Statesman's Warning, trans. Gerald Griffin (London: Dennis Archer, 1935), 51.

[40]Vaïsse, Securité d'Abord, 8.

[41]Ibid, 74.

tion. But while the French admitted that, in theory, the Germans did possess the right to equality of status in armaments, they continued to resist the idea that Germany was entitled in actual reality to exact parity in armaments with France (that is, to the same type and number of arms).[42] Along with Hitler's determination to achieve a full-scale rearmament of Germany, it was to be the refusal of France to accept the German disarmament thesis in its entirety which more than any other factor brought about the collapse of the Conference in April of 1934.

Like the Germans, the French cherished their own set of conditions which they considered to be indispensable to any arms agreement. First, they preferred to see disarmament come about by the reduction of French military forces to a level somewhat greater than those granted to Germany by Versailles.[43] Although equality of status could otherwise have been achieved either through allowing Germany to rearm to the level of France or by simultaneous French disarmament and German rearmament, French leaders were particularly anxious to avoid legally sanctioning German rearmament--a step which they regarded as tantamount to opening a veritable Pandora's Box.[44] Secondly, any arms accord would have to impose absolute and inviolable limits upon German

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[42]Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 151.

[43]Vaïsse, Securité d'Abord, 540.

[44]Ibid.

armaments as well as insure against the possible violations of these limits.[45] For example, such an agreement would have to compensate for France's inferior manpower and industrial potential vis-à-vis Germany by permitting the French to maintain a larger army.[46] This would serve as a safeguard against Germany's ability to produce a rapid and massive military buildup as a prelude to aggression. Accordingly, one of the ideas which the French took great pains to advance at the Conference was that the size of each nation's military forces should correspond to the particular needs and capabilities of that country.[47] And finally, the French delegation also insisted that any disarmament treaty would have to be accompanied by firm military and diplomatic commitments to French security by the other European powers.[48] Unfortunately for France, all of these demands would prove to be irreconcilable with Hitler's ambitions.

The French introduced numerous disarmament plans based upon these guidelines. Several of the nation's most prominent political and diplomatic figures (Edouard Herriot, André Tardieu, Leon Bourgeois, Joseph Paul-Boncour) sponsored a scheme for the creation of an international peacekeeping force which would be put at the disposal of the League and

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[45] Ibid, 560.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Lafore, The End of Glory, 42.

[48] Vaïsse, Securité d'Abord, 560.

equipped with the most modern and powerful weapons. This idea, however, came to nothing. Perhaps the most notable French disarmament proposal was the celebrated Herriot-Paul-Boncour or "Constructive" Plan. This scheme called for a progressive near equalization of all European armed forces to take place over a four year period, after which each power would be allowed to maintain a 200,000 man short term conscript army which would resemble a home defense militia much more closely than it would a conventional army.[49] According to the Constructive Plan, the destruction of the heaviest weapons was compulsory, but each nation--including Germany--would be permitted to possess light tanks up to sixteen tons, new artillery pieces up to 105 mm and older heavy guns up to 155 mm.[50] The catch, however, involved naval and air forces, for here Germany would still be compelled to obey her old Versailles restrictions while the other powers would each be allowed to keep a large navy and a five hundred plane air force.[51] Hitler's response to this offer was entirely predictable. After warning that Germany would withdraw from both the League and the Disarmament Conference if she were not granted unconditional equality of arms, Hitler carried out his threat in November of 1933.

France's worst fear had come true. If Germany left

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[49]Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 150.

[50]Ibid.

[51]Ibid.

the Conference without signing an accord which fixed a ceiling to her military growth, then she would without doubt immediately embark upon a program of rapid and unchecked rearmament. Faced with this fact, the French were forced to move still closer to Germany's demand for equality of arms and away from schemes which attempted to preserve their artificial military superiority. Now the choice was simply one between limited or unlimited German rearmament. In addition, they also felt that it was vitally important to make every possible effort to reach an arms accord not just to prevent Germany's military expansion, but also in order to avoid being blamed for the breakdown of negotiations by their allies and by world opinion.[52] If Germany did not return to the Conference and began to rearm, then France would need the support of these allies more than ever.

Therefore, beginning in December of 1933, the French initiated a series of generous proposals designed to lure the Germans back to the conference table. For instance, they tried to break the stalemate by offering to reduce the size of the French air force by fifty per cent over a four year period in exchange for Germany's acceptance of the Constructive Plan.[53] After Hitler declined to accept this proposal, Prime Minister Daladier agreed to sanction Germa-

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[52]France, Les Événements Survenus en France de 1933 à 1945. Témoinages et Documents Recueilles par la Commission de Enquête Parlementaire (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947), 3:810.

[53]Jordan, Britain, France, and the German Problem, 152.

ny's limited rearmament provided that she sign an "Eastern Locarno" and renounce her demand for the return of the Saar.[54] Once again, the offer was refused. The French finally gave in to Hitler's insistence upon equality of status in 1934, asking in return only that Germany first submit to a four year "trial period" during which she was to demonstrate her honorable and peaceful intentions.[55] But not even these very liberal terms could satisfy the dictator. In February of 1935, nearly ten months after the unsuccessful conclusion of the Conference, a hopeless, last ditch effort by Prime Minister Pierre Laval to trade arms parity for Germany's signature on an Eastern Locarno would also meet with Hitler's rejection.[56]

The End of the Disarmament Conference and the Note of April 17, 1934

By April of 1934, nearly everyone in the French goverment had come to realize that Hitler had never really been interested in equality of rights or in arms parity. Rather, his true objective had always been no less than the establishment of the greatest military force in Europe. Germany had participated in the Conference for two reasons

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[54]William Evans Scott, Alliance against Hitler: The Origins of the Franco-Soviet Pact (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1962), 151.

[55]Tardieu, France in Danger!, 76.

[56]Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 152.

only: first, to buy time while she began to rearm in secret, and secondly, in order to furnish a pretext which would justify this rearmament. Although it had taken nearly two years, France had come very close to meeting in full Hitler's demand for equal rights in armaments. Only her insistence upon accompanying guarantees of security separated the two sides, but this difference was more than enough for Hitler to use as an excuse for not returning to the Conference.

With the breakdown of the disarmament negotiations at the end of 1933, the French began to ponder the alternatives which were left to them. Both information from France's military intelligence service (the so-called Deuxième Bureau) and inflated budget figures released by the German government in early 1934 now confirmed the suspicion that Germany was beginning to rearm in earnest.[57] A variety of opinions on what to do about this situation emerged from within the French government. The advice of the military was divided: Marshal Pétain, then Minister of War, was still in favor of trying to conclude an arms agreement with Hitler, but General Weygand, the army's chief of staff, had always opposed such an accord, and now advocated that France break off the useless negotiations and take active measures to put an end to Germany's rearmament.[58] Counsel from the

[57]Ibid.

[58]Vaïsse, <u>Securité d'Abord</u>, 558.

left was singularly useless: Leon Blum, the voice of socialism, suggested that France disarm totally, unilaterally and immediately--an act which he claimed would carry such moral force that all the other powers would feel compelled to disarm as well. Both the Foreign Minister, Louis Barthou, and France's ambassador to Germany, François-Poncet, were in favor of making further efforts to reach an agreement with Germany.[59] But the great majority of Prime Minister Gaston Doumergue's cabinet were of the opinion that it would be pointless to continue the negotiations when Hitler was determined to rearm no matter what.

Therefore, in April of 1934 the French government decided to leave the Disarmament Conference (several last ditch attempts to conclude an arms treaty with Germany would be made over the course of the next year, but without any real hope of success). Accordingly, Foreign Minister Barthou drafted the famous "Note of April 17th," which merely stated that France intended to break off the negotiations and instead look to her own means for security.[60] It was time for France to take a new approach in solving the German problem, for Germany would now grow stronger with each passing day. The architect of this new approach was to be Louis Barthou, the most able and determined French leader since Poincaré, and like Poincaré, dedicated to containing

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[59]Duroselle, Relations Franco-Allemands, 3:8.

[60]Albrecht-Carré, France, Europe, and the Two World Wars, 257.

Germany's drive for domination. Hitler had issued his challenge, and Barthou had accepted. What would France do now?

CHAPTER III

FRANCE AND GERMAN DISARMAMENT, 1919-1927

Knowing little or nothing of French policy towards Germany during the 1920's and 30's, one would expect that the disarmament of Germany would have assumed the utmost importance for French leaders. After all, one might reason, if Germany was denied the tools of physical force, then it would be impossible for her to threaten France or her neighbors to the east. As it turned out, however, the French offered less than a spirited defense of Versailles' disarmament clauses against the forces of German revisionism. As a result, these clauses were slowly eaten away until, by 1927, the way had been almost completely cleared for Germany's rearmament. How was the disarmament of Germany carried out, and why did it fail to provide France with lasting security against German aggression? The purpose of chapter three is to attempt to answer these questions, as well as to examine France's failure to preserve the Treaty's disarmament clauses within the context of French appeasement.

France Doubts the Value of German Disarmament

French leaders were surprisingly skeptical as to the value of German disarmament as a means of guaranteeing their

country's security.[1] All but a few in France during the 20's and early 30's firmly believed that Germany could never be kept disarmed for any significant length of time.[2] What was needed, they argued, was not a military but a "moral disarmament" of Germany, a fundamental transformation of basic national attitudes which would end forever her militaristic and imperialistic proclivities.[3] Only through such a psychological metamorphosis could the German problem be truly resolved. But this kind of radical transformation could not be forced upon a people; rather, it would have to take place within the hearts of the Germans themselves, naturally and sincerely. Until this change came about, however, other means of containing German aggression would have to be found. As imperfect a solution as it was, disarmament nevertheless constituted one obvious weapon which France could use to help check Germany's drive for European hegemony. While acknowledging that it could not bring lasting security, the French did believe that the disarmament of Germany could provide them with a "breathing space" of perhaps fifteen or even twenty years during which France would not have to contemplate the prospect of anoth-

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[1] Judith M. Hughes, To the Maginot Line: The Politics of French Military Preparations in the 1920's (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 158.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Thomas E. Boyle, "France, Great Britain and German Disarmament, 1914-1927 (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York, 1972), 57.

er German invasion.[4] Moreover, this respite would (in theory, at least) give the French enough time to produce a more effective security plan before they once again found themselves menaced by the threat of German arms.

The great majority of Frenchmen were convinced of the impossibility of long-term German disarmament for several reasons. First of all, it would be too easy for the Germans to hide large stockpiles of arms left over from the war. And since the Allies had no way of knowing exactly how much war material Germany possessed at the end of hostilities, they also could not know how many of the remaining weapons had to be confiscated or destroyed, as well as how many of them had been hidden or had found their way into private hands (such as those of the infamous "military associations" which sprang up after Germany's defeat).[5] For example, Germany had manufactured over ten million rifles during the war, but the Allies were able to collect only 1.3 million of these, the rest being scattered in thousands of hiding places all over Germany.[6] In addition, France and Britain had to contend with the problem of Germany's clandestine manufacture of arms. In the five years from 1925 to 1930 alone, German factories secretly produced seven

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[4]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 86.

[5]W.M. Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd, 1943), 134.

[6]J.H. Morgan, Assize of Arms: The Disarmament of Germany and Her Rearmament (1919-1939) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 21.

times the number of artillery pieces allowed by the Treaty and ten times the number of machine guns.[7] Large-scale arms violations such as these often prompted French leaders to evoke the example of Napoleon's notoriously unsuccessful attempt to disarm the Prussians after their defeat at Auerstadt and Jena in 1806. Marshal Foch was particularly doubtful of the prospects of enforcing Germany's disarmament, and, like the overwhelming majority of his colleagues, seemed to abandon the idea without first seeing whether or not it would work in actual practice. The Allies, insisted Foch, could

> no more limit the number of men trained to arms in Germany than the Germans could limit the output of coal in England. And as for the possibility of checking and limiting guns, rifles, lorries, etc., it would be quite impossible.[8]

On another occasion, Foch asserted that

> Disarmament, one cannot repeat too often, gives us only a temporary, precarious, fictitious security. It is almost impossible to prevent Germany from rearming in secret. If [Germany] has the will to wage war, nothing will prevent it from finding the means and nothing proves that these means will not be effective.[9]

This intense pessimism in regard to the efficacy of German was to become something of a self-fulfilling prophecy: believing from the outset that any attempt to keep Germany

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[7]Georges Clemenceau, The Grandeur and Misery of Victory, trans. P.M. Atkinson (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930), 337-338.

[8]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 82.

[9]Jere Clemens King, Foch versus Clemenceau: France and German Dismemberment, 1918-1919 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1960), 22.

disarmed would inevitably be doomed to failure, French leaders consequently did not overexert themselves in their efforts to carry out what they considered to be a hopeless task.

The Issue of Permanent Military Control

One of the principal reasons why the French viewed the prospect of German disarmament with such gloom was that the Treaty of Versailles failed to provide for the establishment of a permanent system of inspection and investigation which would monitor Germany's compliance to the Treaty's arms clauses. Versailles did contain Article 213, a provision which called for the creation of a League commission of verification, but the idea never got past the planning stages in the League Council due to the extraordinary number of objections which it provoked.[10] Although the Allies had agreed at the peace conference to include Article 213 in the text of the Treaty, the issue of control of German disarmament became increasingly sensitive with the passage of time due to the growing Anglo-American sympathy towards Germany.

The main bone of contention between the three powers on this subject was the insistance of France that military control be permanent; Britain and the United States, on the other hand, favored only a short term verification program.

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[10] Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 147.

In spite of their opposition to permanent military control, however, the British initially took at least as great an interest in Germany's disarmament as did the French (the former were more concerned with eliminating military hardware and the industry which produced it while the latter were more anxious to curb German military manpower).[11] In general, the two nations disagreed less on the issue of disarmament than on any of the other postwar problems, demonstrating particularly close cooperation whenever they were confronted with instances of German arms violations or obstruction of the disarmament process. Nevertheless, when disagreements did occur between the two countries on this matter, they proved to be a major source of discouragement for the French in their already uncertain efforts to enforce Germany's disarmament.[12]

After numerous unsuccessful attempts to persuade the League to establish a permanent military control organization, the French finally gave up all hope of realizing this goal by the end of 1926.[13] With her entry into the League of Nations and her signing of Locarno, Germany gained a new acceptance and a new respectability within the European community which made it nearly impossible to subject her to

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[11] J. Néré, The Foreign Policy of France from 1914 to 1945, trans. Translance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 32.

[12] Jordan, Great Britain, France, and the German Problem, 149.

[13] Boyle, "France, Britain and German Disarmament", 190.

the indignity of being regulated by a foreign authority. As Briand would later recall, "nobody really thought of carrying out any investigation of a League member."[14] The French therefore had to settle for the short-term solution offered by the Treaty, which stipulated that an Interallied Control Commission be sent to Germany only for the length of time required to complete her disarmament. Thus, once the Control Commission finished its work and departed the country, Germany would be left totally free of all allied arms supervision--a fact which meant that she would also be free to begin rearming. The Allies, then, were essentially entrusting the Germans to maintain their own disarmament.

The Interallied Control Commission and the Task of Disarmament

In the atmosphere of anti-German feeling which dominated France during the first months of peace, a significant portion of French opinion advocated the total abolition of all German land, sea and air forces. Most French leaders, however, never seriously considered such a plan, mainly due to the objections of the British and the Americans, but also because they knew that the Germans themselves would never stand for the complete elimination of their beloved army.[15] In addition, the Allies felt that the

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[14] Hans W. Gatzke, Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1954), 70.

[15] Boyle, "France, Britain and German Disarmament", 2.

presence of a German army would provide a reliable safeguard against the communist agitation which was threatening the Weimar Republic at that time. It was therefore decided that Germany would be allowed to maintain military forces which would be adequate to insure her internal security but at the same time too small to constitute a threat to her neighbors. More specifically, this meant a 100,000 man professional army comprising seven divisions and based upon a twelve year term of service. According to the Treaty of Versailles, this new German Army was forbidden to train a reserve corps or to possess either tanks or heavy artillery; military aircraft of all types were also prohibited, and the German Navy was all but eliminated. The Allies now set about the task of reducing the German military units which existed in 1919 down to these specifications.

The task of supervising Germany's disarmament was given to the Interallied Control Commission (ICC). Consisting of 383 officers and a staff of 737 men representing the major allied powers, the Control Commission was divided into eight sections: a headquarters located in Berlin and seven other bases stationed near the operational centers of each of the Reichswehr's seven military districts.[16] The Commission was charged with three basic duties. First, it was to verify that the number of troops in the German Army was brought down to the limit established by Versailles

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[16]Morgan, Assize of Arms, 22.

(this quickly became the most important goal for the French, who were above all worried about the number of German soldiers under arms rather than the amount of training they received or the quantity or quality of their equipment).[17] Secondly, the ICC was instructed to locate all war material in excess of the treaty restrictions, including rifles, machine guns, artillery pieces, tanks, airplanes, ammunition, fortifications and military facilities of all sorts (barracks, instructional schools, supply depots, etc.). And finally, the Control Commission was given the difficult task of stripping German industry of its war potential.

How did the Commission carry out the disarmament of Germany? The procedure which it followed most often in the course of its work involved the inspection of a site by either one or several ICC officers in order to uncover suspected caches of illegal arms or to verify the existence of excess troops or outlawed fortifications. If possible, these inspections were usually carried out without warning so that the Germans would not have time to further conceal or disguise their violations. In order to find hidden war material, the control officers relied heavily on intelligence information gathered by German informers (quite often left wing laborers), as well as on their own exhaustive reconnaissance efforts, expert intuition, and plain good luck. The Control Commission checked the Reichswehr's strength

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[17] Boyle, "France, Britain and German Disarmament", 4.

simply by visiting each army unit and counting the number of soldiers listed on pay sheets, duty rosters and other documents.

The Commission's third principal function, the elimination of Germany's war industry, would prove to be an enormous and complex undertaking. The Treaty specified that all factories and machinery which were designed exclusively for the manufacture of armaments were to be destroyed; those which were capable of both military and civilian production would be converted to "peaceful" industrial output.[18] In addition, such dual-purpose machinery was also to be dispersed throughout the country for good measure (however, war material of this nature, such as binoculars, field telephones, wireless sets, etc., remained outside of the ICC's jurisdiction).[19] In order to eliminate the military potential of German industry, the Control Commission had to inspect not only each of Germany's seven thousand arms factories, but also each and every piece of machinery in these factories (there were twenty thousand of them in the Krupp works alone).[20] These plants and their machinery were then earmarked either for conversion, dispersion or destruction, but in no case did the Commission perform the actual, physical act of disarmament. This task was left up

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[18]Morgan, Assize of Arms, 28.

[19]Ibid, 40.

[20]Ibid, 31.

to the German government itself. If it refused to obey the ICC's instructions, then the latter notified the allied governments, which were then responsible for taking the appropriate enforcement measures.

German Obstruction

Unfortunately for the Allies, the Control Commission would be forced to make many such reports of Germany's obstruction of the disarmament process in the course of its duties. Throughout the Commission's stay in Germany, both the Reichswehr and the Weimar government would constantly attempt to evade the Treaty's disarmament clauses and block the ICC's investigations. Occasionally, the Germans would cooperate with the Control Commission's disarmament efforts for brief periods (usually in order to win allied concessions), but in general, German cooperation in the disarmament process had to be extracted through acts of force, or, more commonly, the threat of force. The fact that the Commission would take seven years to complete the task of disarmament (in 1919 it had estimated that the job would require only six months) is indicative of both the massive scale of German arms violations and the extent of the resistance offered to the ICC's activities.

The Reichswehr and the Weimar government displayed great ingenuity in their evasion and obstruction campaign, accomplishing their goal by a number of different methods. The Germans could legally delay the disarmament proceedings

by appealing the Control Commission's decision to inspect a given site either directly to the allied governments or to their representative body, the Conference of Ambassadors.[21] Far more often, however, the Germans would resort to illegal means in order to disrupt the Commission's work. For example, they would quite often simply refuse to allow the control officers access to the site of a suspected violation, either delaying the inspection until the incriminating evidence could be concealed or removed, or else providing the ICC officers with a carefully guided tour of the facilities designed to skirt sensitive areas. The Reichswehr even went so far as to set up a secret organization in order to obstruct the Control Commission's work more efficiently.[22] The members of this association were assigned to follow control officers on their investigative rounds and give advance warning of the destinations of their surprise inspections (failing this, the German officers were instructed to accompany their allied counterparts and supervise the visits themselves).

In addition to this interference with their duties, the members of the ICC were also subject to verbal and even physical abuse by the Reichswehr and by right wing extremists. The French delegation in particular was singled out for this sort of treatment, with at least two of their

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[21]Boyle, "France, Britain and German Disarmament", 74.

[22]Morgan, Assize of Arms, 113.

number being murdered by "unknown assailants."[23] The Control Commission was absolutely powerless to combat these abuses just as it was unable to respond to German obstruction in general. The enforcement of disarmament policy remained the exclusive province of the allied governments; the ICC could only carry on with its investigation and report any German interference to London and Paris. And very often the response of the allied governments to these reports of German interference was so weak that the obstruction was encouraged rather than deterred.

The Germans also employed more subtle, less heavy-handed tactics in their attempts to evade the Treaty's disarmament clauses. Taking advantage of the presence of sympathetic and practical-minded neighbors, Germany enlisted these countries as accomplices in her plot to circumvent Versailles. The most notorious example of Germany's cooperation with another country in order to evade the Treaty's arms clauses was the Reichswehr's involvement with the USSR during the 1920's. The arrangement between the two nations allowed Germany to secretly manufacture forbidden arms like poison gas and airplanes in the Soviet Union, as well as other war material (such as ammunition) in quantities far excess of the Versailles limitations. In addition, this agreement permitted the Reichswehr to carry out clandestine training exercises in the USSR, thereby enabling it to gain

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[23] Gatzke, Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany, 27.

valuable tactical and strategic experience (in return for all this, the Soviets received part of the manufactured weapons). Germany also contracted various countries (such as Austria, Holland and Hungary) to produce arms for her, or else secretly turned out war material herself on a small scale and shipped it to these countries to be stored in warehouses. One of the most infamous incidents of German arms violations involving foreign countries occurred in 1928 when a trainload of machine gun parts destined for Germany was discovered in the Hungarian town of St. Gothard.[24]

But the most common way in which the Germans evaded the Treaty's disarmament clauses was simply to hide weapons within Germany itself. Time and time again, control officers turned up major caches of illegal war material: in December of 1924 the ICC discovered 113,000 rifles hidden in a factory at Wittenau;[25] half a million gas masks were uncovered in a single depot in Hanover--just after the Weimar government declared that it possessed only 120,000 of them;[26] in 1921 parts for eighteen hundred complete machine guns were found in a barracks in Spandau;[27] in Heidenau,

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[24]Jordan, Britain, France, and the German Problem, 100.

[25]Morgan, Assize of Arms, 335.

[26]Georges Castellan, Le Rearmement Clandestin du Reich, 1930-1935, Vu par le 2e Bureau de l'État-Major Français (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1954), 413.

[27]Ibid.

Saxony, British Control Officers discovered hundreds of howitzers concealed behind a brick wall in a factory;[28] and in the Konigsburg fortress a hidden reserve of heavy artillery was unearthed which was bigger than Germany's entire artillery force in 1914.[29] For every one of these violations that were uncovered, the Control Commission could be sure that there were many others which escaped detection. The only way to know for certain just how much war material remained hidden was to obtain a detailed and accurate inventory of all the arms in Germany's possession (the Allies repeatedly asked for such a list, but the German government predictably declined to oblige them). In the absence of this information, the ICC could only try to conduct its inspections as thoroughly and as frequently as possible.

The Problem of the Reichswehr

Verifying the number of troops under arms in the Reichswehr was a much more important task for the French than eliminating its excess weaponry. They had always maintained that the existence of a large German Army, be it either professional or conscript, constituted the only real danger to French security. At the peace conference this had been the rationale behind restricting Germany to a highly trained but small force of 100,000 men rather than allowing her to keep a large conscript army whose short term of serv-

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[28] Morgan, Assize of Arms, 35.

[29] Ibid.

ice would enable the Reichswehr to build up a mass of trained reserves. Accordingly, French disarmament strategy in regard to military manpower focused primarily upon preventing Germany from acquiring the reserve corps which would constitute the weight behind the spearhead of her highly trained professional army. Conversely, until 1935 Germany's rearmament strategy revolved around the accumulation of such a force. As concerned as the French were with restricting the size of the Reichswehr, the Germans would achieve at least partial success in this goal by the mid 1930's.

In the face of German obstruction, the reduction of the army down to its new 100,000 man limit would prove to be just as difficult a task as eradicating illegal armaments. The Weimar government was extremely slow to complete the army's demobilization; as late as February of 1920, Germany could still boast as many as half a million men under arms.[30] In fact, the Reichswehr's strength never would quite fall to the maximum level set by Versailles. For most of the time between 1920 and 1935 it would number about 120,000 men, twenty per cent in excess of the Treaty limits.[31]

What really upset the French, however, was not so much the existence of twenty thousand additional German soldiers, but the fact that the Reichswehr was employing its entire

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[30]Ibid, 56.

[31]France, Commission de Publication des Documents Relatifs aux Origines de la Guerre 1939-1945, _Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1932-1939_, 1[re] Serie, Tome 4 (Paris: Imprimerie Natiónal, 1963), No. 65, 121.

strength at a term of service considerably lower than the twelve years specified by the Treaty. Soldiers were recruited for only a fraction of the full enlistment period and then put on reserve, thus forming a sizeable pool of experienced manpower which could later be used to construct the framework of a mass army.[32] In effect, the Reichswehr became a vast officer training corps, comprising five times the number of officers specified by Versailles (the Treaty provided for four thousand of them plus 96,000 enlisted men)[33] and enough noncommissioned officers for an army of 300,000.[34] In addition, the short term recruitment of enlisted men (i.e., anywhere from six months to one year in length) was undertaken in order to supplement the meager forces allowed by Versailles. At the command level, the great German general Staff, outlawed by the Treaty, was secretly reconstituted, its different departments concealed within various civil ministries in order to hide it from allied eyes.[35] Virtually all military power was concentrated in the hands of the Chief of the General Staff, von Seeckt, who remained independent of all civilian authority. Most of

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[32] André Tardieu, France in Danger! A Great Statesman's Warning, trans. Gerald Griffin (London: Dennis Archer, 1935), 58.

[33] Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, La Politique Exterieure de la France de 1914 à 1945 (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1968), 182.

[34] Morgan, Assize of Arms, 334.

[35] Ibid, 43-44.

the army's illegal activities were carried out with the knowledge and the sympathy of the Weimar government, which would continue to grant grossly disproportionate sums to the military until its demise in 1932.[36]

The Problem of the Paramilitary Organizations

Another way in which Germany tried to evade the Versailles restrictions on military manpower was through the use of what were generally referred to as "paramilitary organizations," or "military associations." Springing up spontaneously after Germany's defeat, these armed groups of nostalgic, embittered ex-soldiers and disgruntled, restless youths could boast several million members during their heyday in the first half of the 20's. About ten major and dozens of minor paramilitary organizations prowled the country at this time, the most prominent of which were the Freikorps, Stahlhelm, Jung Deutschen Orden, Einwohnerwehr and the "Black Reichswehr" (charged with the task of obstructing allied disarmament efforts, this last group would prove to be especially bothersome to the ICC).[37] Funded in large part by big agriculturalists and industrialists, the military associations also maintained close ties to the Reichswehr, particularly in the case of the Einwohnerwehr, which was

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[36]A.J.P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York: Athenum, 1961), 47.

[37]Fred Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security against Germany, 1919-40" (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1950), 246.

subject to the army's command (in fact, service in this group was considered by the army as the equivalent of service in the Reichswehr itself).[38] In the absence of large numbers of well trained regular troops, the military associations played a vital strategic role for Germany. Besides providing an extra measure of security against internal communist disruption, the paramilitary organizations also constituted an emergency source of manpower in the eventuality of a conflict with Poland or France, as well as a reservoir of partially trained men from which the Reichswehr could draw upon its eventual expansion.

Germany also looked to the national police force, or security police (Sicherheitspolitzei), for the same sort of advantages offered by the military associations. While the Treaty provided for the creation of 150,000 local police (Ordnungspolizei), it strictly forbid the formation of a national police force.[39] In 1919, however, the Weimar government established a corps of 60,000 centrally controlled Sicherheitspolizei (renamed Schutzpolizei, or "Schupos," the next year) along with 92,000 local Ordnungspolizei.[40] Besides the fact that they were placed under the direct control of the central government, what particularly worried the French about these police was that they possessed a

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[38] Morgan, Assize of Arms, 57.

[39] Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1re Serie, Tome 2, No. 390, 714.

[40] Jordan, Britain, France and the German Problem, 145.

very strong military character. To begin with, the Schutzpolizei was a haven for former army officers (especially those from the elite Prussian guard) who had been displaced by the new restrictions on military manpower.[41] Equipped with machine guns, armored cars, and even mortars, light artillery and aircraft, these units were unusually well armed even for a European police force.[42] Furthermore, the Schutzpolizei bore a striking resemblance to the Reichswehr in terms of organization and procedure, employing the same system of pay, rank, promotion, length of service, pensions, etc.[43] In addition, these units received some military training, and approximately one third of them were housed in barracks.[44]

Maintaining that these police amounted to little more than an army in disguise, the French demanded the dissolution of the Schutzpolizei, offering to compensate the Germans by allowing them to increase the number of local Ordnungspolizei to 115,000.[45] But while Germany was quick to capitalize upon the second part of this arrangement, she refused to comply with the Allies' demand that the "Schupos"

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[41] Morgan, Assize of Arms, 58.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid, 355.

[44] John W. Wheeler-Bennet, The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945 (New York: MacMillan and Co., Ltd.,1953), 98.

[45] Jordan, Britain, France and the German Problem, 145.

be abolished. The British and the French then relented, asking only that the German government demilitarize these units, but once again their demands were ignored.[46] Finally the Allies agreed to allow Germany to keep twenty thousand of these militarized police. The Germans, however, decided upon their own figure of 32,000, which the British and the French eventually accepted.[47] This weak and ineffective response to the problem of the Schutzpolizei would turn out to be largely typical of France's efforts to enforce the disarmament of Germany.

The French would be equally unsuccessful in their attempts to eradicate the military associations as they were in their efforts to abolish Germany's militarized police. Frequent allied requests that the groups be disbanded were either ignored or else answered with a host of explanations which tried to justify the existence of these organizations. Most often the Germans cited the danger presented by the internal threat of communist revolution and by the presence of a territorially ambitious Poland to the east. Occasionally, however, they would invoke more creative arguments in favor of the paramilitary associations. Stresemann, for example, insisted that they fulfilled a vital psychological need for the German people, that their abolition would create mass unemployment in Germany and that the organizations

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[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

were a purely domestic concern which remained outside the Treaty's jurisdiction.[48] He even went so far as to say that these groups possessed no military value at all, calling them "sporting" and "athletic" clubs, or units of "special constables," and several times even denied their existence altogether.[49] But even though the Weimar government certainly lacked the will to disband the military associations, it is only fair to point out that it also lacked the power to do so.[50] Because of their close ties to the Reichswehr, the organizations were simply too important and too powerful to be easily disposed of, even by the German government itself.

It is therefore hardly surprising that French efforts to eliminate the paramilitary organizations enjoyed little success. In 1922, for example, the Allied Commander in Chief, General Nollet, mounted a determined campaign to disband the associations which at first seemed to achieve its goals.[51] Within a year, however, the groups reemerged in full strength. By February of 1926, the Allies' repeated and insistent demands for the complete supression of the armed bands were finally met with a promise by the German government to outlaw them. But its decree banning the groups was never really enforced, and only a few of the

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[48] Gatzke, Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany, 66.

[49] Ibid, 26.

[50] Jordan, Britain, France and the German Problem, 144.

[51] Greene, French Military Leadership and Security, 246.

smaller ones were broken up as a token gesture to the Allies.[52] After this failure, the French almost entirely gave up hope of eradicating the paramilitary organizations and instead concentrated merely on ending their ties to the Reichswehr.[53] Although the associations would play a much less prominent role in German life at the end of the decade than at its beginning, this was due not so much to the actions of the Allies but to the more secure diplomatic and political climate which came to Germany during the second half of the 20's. The paramilitary groups, however, would never disappear from the scene entirely, for with the advent of Hitler in 1932-33 all such remaining organizations would be absorbed by the SA. Thus, in this new and more sinister form, the military associations would continue to haunt the French well into the 1930's.

The Course of German Disarmament

The chronology of the ICC's seven year disarmament campaign is extremely assymetrical, with most of the Commission's fruitful activity occurring in the years from 1920 to 1922.[54] During the first months of the disarmament process, the Control Commission's work proceeded slowly: only half a million rifles and a few cannon were confiscated, and the German Army still stood at twice its legal limit

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[52] Gatzke, Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany, 49.

[53] Boyle, "France, Britain and German Disarmament", 173.

[54] Morgan, Assize of Arms, 268.

well into 1920.[55] The ICC's most significant accomplishment during this time was the destruction of a large number of German fortifications.[56] Over the course of the next two years, however, the Commission would make important progress in several areas--so much so, in fact, that by March of 1922 the Commission reported that it appeared as if the bulk of its work had been finished and that, although there still remained much to be done, Germany had for all practical purposes been disarmed.[57]

The ICC's report, however, would turn out to be much too optimistic, for at the end of the year the Commission was confronted by a particularly intense outbreak of evasion and obstruction which would demonstrate just how many arms violations had so far escaped its scrutiny. Particularly serious was the Weimar government's refusal to let the Control Commission begin its inspection of the Reichswehr--a ban which was to remain in effect for two years.[58] In fact, after 1922 the ICC's activities would slow almost to a crawl in relation to the progress it had made since the beginning of military control in 1919. To make matters worse, the British government ordered its delegation (for diplomatic reasons) to suspend operations, thus severely handicapping

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[55] Boyle, "France, Britain and German Disarmament", 51.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Gatzke, Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany, 20.

[58] Jordan, Britain, France and the German Problem, 136.

the future efforts of the remaining officers. 1923 for the most part marked the end of the Commission's activities; during the remaining five years of its tenure in Germany it would accomplish only a fraction of what it had in the previous three.[59]

In order to expedite the now stalled disarmament process, the Allies presented a note to the German government in September of 1922 specifying five major problem ares in which they demanded cooperation: (1) the demilitarization of the Schutzpolizei; (2) the conversion of munitions factories to civilian use; (3) the enumeration of all war material held by Germany and the surrender of all that which was in excess of the treaty limitations; (4) the adoption of the necessary measures by the Weimar government to insure the prohibition of both the import and the export of war material; and (5) the reduction of the number of troops under arms to the level prescribed by the Treaty.[60] The French would now attempt to make future concessions to Germany dependent upon the progress which she made towards fulfilling these five disarmament points. But even this incentive failed to discourage German obstruction and evasion, for as late as January of 1927 (the date of the ICC's departure from Germany), two of these five points still remained

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[59]Morgan, Assize of Arms, 268.

[60]Jordan, Britain, France and the German Problem, 137.

unfulfilled.[61]

The Cartel des Gauches and the Enforcement of German Disarmament

On the whole, the response of French governments (both those on the right and on the left) to the Control Commission's reports of German obstruction must be described as weak and halfhearted. However, the inadequacy of the measures taken to enforce Germany's disarmament becomes particularly evident when examining the Cartel's approach to enforcing the Treaty's arms clauses. Whereas both the right and the left believed that Germany's rearmament was inevitable, the Cartel was also convinced that it would be counterproductive to attempt to institute German disarmament as part of the new European status quo. This idea was consistent with the central theme of the left's policy towards Germany, a strategy which held that France could win her former enemy's friendship and cooperation by initiating a program of limited treaty revision. As the Cartel's leader, Briand was anxious to put this process into motion, and was therefore reluctant to endanger its success by taking punitive against Germany for what he saw as relatively minor treaty violations. In his eyes, all that mattered was that Germany disarmed in the broadest sense of the word--that is, that she was rendered incapable of waging and sustaining war on short notice. As long as the Germans obeyed the spirit

[61]Gatzke, Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany, 68.

of the law, Briand felt that he could look the other way if they occasionally violated its letter; a few arms infractions (which did not endanger French security in any case) could not be allowed to stand in the way of the much larger issue of Franco-German rapprochement. This was the message Briand conveyed to Stresemann at their celebrated lunch at Thoiry in early 1926:

> When I first started working for the elimination of military control, the French War Ministry presented me with heavy folders of documents on German violations. I flung these into a corner and asked to be told the larger issues that still had to be settled, since I had no intention of bothering with such petty details.[62]

The result of ignoring these "petty details" was that thousands of arms infractions went unpunished. Usually the French responded to these violations simply by issuing repeated protests and admonitions to the German government. Often they were left completely unanswered. Briand's handling of the St. Gothard incident in 1928 is typical of the laxity with which the left reacted to German obstruction (the episode was simply referred to the League, where it was immediately buried and forgotten).[63] Although the French did try to make treaty concessions dependent upon Germany's fulfillment of her disarmament obligations, Briand (who dominated the foreign ministry during the second half of the 20's) displayed a fatal tendency to grant these concessions

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[62] Ibid, 56.

[63] Pertinax [André Geraud], The Gravediggers of France: Gamelin, Daladier, Reynaud, Petain and Laval; Military Defeat, Armistice, Counterrevolution (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Co., Inc., 1944), 376.

before Germany had demonstrated any significant progress in carrying out the ICC's instructions. Frequently, mere promises or token gestures of cooperation were enough to satisfy the French government that the Germans would soon meet their demands, and that they had therefore earned their reward. The withdrawal of the Control Commission in January of 1927 before Germany had fully complied with the five point disarmament note of September, 1922 is just one of the many examples of how Briand rewarded and encouraged German resistance to the Treaty's arms clauses. This kind of diplomatic weakness constitutes one of the most common forms of French appeasement.

In view of Briand's lenient attitude towards German disarmament, it would at first seem contradictory to note that he was also responsible for one of the most significant acts of treaty enforcement during the entire interwar period. This was the decision, taken in mid 1925, to delay the evacuation of French army units from the Rhineland's Köln zone of occupation in response to Germany's voluminous disarmament violations, as well as her efforts to obstruct the ICC's investigations. The French had hoped that such a measure would provide the shock necessary to persuade the Germans to allow the disarmament process to continue, for it was well known that the evacuation of the Rhineland stood high on the list of their diplomatic priorites. As it turned out, Briand had correctly anticipated Germany's reaction to his initiative: the postponement of the evacuation elicited

a period of moderate--if temporary--cooperation with the ICC and its investigations. But, like the invasion of the Ruhr two years before, this initial victory was not followed up and exploited. At the Locarno Conference later that summer, Briand promised Stresemann that the French troops would definitely be withdrawn from the Köln zone early in 1926--in spite of the fact that he had no assurance that Germany would continue to cooperate.

Along with the decision to complete the evacuation of the first of the Rhine zones of occupation, other results of the Locarno Conference would have a lethal effect upon the already moribund disarmament campaign. First of all, Briand agreed (against the advice of the military and many of his fellow diplomats) to reduce the staff of the Control Commission and to eliminate all but two of its eight bases as a prelude to its imminent withdrawal.[64] France also made major concessions on the issue of the Schutzpolizei and sanctioned the partial reconstruction of the German general staff as well.[65] And finally it was at Locarno that the French and British gave up their efforts to establish permanent military control in Germany.[66] All of this was done almost exclusively on the oral and written assurances of the German government that it would comply with the five as yet unfulfilled disarmament points

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[64]Gatzke, Stresemann and the Rearmament of Germany, 43.

[65]Ibid.

[66]Ibid.

mentioned in the note of September, 1922. For example, on the question of the paramilitary organizations Germany was required only to issue a declaration stating that there were no ties between the associations and the Reichswehr.[67] The French dealt with the problem of illegal weapons simply by drafting a statement affirming that they "hoped that Germany would promise not to use any forbidden arms."[68] The only positive acts of cooperation by Germany at this time were the demolition of the giant Krupp arms plant and the appointment of a committee to assist the Allies in their remaining disarmament work.[69] With only these two gestures as proof of their sincerity, Briand took the Germans completely at their word, entrusting them to finish in two months what they had been resisting for the previous five years.

In the fifteen months after the end of Locarno until the ICC's departure from Germany in January of 1927, the few investigative operations that the Commission was able to mount met with little or no success.[70] The naval and air arms of the ICC, which had a somewhat easier task than their sister branch and had fared much better, had already completed their mission and left the country in May of 1925. For the next six months the Conference of Ambassa-

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid, 39.

[70] Boyle, "France, Britain and German Disarmament", 173.

dors would take over the role of allied representative in the matter of disarmament. It would be followed in July by a League committee of experts charged with the task of overseeing the completion of the two remaining disarmament points--which remained unfulfilled eight months after the date Stresemann had promised for their completion. The League committee of experts was to spend a largely inactive, ineffectual three years in Germany, departing in 1930. After this point, the question of both German and allied disarmament was taken up in the preliminary sessions of the Disarmament Conference, and then in the Conference itself beginning in April of 1932.

The Balance Sheet of German Disarmament

What was the result of the Allies' seven year effort to disarm Germany? Had Germany been well and truly disarmed? If one interprets the term "German disarmament" in a strict sense as the reduction of Germany's armed forces down to the levels specified by the Treaty of Versailles, then this last question must obviously (in view of the thousands of violations of the Treaty's arms clauses) be answered in the negative. Predictably, this was the way the ICC saw the matter. As one British control officer wrote in the Commission's final report to the allied governments:

> No one who served in Germany on the Control Commission can fail to know that Germany never did fulfill the Disarmament provisions of the Treaty and that she never has been disarmed, materially or morally. The

> plain facts are that Germany has never acknowledged her responsibilities, has never accepted defeat, is determined to rearm in any event, and is merely biding her time.[71]

But if the definition of the word "disarmament" can be loosely interpreted as the inability to wage and sustain war, then one must admit that Germany had, in essence, been disarmed. The new Reichswehr had undeniably been rendered incapable of attack (or even of strong defense) for some time to come. In any case, as Marshal Foch reported to the Chamber Army Commission in February of 1927, Germany had been disarmed as thoroughly as the prevailing conditions had allowed; permanent and complete disarmament, he maintained, was simply impossible.[72]

Among the French, only inveterate Briandistes were satisfied with the results of the disarmament campaign. For the Cartel des Gauches, German disarmament remained a secondary issue at best: security, insisted the left, could not be won by trying to deny Germany the means of aggression, but only by removing the source of that aggression. Thus, according to this frame of mind, the crucial task of France's postwar diplomacy lay in the fostering of Franco-German friendship. The problem of German disarmament therefore had to be resolved as quickly and as quietly as possible, and as a result, the issue became part of the general package of Briand's limited treaty re-

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[71]Morgan, Assize of Arms, xviii.

[72]Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security against Germany", 239.

vision designed to purchase Germany's friendship. Most Frenchmen, however, could not take the matter of German disarmament so lightly. Regarding their "disarmed" neighbor with suspicious and apprehensive eyes, the French nervously awaited the future. The extreme difficulties which they had encountered in their attempt to disarm Germany--her hostile and uncooperative attitude, the massive extent of her arms violations, the lack of a permanent control apparatus, the inability to eradicate the paramilitary organizations, the sheer size and scale of the task itself--all these things helped to convince the majority of French opinion not only that Germany had not been truly disarmed, but that she would inevitably begin to rearm at the first available opportunity.

In their attempts to give substance to their fears, these pessimists pointed most often to the problem presented by German industry. To begin with, there was much reason to believe that the industrial demobilization of Germany had not been nearly as effective as the Allies had originally hoped. On paper the figures looked impressive: 13,000 machines and 801,420 jigs, molds and tools had been destroyed, as well as 379 installations of all sorts (factories, hardening ovens, cooling plants, oil and water tanks, and other industrial targets).[73] But thousands of machines and factories had escaped destruction because it

[73] Wheeler-Bennet, The Nemesis of Power, 144.

was possible to convert them to civilian use, and what had been converted once could obviously be reconverted back to its original military purpose if so desired. In addition, German industry received some unintended but important benefits from its demilitarization: because of the allied housecleaning, Germany's political and economic leaders would be able to rebuild much of the nation's war industry with the most modern technology and with a view to greater organization and efficiency.[74] In fact, as early as 1932 the Control Commission's Armaments District Committee branch in the Ruhr went so far as to report that industry there was even better prepared for war production than in 1914.[75] As far as Germany as a whole was concerned, General John H. Morgan, a British control officer of the ICC's Berlin headquarters, estimated that it would take only one year for the nation's industry to recover its potential for military production.[76]

For France the inescapable fact was that Germany, with its population of sixty million, its great metallurgical, chemical and electrical industries and its explosive dynamism and drive, was and would remain an industrial giant for the foreseeable future. And in order to regain her status as the world's foremost military force, Germany had only to tap this formidable source of power

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[74]Morgan, Assize of Arms, 39.

[75]Ibid, 232.

[76]Wheeler-Bennet, The Nemesis of Power, 144.

whenever she chose and transform it from economic into military might. Having (more or less) disarmed Germany, the French were now faced with the task of preventing this powerful industrial base from once again producing the instruments of war. The disarmament of Germany, enormously difficult undertaking though it was, now appeared to be the easier half of the security equation compared to the sobering prospect of trying to prevent her rearmament. Thus, with the transition from the 1920's to the 1930's, France's attention shifted from German disarmament to German rearmament. Her participation in the fruitless Disarmament Conference of 1932-34 represented France's first attempt to come to grips with the challenge of Germany's imminent rearmament. It remained to be seen what other courses of action the French would adopt in order to stave off the most serious threat to their country's security in the sixteen years since the end of the First World War.

CHAPTER IV

FRANCE AND GERMAN REARMAMENT, 1934-1936

The great problem which confronted Foreign Minister Louis Barthou upon the publication of the Note of April 17 was the task of responding to Germany's rearmament. Although Hitler's official statement announcing his intention to rearm was not released until eleven months later, it was generally assumed that the failure of the Disarmament Conference would provide the Germans with the pretext they were looking for to unleash an unrestricted arms buildup. In fact, the French intelligence service (the so-called "Deuxieme Bureau") had already verified that Germany had begun rearming on a small scale in 1932, but the necessity of keeping the Disarmament Conference alive precluded any notion of a forceful response until all hope of reaching a diplomatic solution to the problem had been exhausted.[1] The Note of April 17, 1934 now served notice that this point had finally been reached: the French announced their intention to discontinue their efforts to conclude an arms agreement with Germany, pledging instead to insure their security through an independent course of

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[1] J. Néré, The Foreign Policy of France from 1914 to 1945, trans. Translance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 130.

action. Thus, Germany's intransigence at the conference table had placed the ball squarely in France's court. Hitler had signaled his plans to rearm by refusing to agree to an arms accord, and now it was up to France to adopt the appropriate countermeasures. How did the French respond to Germany's rearmament? What actions did they take in order to deal with this threat, and why did they fail to take certain others? Why was France unable to prevent, or at least to offset the rearmament of Germany? The purpose of Chapter Four is to provide answers to these questions.

France Refuses to Match Germany's Rearmament

Even before the Note of April 17 had been sent, some French leaders had already come to the conclusion that the government had to act and act quickly in order to counterbalance the growth of German armed strength. In January of 1934, General Maurice Gamelin, soon to become the French Army's next Chief of Staff, issued a sobering report on the country's diminishing military advantage over Germany. Asserting that France no longer possessed the means to guarantee her own defense as well as back up her alliance commitments, Gamelin went on to conclude that the Republic would either have to begin rearming or else start looking for additional allies--preferably both.[2] General

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[2] Robert J. Young, In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-40 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 49.

Joseph Maurin, the Minister of War, concurred with the report and recommended that the government act upon its conclusions.[3]

Apart from the military, however, few Frenchmen reacted with enthusiasm to Gamelin's suggestion that France should embark upon a rearmament program of its own. Accordingly, the Note of April 17 was not followed by any large-scale effort to rearm. The first significant step in this direction would not be taken until March of 1935, when the French government increased the term of military service from one to two years in response to the reintroduction of conscription in Germany. Unfortunately for France, it was only with the advent of the Popular Front in June of 1936 that the first serious attempt at rearmament finally got under way. The breakdown of the disarmament negotiations did, however, persuade the government to put an end to the progressive manpower cutbacks which had ravaged the French Army since the early 1920's.[4] Thus, the Note of April 17 marked, if not the beginning of France's rearmament, then at least the end of her disarmament.

There are several reasons why the French chose to delay their rearmament for so long. First and most obvi-

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[3]Judith M. Hughes, _To the Maginot Line: The Politics of French Military Preparations in the 1920's_ (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 252.

[4]Maurice Vaïsse, _Securité d'Abord: La Politique Française en Matière de Désarmement, 9 Decembre 1930-17 Avril 1934_ (Paris: Éditions Peotone, 1981), 542.

ously, one must point to the financial hardship that a costly rearmament campaign would have brought to a depression plagued France. French industry, too, would have been hard pressed to meet the demands of a large-scale rearmament effort at this time; its poor performance in the drive to keep pace with Germany's massive arms buildup during the last three years of peace would demonstrate just how much French industrial capacity had atrophied over the past two decades. Secondly, France's tardy rearmament can in part be explained by the fact that many Frenchmen still cherished lingering hopes of reaching some sort of arms agreement with Germany (or better yet, a general Franco-German entente); responding in kind to Germany's rearmament, they feared, would not only destroy whatever hope remained of concluding such an accord, but would also ignite a disastrous arms race between the two countries. But perhaps the most important reason for France's belated rearmament is that the French people were simply psychologically unprepared at this time to face the enormous challenge presented by such an undertaking. As Minister of Foreign Affairs in February of 1934, Edouard Daladier clearly recognized that a major rearmament campaign would require an immense effort from the French nation--an effort which was perhaps beyond its capability:

> Et pour qu'elle [France] fut assurée de garder l'avantage matériel qui lui appartiendra au debut, il faudrait, non pas seulement qu'elle fût prête aux plus lourds sacrifices financiers, mais encore que sa politique fût dirigée par un préoccupation d'ordre princi-

> palement nationale et militaire, que la nation tout entiere reformat ses moeurs, son education, ses gouts et fût penetrée d'un dynamisme égal à celui qui arrive l'Allemagne Hitlerienne.[5]

The military was also partially responsible for the postponement of France's rearmament. Like the leaders of all the world's armed forces, the French High Command constantly pressured their government for more men and materiel. But at the same time, the generals did not object too strongly to the delaying of their country's rearmament. This unusually tolerant attitude towards what appeared to be an obvious threat to French national security can be explained by several factors. First, one can point to the new relationship between military and civilian leaders which emerged in France during the First World War. Whereas before the war the Army nurtured a definite hostility towards the Republic and its politicians, even considering itself (as in the case of general Boulanger) to be a potential rival for power, the postwar era saw the Army adopt a much more docile attitude towards the civilian government. Regarding themselves as little more than public servants, French military leaders now played the role of mere advisors whose duty it was to faithfully implement any military policy the politicians saw fit to adopt, regardless

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[5] France, Commission de Publication des Documents Relatifs aux Origines de la Guerre 1939-1945, Documents Diplomatiques Francais, 1932-1939, 1re Serie (1932-1935), Tome 5 (Paris: Imprimerie National, 1963), No. 312, 519.

of its impact upon national security.[6] The failure to begin rearming in early 1934 is a case in point: while the High Command wrote reports on the situation and grumbled about the need for more men and equipment, it did not press the issue and insist that the government institute a rearmament program. As the military saw things, the politicians had made their decision, and the soldiers had no choice but to accept it.

Another reason why the generals declined to step forward and take the lead in pushing for greater military preparedness is that they did not consider Germany's rearmament to be an immediate threat to the security of France.[7] While acknowledging that the failure to match German arms production would eventually result in the loss of the military advantage which France had held over Germany for the past fifteen years, the High Command nevertheless maintained that the country could be rendered impervious to German attack for some time to come with relatively little effort.[8] This illusion was a product of the Army's strategic doctrine: its belief in the superiority of defensive over offensive warfare enabled it to believe that France could counterbalance even a massive German rearmament ef-

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[6] Maurice Gamelin, _Servir_, vol. I, _Le Prologue du Drame (1930-Août, 1939)_ (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1946), 207.

[7] Phillip Charles Farwell Bankwitz, _Maxime Weygand and Civil-Military Relations in Modern France_ (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 54.

[8] Ibid, 123.

fort with a much more modest, defensively oriented program of its own. In addition, the military establishment preferred to put off the task of rearming until a conflict was definitely in sight--a strategy which it hoped would allow the Army to enter the next war with the best and most modern equipment.[9] Thus, throughout the 30's, the French High Command clung to the fatal illusion that there would always be enough time to rearm.[10]

Barthou's Strategy and the Diplomatic Response to German Rearmament

For all of the above reasons, then, the French response to Germany's rearmament was primarily diplomatic in nature. During the first eight months of the new stage of Franco-German relations inaugurated by the Note of April 17, French foreign policy would remain under the guidance of Louis Barthou, who would unquestionably prove to be the most able and successful foreign minister of the 1930's. For a time it appeared as if Barthou's diplomacy would turn out to be the key to solving the German problem for which the French had been searching for so long. And had it not been for his assassination (along with King Alexander of Yugoslavia) at the hands of Mussolini's henchmen in October of 1934, Barthou just might have been able to pro-

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[9] Young, In Command of France, 41.

[10] Jacques Nobecourt, Une Histoire Politique de l'Armée, vol. I, 1919-1942: de Pétain à Pétain (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 196.

vide the leadership necessary to meet the challenge of Germany's rearmament. As it was, however, his death brought to the foreign ministry two much less talented successors, Pierre Laval and Pierre-Etienne Flandin, whose destructive policies would undo much of what Barthou had accomplished.

Although the Note of April 17 said nothing of the specific measures that France would take in order to "insure her security by her own means," Barthou came to the foreign ministry with a firm idea of how to deal with Germany's military resurgence.[11] In essence, his plan consisted of two stages. First, France would try to forestall German expansion by enmeshing Hitler in a restrictive network of European agreements and alliances. These prospective accords usually took the form of an "Eastern Locarno," in which Germany would finally agree to recognize the borders of her southern and eastern neighbors. Germany would then be surrounded on all sides by countries with whom she had signed nonaggression pacts, thereby ending forever all possibility of her expansion by means of military force. Predictably, Barthou would find the long cherished goal of an Eastern Locarno to be all but unobtainable. Hitler refused to sacrifice his revisionist objectives by participating in any agreement which would freeze the European boundaries established by Versailles.[12] The conclusion of

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[11] René Albrecht-Carré, France, Europe and the Two World Wars (Paris: Librairie Minard, 1960), 257.

[12] Young, In Command of France, 85.

an Eastern Locarno was also made impossible by the territorial ambitions and traditional internecine quarrels of the east European successor states, who refused to close ranks even in the face of Germany's rearmament.[13]

Barthou would fare much better, however, in his efforts to implement the second phase of his strategy, the strengthening and expansion of the French alliance system.[14] Having failed to induce Hitler to renounce his territorial ambitions against Poland and Czechoslovakia (which Barthou never really expected him to do in any case), he now set about the task of encircling Germany with a coalition of overwhelming military might. Germany was to be contained by intimidation--and, if need be, by force. The fulfillment of this plan required, first of all, that France strengthen her ties to her half-committed partner, Great Britain, as well as to the small nations of eastern and southern Europe. But most of all, it meant that the French now had to forge new links to their former allies, Italy and Soviet Russia. By the time of his assassination in October of 1934, Barthou had made significant progress towards an alliance with both the Italians and the Soviets: not only was the Quai d'Orsay in the process of negotiating a Treaty of Mutual Assistance with the USSR, but it had also initiated a dialogue with Mussolini

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[13] Néré, The Foreign Policy of France, 127.

[14] Albrecht-Carré, France, Europe and the Two World Wars, 257.

which would lead to a Franco-Italian rapprochement in the first half of 1935. It would now be up to Barthou's successor, Pierre Laval, to bring these initial efforts to fruition.

Laval and the Italian Alliance

For a time it appeared as if Laval had indeed succeeded in constructing an anti-German coalition based on Italian participation. This was the celebrated "Stresa Front," the short-lived alliance between France, Italy and Great Britain which undertook to oppose "by all practical means any unilateral repudiation of treaties which may endanger the peace of Europe."[15] While the purpose of the Front was couched in these broad terms, its true function as an anti-German pact remained obvious to all. Its terms were set down in the so-called "Rome Agreements," which were negotiated between Laval and Mussolini in March of 1935 and ratified overwhelmingly by the National Assembly at the end of the month, two weeks after Hitler's formal announcement of Germany's rearmament.

The Agreements consisted of four major points. First of all, both France and Italy declared that Germany could not legally rearm without the consent of the other great powers. They expressed their regret over Hitler's violation of the Versailles arms clauses, but at the same time made clear their hope that some kind of an arms ac-

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[15]Alexander Werth, Which Way France? (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1937), 132.

cord might still be reached. Secondly, the two countries agreed to guarantee Austria's independence, with France promising to support Italy on the Brenner Pass in case Hitler decided to move on Austria. Towards this end, both signatories set in motion plans for increased cooperation between their armed forces, the French and Italian general staffs taking part in joint military planning sessions in order to formulate strategy against Germany.[16]

It was to be the explosive fourth condition of the Rome Agreements which would eventually doom the Stresa Front to failure. Laval offered Mussolini several North African colonial concessions, including a secret agreement (whether it was an explicit arrangement or an unspoken un-standing has never been proven) that France would not oppose Italian ambitions in Ethiopia. The Anglo-French leg of the Stresa triangle had already been severely damaged in June of 1935 by the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Accords, but in October of that year, the Front was completely shattered by Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia. While Laval and a great many other Frenchmen certainly considered an alliance with Italy well worth the price of sacrificing Ethiopia to the Duce's armies, the British were outraged to a man even at the thought of such an idea. Confronted with the prospect of choosing between their British and Italian allies, there could only be one possi-

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[16]Ibid.

ble choice for the French. Even though Great Britain still refused to support French efforts to contain Germany, all but the extreme right wing elected to preserve its ties with England rather than court Mussolini further. At the same time, they hoped (and actually believed) that Italy would return to the Stresa Front once the Ethiopian affair had blown over.[17]

Thus, Laval helped destroy the plans which Barthou had initiated with such promise. The brief Italian alliance, along with the simultaneous efforts to conclude a mutual defense pact with the Soviet Union, represented both the high water mark of French diplomacy between the wars as well as one of France's best opportunities to produce an effective response to the growing menace of Nazi Germany. During this short six month period when it appeared as if France was on the verge of constructing a grand European coalition against Hitler, French diplomats seemed to experience a rebirth of confidence the kind of which had not been seen since before the First World War. At the Stresa negotiations in Rome Prime Minister Pierre-Etienne Flandin even threatened mobilization in response to any German move towards expansion.[18] This confidence was well founded: the French fully realized that an asso-

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[17] James Thomas Emmerson, The Rhineland Crisis, 7 March, 1936: A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1977), 46.

[18] Ibid, 62.

ciation of the other four most powerful nations in Europe could not fail to contain Germany, if not diplomatically, then at least militarily. For the first time in years, the future looked bright for France.

But this promising picture vanished immediately with the advent of the Ethiopian fiasco which Laval had unwittingly helped engineer. Not only was Italy now lost to France as an ally, but the British had been upset and much doubt had been cast in the minds of the Soviets as to the sincerity of their prospective ally. And if this were not enough, a fatal blow had been dealt to the League and the concept of collective security. The Abyssinian affair demonstrated to the dictators that their aggression would not be opposed and helped to convince their potential victims not only that France would fail to protect them, but that she would even sacrifice them to Hitler and Mussolini in order to purchase her own security.

Unfortunately for these smaller countries, their suspicions described Laval's strategy only too well. Whereas Barthou's policy towards Germany was animated solely by the desire to contain Hitler and his revisionist ambitions, that of Laval was based entirely upon the single objective of avoiding another war with Germany. If Hitler's expansionist goals could be thwarted at the same time, then so much the better. But under no circumstances could France let non-vital interests (such as the independence of Ethiopia or Poland or Czechoslovakia) stand in

the way of the one thing which really mattered to her: the avoidance of a new Franco-German conflict. Her own self-interest, then, dictated that France abandon Abyssinia to the Italians since this would purchase a strong ally for the Republic and make Germany that much more reluctant to risk war. This was French appeasement at its most shameless and its most cynical.

The Birth and Death of the Franco-Soviet Pact

While the Italian alliance may have been lost forever, the French still had a chance to offset this reverse by concluding a pact with an even more formidable power, Soviet Russia. As in the years prior to 1914, logic alone dictated the formation of such a bond. As the great ideological antagonist of Nazi Germany, and as the largest country in the world, with almost unlimited resources, the greatest population and the largest army of any European nation, the Soviet Union appeared to be the natural choice for an ally against Hitler. Of course, these thoughts were not lost upon French leaders, and as early as 1931 the two countries embarked upon a long, drawn out process of seeking closer diplomatic relations with one another. The first step in this reconciliation was the signing of a nonaggression pact in November of 1932 (it had been initialed in August of the previous year and was eventually ratified by the Assembly in May of 1933). The rapprochement culminated in May, 1935 with the signing of the

Franco-Soviet Pact of Mutual Assistance, which, along with the consolidation of the Stresa Front two months earlier, constitutes the principal French response to Germany's rearmament.

However, the important symbolic significance of the Pact itself almost completely obscured the fact that it held little value as a deterrent against German revisionism. To begin with, the alliance was only defensive in nature, which meant that no Soviet aid could be expected if France was forced to take military action against Hitler. Likewise, the Pact could not be used to prevent Germany's rearmament or a German attack on Poland or Czechoslovakia. Only if France were invaded would the USSR be obliged to come to her assistance, and even then the treaty provided for Soviet support only on the condition that both the League Council and the other Locarno signatories approved of such a measure.[19] Even more important was the fact that the alliance was never consumated by the conclusion of a military convention, which rendered it all but useless as far as any practical application of the Pact was concerned. Only three meetings between the French and Soviet general staffs were held in January of 1937 before they were discontinued entirely.[20] In fact, except for the

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[19] Werth, Which Way France?, 132.

[20] William Evans Scott, Alliance against Hitler: The Origins of the Franco-Soviet Pact (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1962), 266.

far left, no one in France seemed to take the alliance very seriously as a military measure. By mid 1936 the French had lost nearly all interest in the Pact (except as a domestic political issue), and it was left to languish and disappear from the scene entirely. Why did this happen?

The failure to fully exploit the possibilities of the Soviet alliance was due in large part to the reluctance of the French High Command to consumate the Pact by participating in joint military planning with their Soviet counterparts. For several reasons, both military and political, the Army considered this kind of close cooperation with the Russians to be unnecessary as well as undesirable. First of all, the High Command maintained that there was no need to coordinate strategy with the Red Army because France, by virtue of the superiority of the defensive over the offensive, was capable of holding off any German attack almost indefinitely.[21] All that was required was that the USSR be denied to Germany as a potential ally or a supplier of material resources (the French were particularly afraid that the two countries might revive their old association), and that, if war did come, the eastern front be used to divert as much of Germany's strength away from the west as possible until America's inevitable entry

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[21] Ibid.

into the conflict could prove decisive.[22] In this respect, at least, the next war was to be fought exactly like the last one, with Russia playing much the same role.

There were still other reasons why the French military establishment objected to close ties with the Soviet Union. Even before Stalin's great purge had almost completely wiped out the top tier of the Soviet officer corps, many French observers expressed grave doubts as to the military value of the Red Army. After all, these skeptics argued, had not the alliance with Tsarist Russia been proven to be overrated by the events of the First World War? And for a significant portion of French opinion, the Franco-Soviet Pact brought with it several very serious potential dangers which cast doubt upon the entire project. For example, many Frenchmen feared that another Russian alliance would inevitably draw them into a new conflict with Germany, just as it did in 1914. Most of this anxiety issued from the right wing, which constantly voiced its suspicion that Stalin would try to use the Pact to embroil France in a war with his fascist archenemy--a war which would be fought not for French interests, but solely for the purpose of advancing Soviet communism. Finally, the opponents of the Franco-Soviet alliance objected to close ties to the USSR because of the continuing efforts of the Communist International to propagandize and

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[22] Ibid.

suborn French workers and soldiers. And of course, one must also take into consideration the right's ideological distaste for the Soviets as a reason for its misgivings towards the Pact. As one of the most conservative groups in French society, with strong ties to the church and the aristocracy, the Army harbored a particularly strong dislike of communism.

The Intrusion of Domestic Politics into French Foreign Policy

In mid 1935 few Frenchmen considered the disadvantages of the Franco-Soviet Pact to be serious enough to warrant its rejection. In the face of Germany's rearmament, both the right and the left clearly saw the necessity of the Pact and welcomed its signing (it was ratified by the Assembly by a vote of 544 to one with forty-four abstentions, all forty-five of the nays and abstentions coming from the right).[23] This occasion marked one of the few times during the entire interwar period when there existed in France something of a national consensus on foreign policy.[24] But by the beginning of 1936 this consensus had been completely shattered, for by this time almost the entire right side of the political spectrum had turned against the Russian alliance. What had taken place in

[23]Ibid, 102.

[24]Robert Michael, _The Radicals and Nazi Germany: The Revolution in French Attitudes Toward Foreign Policy, 1933-1939_ (Washington D.C.: University Press of America, 1982), 2.

France during the preceding months to bring about such a dramatic transformation?

The demise of the Franco-Soviet Pact can be directly attributed to the radicalization of French political life which accompanied the dramatic rise of the Communist Party after May of 1935. This process of polarization into the extremes of left and right had actually begun with the riots of February 6, 1934 and crystalized in October of the following year with Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. The rapid growth of the French Communist Party which so greatly accelerated the political division of the country began just three days after the ratification of the Franco-Soviet Pact when it scored a resounding triumph in the municipal elections of May, 1935. Holding only ten out of 615 seats in the Chamber just three years earlier, the communists expanded their influence until in May of 1936 they could claim seventy-two of the Chamber's 618 seats.[25] Even more importantly, the Party now began to smooth over its bitter and longstanding feud with the with its socialist rivals as a prelude to the formation of a grand coalition of the left, the so-called "Popular Front." The communists nearest neighbors to the right, the SFIO socialist Party, held 149 seats alone; together with these and their own seats, and with the support of most or even all

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[25]Charles A. Micaud, The French Right and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939: A Study in Public Opinion (Durham, N.C.: uke University Press, 1943), 236-237.

of the smaller socialist parties, the communists would be able to construct a coalition which could win control of the government.[26]

The moderate and conservative elements within French society reacted to these political developments with suspicion, fear and hostility. In the stormy, politicized atmosphere of the times, the right predictably overreacted and exaggerated the threat posed by the Communist Party and its socialist allies. Although they correctly pointed out that the communists were little more than Stalinist puppets, the right wing greatly overestimated both the strength of the bonds which held the Front together, as well as the extent of the control which the Party exercised over its socialist partners. Throughout the second half of the 30's the refrain from the right was loud and constant: the communists were plotting to involve France (along with the USSR) in a war against fascist Germany and then to overthrow the Republic. To a large degree this paranoia was of the left's own making, for the extremely militant and ideological tone in which the communists and socialists invariably spoke unquestionably helped to poison the political climate in the Republic. In such an atmosphere the logical and unemotional discussion of the issues at hand quickly became an impossibility. The two most prominent practitioners of this inflam-

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[26] Ibid.

matory style were the leader of the French socialists, Leon Blum, and his communist counterpart, Maurice Thorez. Harping incessantly and dogmatically upon the sanctity of the workers and the class strugle, these two men and their followers thoroughly irritated the profoundly conservative bourgeoisie which constituted the very heart of French society.

The effect of such politically charged rhetoric on the men of the right was to breed within them a hatred of the socialists and the communists which was so intense as to not only turn them against everything associated with the left, but also to make them embrace, as if out of sheer spite, all that it rejected. This trend began in earnest in October of 1935 after Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. Until this time there had been an ideological balance in France's foreign policy since she was allied with both fascist Italy and communist Russia. This equilibrium made the two alliances acceptable to both the left and the right, the simultaneous embrace of Mussolini and Stalin making it appear as if the Republic were neither accepting nor rejecting either fascism or communism on ideological grounds. But when the Italian attack on Abyssinia forced France to distance herself from Rome, this balance was upset.

In the atmosphere of hostility created by the increasing antagonism between right and left, issues of foreign policy now took on a political significance never be-

fore encountered in French history. Without its accompanying alliance with Italy, the Franco-Soviet Pact had suddenly become unacceptable to the right, which now tended to look upon it as merely another symptom of the progressive communization of France (by the end of 1936 the situation had deteriorated to the point where the right wing would have rejected the Pact even if it were tied to an Italian alliance). All the reservations which the center and the right had earlier voiced about the Pact but had not considered serious enough to justify its defeat were now invoked as proof of its utter insanity. Under the influence of their intense hatred for their ideological enemies, French moderates and conservatives lost all perspective where foreign policy was concerned. After 1935, the right, no longer able to view the Soviet alliance simply in terms of national security, began to associate the Pact almost exclusively with its vociferous champions, the despised Popular Front.

The bitter political feud even effected the right wing's traditional attitudes towards Germany. Instinctively nationalistic, it had always regarded the German race as the natural enemy of France. But now that Hitler had become the object of the left's hatred, it almost seemed as if those on the right side of the political spectrum were appalled to find that they shared the same enemy as their communist and socialist opponents. While only a few extremists entertained pro-Hitler sentiments,

many French moderates and conservatives became--almost unconsciously and unwillingly--much less critical and hostile towards the Nazi regime. Some maintained a stubborn silence in the face of Hitler's acts of lawlessness, while others even became irritated and defensive in response to the left's unceasing tirades against Germany--not because they sympathized with the Nazis, but simply because this criticism issued from the hated left wing. Many rightists were upset by these harangues because they felt (and not without some justification) that the Popular Front's opposition to Hitler was based more on blind Marxist ideology than on motives of morality or patriotism or national security.[27] This suspicion was partially born out by the far left's frequent demands that the government take action against the Nazi regime in order to prevent the persecution of German communists and socialists.

In his angry--and, quite frankly, slanted--book, The French Right and Nazi Germany, author Charles Micaud refers to the right's new behavior towards Germany as "neo-pacifism." According to Micaud's thesis, neo-pacifism was constituted by the right's lack of opposition to Hitler due to its obsessive fear and hatred of the Popular Front, which it considered to be the real threat to France. In terms of their foreign policy, he characterizes the neo-pacifists (among whom he includes such men as Pierre-Eti-

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[27]Charles Reibel, Pourquoi Nous Avons Été à Deux Doigts de la Guerre (Paris: Librairie Artheme Payard, 1938), 27.

enne Flandin, Georges Bonnet and Pierre Laval) as favoring an alliance with Italy but rejecting all ties with the Soviet Union. Concerning their attitudes towards Germany, Micaud divides the neo-pacifists into two categories. The first of these, which he calls "resigned nationalists," advocated some accomodation with Hitler after 1935.[28] The other type of neo-pacifist Micaud names "traditional nationalists." Adopting as their slogan "Neither Hitler nor Stalin," they refused to abandon their nationalistic instincts and rejected any idea of a compromise with the Nazis.[29] Charles Maurras, head of the rightist league _Action Française_, provided a clear illustration of the idea of "conditional nationalism" with his suggestion that the best course for France to take would be to try to pit Germany and the USSR against one another and hope for their mutual annihilation.[30] Another good example of the phenomenon of conditional nationalism can be found in the writings of the neo-pacifist journalist Henri de Kerillis. Speaking of the proposed Franco-Soviet Pact, he asserted that:

> At the same time that [the USSR] offers us a guarantee against the German danger, she threatens us with the Soviet danger. And between the danger of Hitler and

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[28] Michael, _The Radicals and Nazi Germany_, 112.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, _La Politique Extérieure de la France de 1914 à 1945_ (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1968), 246.

the danger of Stalin I do not wish to chose.[31]

France Turns Inward

It is interesting to contrast this sad state of affairs in the France of the 1930's with the mood of the country in the days of August, 1914, when the entire French people responded to a grave national crisis with a "union sacrée." Clearly, a profound transformation had taken place within France since those glorious, heroic days. What caused the French to lose sight of their national values to the extent that some could now proclaim, "Hitler rather than Blum!," or prefer slavery to war? How could Frenchmen lose their perspective to the point where they insisted on pursuing their own personal political quarrels while calmly watching disaster approach? To a large degree, these questions can be answered by examining several important social, economic, and intellectual factors which served to divert the attention of the French away from the field of foreign policy and redirect it towards the arena of internal affairs.

As we have already seen, the bitter ideological clash between left and right was one such distraction. In addition, one must also take into account the fact that Hitler's challenge to France came at a time when the nation was struggling to recover from the crippling effects of the worldwide economic depression. The economic crisis

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[31]Scott, Aliance against Hitler, 204-205.

not only helped to delay and then handicap France's rearmament, but it also tended to exacerbate the many tensions existing within French society. France at this time was still a country which was deeply troubled by the social divisions inherited from the French Revolution: aristocrat versus republican, Catholic versus anticleric, bourgeois versus proletarian. The depression served to widen these clefts and bring to the forefront the ugliest sort of social strife, such as the riots of February 6, 1934. To make matters worse, the Third Republic was shaken at this time by a series of particularly cheap and degrading scandals as well as by severe labor unrest--in short, all the unseemly embarassments that democracies are subject to. And as government succeeded government on the average of one every six months (there were forty of them in the twenty years between Clemenceau and Paul Reynaud), the French people gradually became aware that their leaders were unable to solve the problems that plagued the nation. It is no accident that one encounters over and over again the same words used to describe this period in the country's history: impotence, decadence, stagnation. By the second half of the 30's, many Frenchmen came to feel not only that the Republic was unworthy of France, but that it was not worth defending. Few voices were raised in its defense in 1940 when Germany's victory provided the opportunity to sweep the mess away. By 1935, France was well on the road to Vichy.

Thus, even before Hitler's invasion of Poland, France was already fighting a war on two fronts: at the same time that they were attempting to deal with Germany's military resurgence, the French were also forced to contend with major political, economic and social disturbances at home. In its weakened condition, the Republic simply did not possess the necessary energy to respond adequately to both these problems at once. Forced to divide their attention between domestic and foreign affairs, the French invariably let the former take precedence over the latter during the last years of the Third Republic.[32] Internal affairs became an obsessive preoccupation, and as a result, not nearly enough time, effort, money or thought was devoted to the task of finding a lasting solution to the German problem. In many ways this trend represents an almost unconscious isolationism, the desire of an exhausted, divided nation to rest, to turn inward and heal the many deep wounds that it had sustained since 1914. For a few years at least, the French secretly longed to lay aside their traditional duties and obligations as a great power. If this wish was never explicitly verbalized, then it was more than adequately expressed by the weakness of France's response to German disarmament.

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[32]Joseph Paul-Boncour, Entre Deux Guerres: Souvenirs sur la IIIe Republique, vol. 2, Les Lendemains de la Victoire, 1919-1934 (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1945), 35.

Pacifism and Internationalism

It is difficult to overestimate the effect of the First World War upon France. As far as French foreign policy is concerned, the war exerted a profound influence by unleashing the twin forces of pacifism and internationalism--two ideologies which would make the task of containing Germany much more difficult for French leaders. There were basically two different types of French pacifism: that of the right and that of the non-communist left--that is to say, the socialists (communist attitudes ranged anywhere from pacifism to belligerence, depending upon Stalin's orders). Grounded firmly in Marxist theory, the pacifism of the socialists held that war was simply another one of the means by which the bourgeoisie exploited the proletariat. After 1932, however, this ideology increasingly came into conflict with an even stronger impulse: the desire to combat fascism. Accordingly, with the advent of the Popular Front in June of 1936, the socialists initiated the large-scale rearmament of France in spite of their instinctive pacifist tendencies. But in the years prior to the Front's formation, the left did much damage to the cause of French security by labeling the right's efforts to contain Germany as "warmongering" while at the same time producing no constructive alternative policy of its own.[33] Compelled by their creed to de-

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[33]Arnold Wolfers, Britain and France between the Two Wars: Conflicting Strategies of Peace since Ver-

nounce Hitler with the greatest possible vehemence, the socialists were simultaneously forbidden by their pacifist beliefs to contemplate any action against Germany's acts of revisionism.

There was also another kind of pacifism that affected the left but which is more closely associated with the right. A product of the terrible sacrifices and sufferings endured by the French people during the First World War, this particular form of pacifism stipulated that another such conflict would be simply too costly and too horrendous to be fought. Although the war's other participants had experienced similar hardships, none of them had been effected by its horrors in quite the same way as had France. In part, this phenomenon can be explained not only by the fact that the country sustained more physical damage than any other, but by the fact that that its people suffered more casualties per capita than any of the other major belligerents.

It would also seem, however, that the unusually severe trauma which the war held for the French can also be partially attributed to certain features of their national character. The French are a people who, as much as any other, love the good life. It is the dream of every Frenchman to live the life of the grand bourgeois, to raise their sons and daughters in peace and prosperity,

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<u>sailles</u> (Hamden, Ct.: Archon Books, 1963), 59-60.

and to experience each day all the many simple joys and pleasures that life has to offer. It is partially for this reason, one could argue, that the French showed themselves to be particularly sensitive to the horrors of the Great War, and therefore all the more likely to turn to pacifism in the postwar era. In any case, few Frenchmen could bear to contemplate a return to the kind of ordeal which they had undergone just two decades before. The avoidance of war therefore became an end in itself for the pacifist right. Time and time again, French leaders would refuse to act in the face of Hitler's diplomatic coups, justifying their inertia with the explanation that any opposition to Germany would mean war, that greatest of all disasters. The noted journalist Genevieve Tabouis had this to say about the extent to which this attitude permeated French society:

> In France, war is not feared, but hated. Public opinion takes the point of view that war, which may perhaps be inevitable, would involve the utter ruin of our civilization. Hence, what must be done at any cost is to gain time by favoring every possible concession. At all events, before taking the fatal step which would result in a ghastly conflict, the government must convince the French people that every attempt has been made to avoid war. . . .
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> If today . . . a government wished to forestall events and bring force to bear upon the high-handed action of Germany and Italy in the Mediterranean, France would be divided and the Government would be accused of serving the interests of the political parties or the countries with whose doctrines its opposition to the dictatorships would be interpreted as a proof of sympathy.[34]

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[34] Genevieve Tabouis, Blackmail or War, trans. Paul Selver (New York: Penguin Books Ltd., 1938), 8-9.

Internationalism was another force which helped prevent the French from responding effectively to Hitler's challenge. Like pacifism, internationalism emerged after the First World War largely as a reaction to the conflict itself, which was now blamed on the proliferation of European national pride and ambitions in the years before 1914. French nationalism--one of the few forces which could have prevented the rise of Nazi Germany--had been thoroughly discredited in the Third Republic. With the advent of the "new diplomacy" of international cooperation and collective security, it suddenly became bad form for any nation (and especially a great power such as France) to act independently of the League's authority. The idea of using military force as an instrument of foreign policy was ruled out almost completely in this new era of antinationalism. Georges Bonnet, one of France's top diplomats, recalled the temper of the times in his memoirs:

> The League of Nations spirit breathed on all the democracies and inhibited "national thinking"--even the idea of reacting against a dangerous aggressor. . . . It would have seemed sacreligious to act without the League's and Great Britain's support. Poincaré was thrown out in 1924 for having tried it. Nobody wanted to repeat the experiment.[35]

If any doubts were expressed about the League, wrote General Gamelin, then "on était immédiatement classé comme reactionaire."[36] As the self-styled champions of interna-

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[35]Georges Bonnet, Quai d'Orsay (Isle of Mann: Times Press and Anthony Gibbs and Phillips, 1965), 141-142.

[36]Gamelin, Servir, vol. I, 56.

tionalism and collective security, the left was particularly prone to this kind of League mania. For Leon Blum and Maurice Thorez, any response to Germany's rearmament had to be consistent with good socialist theory. A patriotic, nationalistic reaction to Hitler, which they considered the equivalent of fascism itself, was therefore to be avoided at all cost. "We shall combat Hitler," asserted Blum, "but we shall see to it that France does not succumb to nationalism."[37] Only by appealing to the German working class, he insisted, could the Nazis be defeated:

> Je ne crois pas que l'Allemagne souhaite la guerre. Si le danger était imminent, le peuple allemande réagirait contre cette folie. Nous devons faire confiance à la classe ouvriere organisée et au parti socialiste, qui est l'ennemi de la guerre.[38]

<u>The French Response to</u>

<u>Hitler's Announcement of March 16, 1935</u>

So far this chapter has been concerned with the general French reaction to Germany's rearmament after the drafting of the Note of April 17, 1934. How did France respond to Hitler's statement of March 16, 1935 which officially announced that Germany had reintroduced conscription and had begun rearming? As we have already seen, the Rome Agreements were signed with the Italians just two weeks after this declaration, and the Franco-Soviet Pact

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[37] Scott, <u>Alliance against Hitler</u>, 102.

[38] Pierre-Etienne Flandin, <u>Politique Française, 1919-1940</u> (Paris: Les Éditions Nouvelles, 1947), 51.

was signed two months later. But in actuality, these events merely represented the fruition of diplomatic efforts which had been initiated long before the coup of March 16 and bore little relationship to it other than their propitious timing. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Pierre-Etienne Flandin was content to let the conclusion of the Italian and Soviet alliances serve as the principal French "response" to the German announcement. In effect, this meant doing nothing except letting the diplomatic initiatives set in motion by Barthou in 1934 run to their inevitable conclusion. As far as any positive measures were concerned, Flandin and his government took only two very minor and completely ineffective steps in reply to Hitler's *fait accompli*. First, an appeal was lodged with the League of Nations asking that an extraordinary session of the League Council be convened in order to consider punitive action against Germany.[39] And secondly, a few army units were transferred to areas nearer the German border as an expression of France's displeasure.[40]

One might have thought that the shock of being openly confronted by the Germans with the fact of their rearmament would have finally provoked the French into taking decisive action which would have solved the problem once

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[39]Frederick L. Schuman, *Europe on the Eve: The Crisis of Diplomacy, 1933-1939* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), 124.

[40]Emmerson, *The Rhineland Crisis*, 29.

and for all. Obviously, this was not the case. Why didn't the French use the occasion of Hitler's declaration as a casus belli, as an excuse to bring a halt to Germany's rearmament by any means at their disposal? One can point to several attitudes then current in France which discouraged the adoption of such a course of action. To begin with, although the announcement of March 16 produced general outrage in France, its contents surprised no one.[41] Most Frenchmen had long suspected that Germany had been secretly rearming; the only significance of Hitler's proclamation, they maintained, was simply that Germany was now rearming openly rather than in secret. These observers therefore saw no more need to take action against the Nazis at this point than they did two or three years earlier (of course, such an attitude ignored the fact that France's once sizeable military advantage over Germany was quickly being eaten away). Some also tried to minimize the importance of the statement of March 16 by arguing that Germany's rearmament was not aimed specifically at France but at the Treaty of Versailles and the Allies in general.[42] And finally, any possibility of a forceful French response to Hitler's coup was ruled out almost from the start by the well entrenched idea that the rearmament of Germany was inevitable.[43] Most French leaders seemed to

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[41] Werth, Which Way France?, 132.

[42] Michael, The Radicals and Nazi Germany, 112.

[43] Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 158.

think that the problem of Germany's rearmament could best be dealt with by the League, and more specifically, by a revival of the Disarmament Conference.

The Option of Preventive War

How could France have forced Hitler to abandon the rearming of Germany? Realistically, there existed only two possible courses of action which could have produced such a result: first, as in 1923, a military occupation of part of German territory, and secondly (and much more likely), a preventive war which would lead directly to the unseating of the Nazi regime. But while many well informed Frenchmen clearly recognized that preventive war constituted the only real means of halting Germany's rearmament, very few in France were willing to see their country embark upon such an undertaking. In March of 1934 the Belgian Prime Minister, le Comte de Broqueville, addressed his nation's Senate with words which precisely mirrored the French attitude towards the subject of preventive war: "To prevent the rearmament of Germany there is no other means than immediate war. For myself, I refuse to throw my country into such an adventure."[44] Expressing the same contradictory mixture of fear and duty, the French deputy Georges Franklin-Bouillon observed that "Nobody in France wants a preventive war. Perhaps it would be a good thing,

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[44] Schuman, Europe on the Eve, 51.

but our people do not want it."[45] This was no exaggeration. In fact, so strong was the general aversion for the idea of preventive war that it became something of a forbidden topic in French government circles.[46] "La guerre preventive, mais nul y songe," wrote deputy Henry Lemery in January of 1934, "et le mot seul nous fait horreur."[47]

Although the option of a preventive strike against Hitler was almost universally rejected by the French, a few voices were raised in favor of military action. The most notable advocate of preventive war was General Maxime Weygand, the French Army's Chief of Staff from 1932 to 1935. Never hesitant to recommend the use of force, Weygand would prove himself to be one of the most tough-minded and uncompromising French leaders in regard to policy towards Germany during the entire interwar period. Numerous times during his tenure as Army Chief of Staff he would suggest the use of military force as a means of putting an end to Germany's rearmament. Pointing out the irrefutable logic of the situation as it stood in 1934, Weygand emphasized that France had to act quickly and decisively: "Why not a preventive war? Today France still has

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[45] Alexander Werth, France in Ferment (New York: Harper and Brothers, Publishers, 1934), 223.

[46] Richard D. Challener, The French Theory of the Nation in Arms, 1866-1939 (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1965), 141.

[47] Elizabeth R. Cameron, Prologue to Appeasement: A Study in French Foreign Policy (Washington D.C.: American Council on Foreign Affairs, 1942), 41.

the military advantage. Soon she will not."[48] Weygand also proposed an alternate plan to force Hitler to halt his rearmament campaign by seizing the Rhine bridgeheads which France had occupied during the 20's.[49] Such an operation, he asserted, would have the effect of "un paire de gifles à un gamin espiègle," permanently discouraging Germany from making any further attempts to rearm in the future.[50] Somewhat unrealistically, however, he minimized the difficulties presented by such a preemptive strike, glossing over the fact that the French government would almost certainly demand at least the moral--if not the military--support of Great Britain as a prerequisite to any preventive attack.[51] It should have been obvious to Weygand that British opinion (let alone that of France) would never have approved of any offensive action against Germany.

Some of Weygand's colleagues shared his opinions on the subject of preventive war, but none of them held these ideas with the same strength of conviction. In general, the High Command was divided on the issue.[52] Weygand's successor, General Gamelin, an extremely cautious man who preferred to watch and await events, declined to commit

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[48]Young, In Command of France, 51.

[49]Bankwitz, Maxime Weygand, 54.

[50]Vaisse, Securité d'Abord, 444.

[51]Bankwitz, Maxime Weygand, 54.

[52]Vaisse, Securité d'Abord, 444.

himself on the question of preventive war.[53] Another of France's top soldiers, Jean de Lattre de Tassigny, favored the idea but refused to publicly advocate the use of military force against Germany.[54] In the civil sphere, support for a preventive war came mainly from the two extremes of the political spectrum. On the right, only a handful of politicians (namely Paul Reynaud, Andre Tardieu, Louis Aubert, Fabre Luce and Jean Fabry) expressed varying degrees of sympathy for an armed response to Germany's rearmament.[55] In the ranks of the press, their sentiments were echoed most notably by the rightist journal <u>Gringoire</u>.[56] The only other group which displayed some receptivity towards the idea of preventive war was the Communist Party.[57] Ever faithful to their masters in the Kremlin, the communists maintained a tone of unflagging bellicosity in regard to fascist Germany until the signing of the Nazi-Soviet Nonaggression Pact of August, 1939, when they suddenly became aware of their long dormant feelings of friendship for Hitler.

Did the French government ever give any serious thought to launching a preventive assault against Germany?

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[53]Ibid, 445.

[54]Ibid.

[55]W.M. Jordan, <u>Great Britain, France, and the German Problem</u> (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd, 1943), 165.

[56]Vaisse, <u>Securité d'Abord</u>, 445.

[57]Ibid, 443.

The answer to this question appears to be a qualified "yes." During the autumn and winter of 1933-34, rumors circulated widely in France to the effect that a military riposte against Hitler could be expected in the near future.[58] In fact, at one point the atmosphere in western Europe became so threatening that the German government was prompted to put its armed forces on the highest possible state of alert.[59] At least one historian has suggested that these rumors were deliberately spread in order to intimidate the Germans into abandoning their rearmament and returning to the Disarmament Conference.[60] But there is one piece of evidence which suggests that these reports of an imminent preventive war amounted to more than just idle threats. In his testimony to a postwar committee of investigation, the former politician and Prime Minister Georges Sarraut recalled a conversation between Louis Barthou and a Belgian Senator (the Baron de Dorlodot) whom the French government was consulting in regard to his country's participation in a possible preemptive attack.[61] In this interview (which took place in February of 1934), it was revealed that Prime Minister Gaston

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[58]Young, In Command of France, 45.

[59]Emmerson, The Rhineland Crisis, 78.

[60]Young, In Command of France, 45.

[61]France, Les Événements Survenus en France de 1933 a 1945: Témoinages et Documents Recueilles par la Commission Parlementaire (Paris: Imprimerie National, 1947), 3: 669.

Doumergue and his cabinet had secretly decided--largely at the behest of Barthou--to order a preventive assault against Germany if she persisted in her refusal to take part in an arms limitation agreement.[62] Sarraut went on to describe this plan in greater detail:

> Si l'Allemagne n'accepterait pas [an arms agreement], Barthou . . . proposerait une action militaire collective. Et si cette action collective n'était pas admise par l'Angleterre, à condition d'être soutenue par la Belgique--qui s'associerait entièrement a ses démarches--la France exercerait elle-même, et seul, l'action militaire nécessaire pour assurer un désarmement effectif; elle laisserait à la Belgique le droit de s'y joindre ou non par l'envoi de troupes.[63]

As to why this attack never materialized, Sarraut did not say.

If Sarraut's testimony is accurate, then this occasion would seem to mark France's closest approach to preventive war. The only other instance in which the French even remotely appeared to consider this option occurred in March of 1933, when Poland's Marshal Pilsudski offered to join France in a combined offensive against Germany.[64] This proposal probably constituted the best of many excellent opportunities for the French to eliminate the growing Nazi menace in its infancy: Germany's rearmament was still in its earliest stages, the Polish Army had not yet become the obsolete weapon of September, 1939, and, perhaps most

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[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Schuman, Europe on the Eve, 98.

importantly of all, France was only just beginning to suffer from the social, economic and political problems which would reach their peak at mid-decade. The French, however, still hoping to achieve a peaceful solution to the problem of German rearmament at the Disarmament Conference, declined Pilsudski's offer. Preferring to place their trust in German honor rather than French resolve, the Poles responded to this snub by signing a ten year nonaggression pact with Hitler.

The Case against Preventive War

Why did the French reject the idea of preventive war so decisively? In general, one can point to the broad trends which have been discussed here so far: pacifism, internationalism, the distraction of domestic problems, etc. One can, however, site more specific reasons why the French chose not to seek a military solution to the German problem. First of all, there are ideological factors to be considered. Heavily influenced by their traditional republican idealism, most Frenchmen were very uncomfortable with the idea of their country being cast in the role of an aggressor. It would be completely out of character, these people maintained, for France to initiate hostilities under any circumstances. Preventive war, wrote an anonymous journalist in Le Temps in October of 1933, "is repugnant to our sentiments, to our traditions, to our ideal of peace . . ." [65] Very few in France at this time were willing to make use of the country's military

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[65] Micaud, The French Right and Nazi Germany, 30.

resources for any purpose other than to defend the Republic from attack.[66] In fact, there is much reason to believe that the decision to launch a preemptive strike against Germany probably would have meant the downfall of any government then in power.[67]

For a number of ideological as well as practical reasons, the socialists voiced by far the strongest opposition of any group to the idea of preventive war. In his testimony to a parliamentary committee of inquiry in 1947, Leon Blum explained why he and his socialist comrades refused to consider a military response to Germany's rearmament:

> Nous ne l'avons fait, pour des raisons parfaitement honorables. Nous ne l'avons pas fait parce que nous éprouvions une pudeur à prendre l'initiative de mesures qui prouvaient être interpretée, en même temps que commes des mesures de salut, comme des mesures de vengeance à l'égard de nos camarades socialistes d'Allemagnes, qui étaient été déja et qui étaient destinés à être encore davantage les victimes de la prise de pouvoir hitlérienne. .. Nous ne l'avons pas fait parce que nous éprouvions l'horreur religieuse de la guerre. Nous ne l'avons pas fait parce que nous nous demandions--c'est l'argument qui a été le plus fort sur nous--si nous n'apporterions pas encore une nouvelle force au nationalisme allemande en opprimant sous une contrainte de force ce que à ce moment là se présentait à certaine égards comme l'expression de la volonté à peu pres libre d'un peuple.[68]

This fear of exacerbating the already formidable problem of German nationalism was shared by both left and right and constituted one of the most common arguments against preventive war. In addition, the French also had to take into account

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[66] Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 141.

[67] Young, In Command of France, 100.

[68] France, Les Événements Survenus en France, 1:121-122.

the fact that the Treaty of Locarno forbade the use of military force against Germany. If France attacked Germany in violation of the Treaty, then she would almost certainly be branded as the aggressor by the other Locarno signatories, who would then be required by the terms of the Treaty to come to the aid of the Germans (in all probability, such a scenario was unlikely to take place, but the mere possibility that it might nevertheless caused the French much anxiety, as the Rhineland Crisis of March, 1936 would so clearly demonstrate).

There were also a number of military considerations which discouraged French leaders from exercising the option of preventive war. To begin with, the evacuation of the last French troops from the Rhineland in 1930 was perceived as marking the beginning of a major shift in the strategic balance between France and Germany. The Army was now deprived of an advance guard which could secure its passage across the Rhine as well as provide a valuable first line of defense against any German attack. Even more significant for the French was the fact that Germany had begun rearming on a small but ever increasing scale in 1932. The situation had therefore altered considerably since the last time France had mounted any sort of military operations against Germany. The French Army had met only localized, passive resistance when it had invaded the Ruhr in 1923. But after several years of rearming, how would the Germans react if France launched a full-scale invasion of their country in 1934 or 1935? A great many Frenchmen now believed that any incursion into

German territory (even if it was only a limited operation focused exclusively on the Rhineland) would automatically provoke all-out armed resistance--in other words, war.

As we have already seen in Chapter I, the French were willing to mount coercive operations against Germany only as long as the economic, diplomatic and military costs of such ventures remained relatively minor. But now that Germany was capable of at least some measure of self-defense, it was highly unlikely that any French leader would dare to order a military strike in order to cut short Hitler's rearmament.[69] In fact, even during the first postwar years no one in France ever seemed to consider the option of preventive war as an acceptable response to Germany's eventual rearmament. Hoping to find an easy way out of the problem, the French rejected its only real solution, and as a result found themselves completely unprepared to deal with Hitler's challenge. Although France had launched several coercive operations during the early 20's, these actions were intended primarily as a means of forcing the Weimar government to pay reparations and were never meant to serve as a remedy against the much more complicated problem of German rearmament.[70] The French High Command did not even consider these coercive actions as proper military operations (so minor was the scale on which they were conducted), and regarded them as totally inadequate as

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[69]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 133.

[70]Bonnet, Quai d'Orsay, 68.

as a solution to the rearmament problem.[71] In spite of this fact, the Army devoted surprisingly little thought and effort to developing plans for an adequate response to German rearmament.[72]

The reason behind this lack of interest in the idea of preventive war lay in the fact that the High Command viewed this alternative with great skepticism. As has already been mentioned, this skepticism was motivated in part by fears of German resistance as well as by the disappearance of the crucial advantage provided by the occupation of the Rhineland. However, France's military leaders also questioned the wisdom of a preemptive attack for important technical reasons. In short, the High Command argued that the Republic simply did not possess the kind of army which was suited to execute a preventive strike. The very nature of such a strategy required the delivery of a lightning-quick initial blow--something that the French Army, because of its slow, laborious process of mobilization, was ill-equipped to deliver.[73] According to the military establishment, this slow mobilization would give the Germans up to eight days advance warning, thus enabling them to prepare their defenses to a considerable degree. With the help of these defensive precautions, the High Command was afraid that the Reichswehr would be able to stall

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[71] Hughes, _To the Maginot Line_, 99.

[72] Fred Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security against Germany, 1919-1940" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1950), 30.

[73] Nobecourt, _Une Histoire Politique de l'Armée_, 196.

the French attack and transform the conflict into a stalemate. Germany would then gain the time it needed to bring its superior manpower and industrial potential to bear and exact its revenge upon an isolated France. Thus, rather than a bold initiative which could bring about the end of the Nazi regime, the military saw the option of preventive war as a potential death warrant for France.

The Overestimation of German Strength

As unbelievable as it may seem from today's standpoint, both French military and civilian leaders rejected the idea of preventive war in large part because they believed that, by as early as 1933, Germany had already grown too strong to be safely challenged. This illusion was born out of the suspicion--held by nearly every Frenchman--that Germany had never really disarmed and that she had been secretly rearming ever since the departure of the Interallied Control Commission in 1927. To a certain extent the French were correct: Germany had uncontestably violated the arms clauses of the Treaty of Versailles on a significant scale in the area of both troops and weaponry. However, they exaggerated the extent of these violations to such a degree that their idea of Germany's military capabilities became completely distorted. The Reichswehr was imparted with almost supernatural attributes, particularly in regard to its size (which the French consistently overestimated by at least a factor of two), the speed with which it could mobilize, and its ability to carry

out offensive as well as defensive operations.

One can find countless examples of this kind of exaggeration contained in the various accounts of the period. For instance, in mid 1933 Minister of War Daladier claimed that Germany could quickly assemble an army of 800,000 men.[74] A year later, Jean Fabry, then chairman of the prestigious Senate Army Commission, asserted that the Germans were marshalling 600,000 troops in the western part of the country, and that these men were about to be joined by another twenty-one divisions in preparation for an attack on France.[75] Some members of the High Command even believed that Hitler was ready to launch a lightning assault against France in early 1935 with up to one hundred divisions--as many as Germany assembled on the western front for its offensive of May, 1940.[76] As absurd as these reports may seem from our postwar vantage point (we now know that in March of 1935 the German Army consisted of twenty-one divisions, only seven of which were first line), they were taken very seriously by nearly everyone in France at that time.[77]

What can account for this gross overestimation of Germany's armed strength? At first glance, one would think that

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[74] France, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1re Serie, Tome 4, No. 11, 19.

[75] Cameron, Prologue to Appeasement, 69.

[76] Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security", 263.

[77] Georges Castellan, Le Rearmament Clandestin du Reich, 1930-1935, Vu par le 2e Bureau l'État-Major Français (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1954), 46.

the problem was one of military intelligence, but this is only partially true. The Deuxieme Bureau provided surprisingly accurate information concerning the size and growth of the Reichswehr, but at the same time it made the fatal mistake (as did seemingly all French observers during the 30's) of attaching too much military significance to Germany's two great paramilitary organizations, the SA and the SS. Mesmerized by their great numbers and their ideological fervor, the French tended to consider these irregulars as capable of fighting alongside of the Reichswehr's professional soldiers in spite of the fact that the former received only about one to three months of military training.[78] Since the active strength of the SA alone stood at 1.2 million men in December of 1933 (it was twice that if reserves and trainees were counted), Germany's actual military strength could be exaggerated many times over by counting--as the French invariably did--part or even all of these paramilitary forces as auxiliary troops of the Reichswehr.[79] Thus, rather than possessing a solid military advantage over Germany, the French saw themselves as scarcely being able to defend their country even with a full mobilization of the nation's manpower.

In the final analysis, it could be argued that the extreme overestimation of the Reichswehr's strength was simply a product of France's single greatest fear: war with Germany.

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[78] Ibid, 407.

[79] France, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1re Serie, Tome 5, No. 102, 22.

The fear of such a conflict and all the hardship and suffering that it entailed tended to magnify the threat posed by the SA and the SS and by Germany's secret rearmament to the point where these concerns became excuses for inaction. Compounding this problem was the fact that the French Army was undergoing a period of crisis so severe as to convince the High Command that France was in no position to risk a conflict with Germany at that time. It will be the task of the next chapter to examine the problems of the French Army during the first half of the 30's and to determine how these problems shaped the way in which France responded to the rise of Nazi Germany.

CHAPTER 5

THE FRENCH ARMY'S CRISIS OF CONFIDENCE, 1919-1936

One of the primary tasks of any army is to impose--should the situation demand it--the will of its government upon another. As the Republic's ultimate means of forcing Germany to obey the restrictions set down by the Treaty of Versailles, the French Army deserves special attention in any study of Franco-German relations during the 1930's. This is particularly true since the military played such a surprisingly small role in France's efforts to contain German revisionism during the interwar period. In large part, this fact was due to the Army's inability as well as its unwillingness to take action against Hitler. There were essentially two factors which conspired to convince the French High Command of the impossibility of a military solution to the German problem. First, the High Command's own strategic and tactical doctrines discouraged any thought of offensive operations against Germany. And secondly, the French Army was beset by a number of very serious problems (such as manpower shortages, low morale and the inadequate training of conscripts) which, according to its leaders, threatened the very existence of the Army itself. Under such circumstances (created largely the government's insistence upon one year

military service), the High Command considered the idea of preventive war to be the very height of madness. Thus, both the Republic's civilian and military leaders had created an army which would not and could not (except by virtue of a general mobilization) carry out the foreign policy of its government. As Paul Reynaud put it, "France n'a pas l'armée de sa politique." Why did this astonishing gap between the nation's foreign and military policies come into being? Chapter Five will attempt to provide an answer to this question.

France Plans for the Defensive

France's experience in the First World War was all important in determining how her military leaders prepared for the next conflict with Germany. Like any other great historical event, the war offered up a veritable treasure chest of "lessons" for military observers--lessons which, unfortunately for France, the Army High Command learnt all too well. While it would be unfair to accuse the High Command of planning to fight the First World War all over again (as is often charged), it did believe that the best course of action for France to take would be to try to recreate as closely as possible the favorable conditions which prevailed during the final stages of the conflict. However, in order to bring about circumstances, the French thought that they would first have to endure a four to five year siege during which they would

remain exclusively on the defensive.[1] Then, after Germany had obligingly exhausted its strength in futile and costly attacks against well-prepared defenses, France would finally go on the offensive. The events of 1918 had proven this to be the formula for victory in the First World War, and the High Command automatically assumed that it would enable their country to triumph once again in the eventuality of another clash with Germany.

Almost as important for the French was the fact that this two part strategy would allow them to avoid their two great mistakes of the last war. First of all, such a plan forbade the sort of disastrous offensives which nearly destroyed the French Army in the first years of the conflict. And just as the tremendous losses incurred in these attacks had rendered the High Command supersensitive to the need for preserving precious French blood, the loss of the country's richest and most productive provinces in 1914 convinced the French that their sacred soil must never again be invaded. Accordingly, the Army's main task upon the opening of hostilities would be to keep the war as far away as possible from France. In order to achieve this goal, army strategists planned to establish the front in Belgium and in Germany itself by immediately sending six divisions to join the six others which were occupying the Rhine bridgeheads, and then

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[1]Robert J. Young, In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-40 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 28.

to transfer the bulk of the French forces across the Belgian border to meet the oncoming German attack (while these operations had the outward appearance of an offensive, their purpose remained entirely defensive). The High Command laid particular emphasis upon winning this initial clash, for above all else the Army had to avoid falling back on French territory.[2] The French concept of the next war (or at least its opening phase) was therefore exclusively defensive in nature, concerned more with avoiding invasion and minimizing casualties that with winning the conflict--or with preventing it from occurring in the first place.[3]

This obsessive defensiveness was reflected in the Army's contingency plans (drawn up at various points during the 1920's) for a possible renewal of hostilities with Germany. For example, Plan P of 1920 provided for an occupation of the Main and Ruhr valleys by 103 French and Belgian divisions in conjunction with a combined Polish-Czech offensive in the east--all against expected light to moderate German opposition.[4] The goal of the operation was merely to disrupt Germany's mobilization process while France attempted to strengthen its diplomatic ties with the Anglo-Americans and

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[2]Jeffery Albert Gunsberg, "Vaincre ou Mourir: The French High Command and the Defeat of France, 1919-May, 1940" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1974), 99.

[3]Judith Hughes, To the Maginot Line: The Politics of French Military Preparations in the 1920's (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 141-142.

[4]Ibid, 86-87.

the other powers.[5] An alternate version of Plan P envisioning a German reoccupation of the Rhineland required only that the French and Belgian forces push the German troops back across the Rhine.[6] Even with their crushing superiority in men and materiel and their very limited objectives, the French considered Plan P to be rather ambitious.[7] As the decade progressed, the Army's contingency plans (as well as its war college instruction and its field exercises) became more and more defensively oriented until, by 1929, Plan B called for the retreat of all French troops from the Rhineland upon the outbreak of hostilities.[8] With the advent of the 30's, the Army firmly committed itself to the idea of assuming a strong defensive posture at the beginning of the next war. At most, the High Command contemplated a minor, token offensive into the Rhineland or the Saar, or, as an alternative, a joint attack against Germany from the south and east (along with Poland, Romania, Italy and Yugoslavia) to which France would contribute a large contingent of troops.[9]

The Origins of French Defensiveness

Some of the chief causes of the French Army's obsession

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[5]Ibid.

[6]Ibid.

[7]Ibid, 138.

[8]Ibid, 193.

[9]Fred Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security against Germany, 1919-1940" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1950), 35.

with the defensive have already been discussed. The impending evacuation of the last troops of occupation from the Rhineland (which eventually took place in 1930) became a major source of anxiety for the High Command as the end of the decade drew near. France's military frontier would then be pushed back from the Rhine to the Franco-German border, greatly increasing the ease with which the country could be invaded once again. In turn, the apprehension caused by the loss of the Rhine barrier tended to exacerbate the already pronounced tendency to exaggerate Germany's military capabilities. As early as the mid 20's the French began to express their fear of a German "attaque brusquée," a lightning-swift surprise attack designed to establish a defensive front in France, behind which Germany could assemble her formidable military-industrial war machine with impunity.[10] Thus, due in large part to the perceived threat of Germany's growing war making potential, the High Command became increasingly concerned with the defense of the country.

Another important factor which contributed towards the Army's defensive-mindedness was the reduction of the length of military service to just one year in 1928. In actuality, the adoption of one year service represented only the culmination of a long process of demobilization which began in 1920, when the government lowered the term of service to two years, and then to eighteen months in 1923. While the nation's civilian leaders almost unanimously considered these

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[10] Ibid, 246.

reductions to be matters of political and economic necessity for their war-weary country, the Army remained bitterly opposed to any decrease in the length of military service below the level of two years.[11] With conscripts serving for only twelve or eighteen months under the colors, the High Command warned that the Army would not possess the necessary strength to mount any kind of offensive or coersive operations, or even to properly defend the country.[12] According to Minister of War Georges Lefevre, the minimum number of troops which could remain under arms without endangering national security was 675,000 (or forty-one divisions), 400,000 of which had to be located in the metropole itself.[13] However, in order to fulfill these conditions, the government would have had to reinstitute the three year term of service which constituted the basis of the Republic's prewar army--a step which nearly all politicians on both the left and the right recognized as a blatant impossibility. In view of the fact that Germany did not at that time pose an immediate military threat (and also because of their faith in the idea of collective security), France's civilian leaders were therefore not overly concerned by their decision to reduce the length of service in spite of the High Command's warning that such a measure would

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[11]Richard D. Challener, The French Theory of the Nation in Arms, 1866-1939 (New York: Russell and Russell Inc., 1965), 148.

[12]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 208.

[13]Challener, French Theory of the Nation in Arms, 160.

have disastrous consequences for the Army.[14]

What were some of the harmful results of the reduction of the length of military service? Perhaps most important of all was the fact that, with the change to two year service in 1920, the High Command believed that there were no longer enough readily available troops in the metropolis in order to insure its defense. The passage of the two year service law meant that the strength of the French Army now stood at 450,000 men comprising thirty-two divisions.[15] Of these troops, only 300,000 were stationed in France--one quarter less than the number specified by Minister of War Lefevre as the minimum level of manpower which could be safely maintained in the country. With the decrease of the length of military service to eighteen months in 1923 and then to just one year in 1928, the situation would grow correspondingly worse. Under the one year service law, the Army shrunk to just twenty divisions and the number of combat ready troops serving in the metropole dipped to 226,000 in 1933--its lowest point during the entire interwar period.[16]

The peak of the manpower crisis in the first half of the 30's was brought about by the so-called "hollow years" ("les années creuses"), the period during which the size of

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[14] Ibid, 183.

[15] Young, In Command of France, 36.

[16] Robert Allen Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster: The Development of French Army Doctrine, 1919-1939 (Archon Books, 1985), 22.

the annual conscript classes was reduced by more than half due to the lower wartime birthrates. The Army therefore suffered not only from its draftees spending less time under the colors, but also from smaller yearly contingents of conscripts (normal classes numbered about 240,000 men, but those of "les années creuses" only about 118,000).[17] In order to help alleviate the effects of the manpower shortage, the High Command was allowed to recruit more professional soldiers as well as station additional colonial troops in France.[18] But both of these attempts to solve the problem would prove to be imperfect remedies at best, and it was only with the disappearance of the "hollow years" and the return of two year service at mid-decade that the Army was finally able to overcome the manpower crisis.[19]

One of the most important results of the postwar reduction of the length of military service was that the French Army was reorganized according to a plan which made it impossible for it to move beyond the nation's borders without a general mobilization.[20] With so few active troops serving in France after 1920, there could be no question whatsoever of the standing army undertaking any sort of offensive opera-

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[17]Elizabeth R. Cameron, Prologue to Appeasement: A Study in French Foreign Policy (Washington D.C.: American Council on Public Affairs, 1942), 106.

[18]Maurice Gamelin, Servir, vol. I, Le Prologue du Drame (1930-Août, 1939) (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1946), 207.

[19]Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster, 181.

[20]Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security", 224.

tions. Rather, the primary task of the active army was now to defend the Republic against attack, to withstand and absorb the first German blow, and to stave off invasion until mobilization of the reserves could be completed.[21] In the parlance of the French High Command, this function was known as "couverture."

Requiring forty-eight hours to execute and involving 1.2 million men (consisting of all the career soldiers serving in the metropole, special fortress troops manning the frontier fortifications, all the members of the current conscript class with at least six months training, and the three most recent reserve classes), "couverture" could be triggered either by an actual attack or by the threat of imminent hostilities.[22] Upon the government's order, the designated troops would rush to the frontier defenses and seal off the nation's northern and eastern borders. Until both the couverture and mobilization processes had been completed, the Army could not risk weakening this thinly stretched first line of defense by launching a hazardous offensive across French borders. Thus, there was practically no middle ground between complete inaction and total mobilization. The French military system was geared almost exclusively towards protecting the country from a German attack. In order to carry out any sort of operations beyond the nation's borders (even those which were undertaken on a very limited scale, such as the coercive ac-

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[21]Young, In Command of France, 30.

[22]Ibid.

tions of the early 20's), the Army would first have to execute its couverture duties and then wait until its ranks were filled out by the mobilization of the reserves.[23]

Another reason why the Army was incapable of taking any immediate action (other than couverture) was that none of its peacetime units possessed its full complement of manpower.[24] Including the active divisions charged with carrying out couverture (there were twelve of these under two year service and six under one year service), the French Army consisted entirely of partially manned skeleton units which could only be brought to full strength by the addition of reserve troops. For example, France's first line divisions were staffed by only one third of their wartime complement of officers, seventeen percent of their noncommissioned officers and fifty-five percent of their enlisted men.[25] Second line, or "Series A" divisions, were manned by just twenty-three percent of their normal contingent of officers, seventeen percent of their noncommissioned officers and a scant two percent of their enlisted men.[26] The so-called "Series B" divisions existed entirely on paper; they contained no active troops at all and were composed exclusively of the oldest reserve

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[23]W.M. Jordan, Great Britain, France and the German Problem (London: Frank Cass and Co., Ltd, 1943), 72.

[24]France, Commission de Publication des Documents Relatifs aux Origines de la Guerre 1939-1945, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 2e Serie, Tome 1 (Paris: Imprimerie National, 1963), No. 525, 698.

[25]Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster, 23.

[26]Ibid.

classes.[27] Upon mobilization, each of the active army's divisions separated into three regiments, each of which would constitute the nucleus of a new division.[28] Except for the couverture units (which could be ready and in place almost immediately), it took anywhere from eight to fourteen days to mobilize the reserves which formed the backbone of the French Army's approximately one hundred divisions.[29] If forced to deal with a crisis beyond her borders, France therefore had no choice but to respond with the full weight of her forces, and then only after a delay of perhaps as much as two weeks.

The Army's reliance upon reservists to fill out its ranks also led the High Command to question its value as a fighting force. These doubts constituted one of the chief causes of the military's obsessive preoccupation with the defense of the country. However, in the eyes of the French High Command, these doubts were well founded. Over eighty-five percent of the couverture force--the nation's first line of defense--consisted of reserve troops.[30] As General Weygand pointed out at the end of 1933, the situation had become so serious that "five divisions out of twenty, or one quarter of the peacetime army, could no longer be utilized as divisions in the field, that is to say, so many reservists would have to be allotted to them that they would simply have the value

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[27]Ibid.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Young, In Command of France, 30.

[30]Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster, 32.

of reserve divisions."[31]

The problem of the Army's overdependence upon reservists was compounded by the reduction of the length of military service to one year. Although the High Command conceded that conscripts could be thrown into battle with as little as six months of training if absolutely necessary, it nevertheless maintained that trainees required a minimum of two years of instruction in order to acquire the proper level of military proficiency.[32] With only one year spent under the colors, Army commanders insisted that their troops could not learn the combat skills necessary to conduct offensive operations, or even a strong, determined defense. One year service, they pointed out, rendered it difficult for the Army to produce the required number of noncommissioned officers and deprived enlisted men of the opportunity to work with new, heavy or more complex equipment.[33] To make matters worse, many conscripts served as little as half the prescribed twelve months under the colors due to extended periods of leave and the early release of conscript classes by the economy-minded government.[34] Upon leaving the Army, these troops were placed on

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[31]Paul-Marie de la Gorce, The French Army: A Military-Political History, trans. Kenneth Douglas (New York: Georges Brazilles, Inc., 1963), 254.

[32]General Eugene Debeney, Sur la Securité Militaire de France (Paris: Payot, 1930), 17.

[33]Phillip Charles Farwell Bankwitz, Maxime Weygand and Civil-Military Relations in Modern France (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), 84.

[34]Debeney, Sur la Securité Militaire de France, 17.

active reserve for three years, during which time they received only a further two weeks of instruction.[35] It is therefore hardly surprising that, given the lack of adequately trained personnel, the High Command became extremely apprehensive as to whether the Army could survive the crucial opening weeks of the next war.

Just as the nation's military leaders entertained serious doubts about the capabilities of their conscript soldiers, they also expressed much anxiety over the state of the professional army. Few in number (the strength of the regular army ranged from an interwar low of 106,000 in 1932 to a high of 136,000 in 1936), career soldiers were scattered sparsely among France's twenty active divisions.[36] While charged with such various duties as protecting the overseas empire and manning the frontier fortifications and mobilization centers, by far the most important task of the peacetime professional army was the training of draftees. In fact, this chore became such an all-consuming responsibility that many career soldiers came to feel that their identity and their calling had been sacrificed for the sake of the conscript army.[37] There was much truth in this sentiment: lacking an organization of its own and overwhelmed by an avalanche of inductees, the professional army became little more than a vast instruc-

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[35]Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster, 30.

[36]Bankwitz, Maxime Weygand, 41.

[37]Ibid.

tional corps.[38] Bemoaning what he saw as the devaluation of the regular forces, one French general wrote: "Nous avons dilué nos hommes de l'active dans un flot de reservistes et nous avons obtenu un liquide un peu pres inoffensive."[39]

There were also numerous other factors which led to the decay of the professional army during the interwar years. To begin with, the Republic's career soldiers had become deeply embittered by the government's failure to prevent the devaluation of the franc, one of the results of which was to depress military salaries below the subsistence level.[40] The situation became so serious that some officers were even forced to take second jobs in order to survive. The efforts of the French government to cut spending during the late 20's and the first half of the 30's also took its toll upon the Army.[41] As part of the general austerity measures, its budget was progressively slashed until it reached an interwar low in 1934. These cutbacks included not only the reduction of the length of military service to one year in 1928, but also the dismissal of five thousand officers (half the Army's total) from active service in 1933.[42] The professional soldiers reacted to these events by blaming the civilian government for

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[38] Ibid.

[39] General Narcisse Chauvineau, Une Invasion, Est-Elle Encore Possible? (Paris: Éditions Berger Levrault, 1939), 206.

[40] Alistair Horne, The French Army and Politics, 1870-1970 (New York: Peter Bedrich Books, 1984), 51.

[41] Gamelin, Servir, vol. 1,, 79.

[42] Horne, The French Army and Politics, 53.

the Army's shabby and neglected state, which they regarded as further proof of the anti-militarism which had taken root in French society after the end of the First World War.[43] Exacerbating this resentment towards the government was the fact that the soldiers commonly accused the politicians of having "lost the peace" by allowing the Germans to tear the Treaty of Versailles to shreds, thus squandering their hard earned victory.[44]

One of the most important results of the civilians' assault upon the Army was the almost total destruction of the morale and the ésprit de corps of the professional forces. This crisis was also precipitated in part by certain conditions which were created by the High Command itself. First of all, it became very difficult for junior officers to advance through the ranks of the postwar army due to the congested state of the upper reaches of the officer corps.[45] Thinking that only they could lead the Army through its period of crisis, the generals who helped to engineer the victory of 1918 made sure that they would remain in command throughout the 30's by raising the age of mandatory retirement for generals from sixty to seventy years of age.[46] The resulting stagnation at the top of the army hierarchy consequently

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[43]de la Gorce, The French Army, 192.

[44]Horne, The French Army and Politics, 51.

[45]de la Gorce, The French Army, 192.

[46]Georges Clemenceau, The Grandeur and Misery of Victory, trans. P.M. Atkinson (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1930), 350.

blocked the upward movement of younger men. The High Command's tactical doctrine also tended to provoke profound discontent within the ranks of the professional army. French military thought laid heavy emphasis upon mechanical theories of warfare which subordinated the traditional role of the soldier to material factors such as weight of firepower, superiority of materiel, fortifications, etc. For many in the regular army, these principles dehumanized their profession and called up feelings of uselessness, boredom, and intellectual suffocation.[47] Taken together, both of these factors caused significant numbers of career soldiers to leave the Army, 25,000 of them departing its ranks in 1932 alone.[48]

Thus, due to the evacuation of the Rhineland, the shortage of military manpower brought on by the passage of one year service and the advent of the "hollow years," the proliferation of reservists, the inadequate training of conscripts and the breakdown of morale in the professional army, the High Command asserted throughout the first half of the 30's that the French Army was incapable of responding to a crisis at that time.[49] In fact, the condition of the Army had deteriorated to the point where, in the eyes of its commanders, it could no longer be counted upon to perform even its

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[47]de la Gorce, The French Army, 192.

[48]Jacques Nobecourt, Une Histoire Politique de l'Armée, vol. I, 1919-1942: de Pétain à Pétain (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967), 196.

[49]Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security", 48.

basic duty of couverture.[50] In December of 1933, General Weygand went so far as to say that:

> Du fait des réductions d'effectifs et des compressions budgétaires, un partie de l'armée active n'existe plus qu'a l'état d'unités-cadres; l'instruction est en régression; la mobilisation présente des incertitudes materielles et un incontestable affaiblissement de valeur des grandes unités aux quelles elle donnerait naissance.[51]
>
> Ainsi, tandis que de l'autre coté du Rhin, l'Allemagne unifée, fidèle à son idéal de domination, a remis sur pied une force militaire déja de haute qualité et bientôt redoubtable, l'armée française a perdu de sa valeur. À continuer les errements actuels nous risquons de n'avoir bientôt plus dans l'armée qu'une façade, donnant une fausse securité en face de l'Allemagne rearmée.[52]

Constantly pressing the government for the restoration of two year service and an increase in defense spending, Weygand remained the staunchest defender of the French Army during the interwar period, and only when the government acted upon his advice in the first half of 1935 did the Army's decline begin to reverse itself.

Armée de Metier?

In the face of the many serious problems which confronted the French Army between the wars, it was only natural that those who were interested in military affairs began to suggest alternative forms of organization for their nation's armed forces. One of the most controversial of these pro-

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[50] Bankwitz, Maxime Weygand, 48.

[51] Georges Castellan, Le Réarmement Clandestin du Reich, 1930-1935, Vu par le 2e Bureau de l'État Major Français (Paris, Librairie Plon, 1954), 556.

[52] Maurice Vaisse, Securité d'Abord: La Politique Française en Matiere de Désarmement, 9 Decembre 1930-17 Avril 1934 (Paris: Éditions Peotone, 1981), 542.

posed plans was the creation of what was popularly known as an "armée de metier," or, simply, a professional army. The concept of the armée de metier differed in several important ways from the "regular" or "professional" army which France possessed at the time. First of all, the armée de metier would consist of a small but highly trained corps of elite career soldiers which would remain independent of the national conscript army rather than serve as the framework around which it was constructed. Secondly, this new army was to be a heavily armored force. According to the paradigm suggested by Colenel Charles de Gaulle, the greatest champion of the armée de metier, it was to be composed of six armored divisions, each of which would possess about five hundred heavy and several hundred light and medium tanks.[53] But the most important feature of this force was that its ability to deliver swift and powerful blows deep into enemy territory made it an ideal weapon with which to carry out coercive operations or a preventive war. Equipped with its own artillery and infantry support, aircraft, engineers, reserves and supply, reconnaissance and camoflage units, this new armored corps would be almost totally self-sufficient and capable of operating independently even if cut off or surrounded.[54] In addition, the creation of such a force would eliminate most of the disadvantages presented by the Republic's existing

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[53]General Charles de Gaulle, The Army of the Future (New York: J.B. Lippencott Co., 1941), 100.

[54]de Gaulle, The Army of the Future, 100.

military system (inadequate training, slow mobilization, low morale, etc.).

In spite of the potential advantages offered by an armée de metier, only a few in France favored the formation of this kind of an army. As has already been mentioned, the most famous advocate of an armored intervention force was Charles de Gaulle, whose celebrated book, Vers l'Armée de Metier, became the bible of the army reform movement. Although numerous other high ranking officers agreed with de Gaulle's ideas to a certain extent, his only major allies within the French Army were two prominent generals, Estienne (known as "the father of the tank") and Doumenc.[55] In the National Assembly, the idea of an armored corps was advanced primarily by Jean Fabry, the royalist deputy Jean le Cour Grandmaison, and Edouard Daladier, who, as Minister of War, would eventually oversee the formation of France's six Light Mechanized Divisions as well as her four armored divisions.[56] But de Gaulle's most renowned parliamentary spokesman was undoubtedly Paul Reynaud, who began urging the adoption of an armored intervention force as early as 1924.[57] Calling this proposed corps a "Treaty Army," Reynaud asserted that:

> To have given France a defensive army is one of the most serious signs of our intellectual and moral declension

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[55]de la Gorce, The French Army, 277.

[56]Paul Reynaud, Le Problem Militaire Français (Paris: Flamarion, 1937), 27.

[57]Paul Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight: 1930-1945, trans. James D. Lambert (Paris: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 94.

during the interwar period.[58]

> Is the role of our Army, as in 1914, to cover us against any German aggression? No such thing. We are victorious. Its role is to put the Treaty into effect.[59]

Unfortunately, the vast majority of Frenchmen--both on the left and on the right-- were strongly opposed to the creation of an armée de metier. The communists and socialists were hostile to the adoption of such an army mainly for ideological reasons. Pacifist by nature, the left invariably regarded an armored corps as an exclusively offensive, first-strike weapon, the mere possession of which would inevitably tempt the High Command to launch a preventive war against Germany.[60] The left's prejudice against a de Gaulle style army was confirmed in the mid 30's when Hitler began building his Panzer divisions. The simple fact that the Nazis now had such militaristic and immoral weapons was reason enough for the socialists and communists to insist that France renounce all thought of constructing an armée de metier.[61] In addition, they were also convinced that the creation of an armored force would pose a grave threat to the Republic by providing the generals (whom the antimilitaristic left instinctively suspected of harboring Napoleanic ambitions) with the perfect tool with which to stage a coup d'état.

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[58]Lewis B. Namier, Europe in Decay: A Study in Disintegration, 1936-1940 (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1950), 37.

[59]Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight, 94.

[60]Challener, French Theory of the Nation in Arms, 182.

[61]de la Gorce, The French Army, 280.

The left also entertained other ideological arguments against the formation of an armée de metier--arguments which, conversely, justified France's existing military system. Asserting that democracies such as France should never cast themselves in the role of an aggressor by initiating hostilities, the communists and socialists maintained that only defensive armies were consistent with the republican form of government.[62] Since they considered an armored corps to be a strictly offensive weapon, French leftists consequently held that it would be highly inappropriate for France to build such an army. Furthermore, the socialist bloc asserted that the idea of an elite professional force was highly undemocratic as well as contrary to the Republic's military traditions.[63] Just as in 1791 or in 1914, the left insisted that France's wars should be fought by national conscript armies--by "la nation tout entiere."[64] This "theory of the nation in arms" (as one historian, Richard D. Challener, has called it) was so deeply rooted in the French military experience and in the republican consciousness that it simply could not be challenged.[65] After all, the socialists pointed out, it was the citizen-soldier who had won victory for France in the wars of revolution and in the First World War.[66] On the other hand,

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[62] Challener, _French Theory of the Nation in Arms_, 142.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Debeney, _Sur la Securité Militaire de France_, 62.

[65] Challener, _French Theory of the Nation in Arms_, 142.

[66] Ibid.

it was the professional army which was largely responsible for France's humiliating defeat in 1870 and the disastrous invasion of the country in the first weeks of August, 1914.[67] Moreover, the left argued that the experience of the First World War had proven that conscripts and reserves, once they had tasted battle for the first time, could fight just as well as the professional soldiers.[68]

Almost as much opposition to the idea of an armée de metier would issue from the French High Command as from the ranks of the socialists. The generals drew upon a veritable arsenal of arguments in their efforts to discourage the formation of an armored corps. General Eugene Debeney, one of the principal opponents of an armée de metier, maintained that the construction of such a force would be tantamount to putting all of France's eggs in one basket: if the army were cut off in enemy territory and destroyed (as he was sure it would be), then the nation, deprived of its best troops and equipment, would be left with only a second line conscript army to defend it.[69] Predicting the inevitable failure of any strategic offensive undertaken by an armored corps, Debeney wrote: "We will have a brilliant communique at the outset, and a few days later, a useless S.O.S." [70] And while most of the High Command doubted the value of an armée de metier as

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[67]Namier, Europe in Decay, 36.

[68]Challener, French Theory of the Nation in Arms, 143.

[69]Debeney, Sur la Securité Militaire de France, 50.

[70]de la Gorce, The French Army, 272.

an offensive weapon, many also agreed that this kind of a force would be practically useless for defensive purposes as well since (as they believed) tanks could not hold ground by themselves.[71]

The military establishment found still other reasons to reject the formation of an armored striking force. One influential officer, General Narcisse Chauvineau, thought that an armée de metier would soon fall prey to the sort of problems which commonly afflict elite organizations of its kind: complacency, bureaucracy, abuse of power, physical age, intellectual ossification, etc.[72] General Maurin, Minister of War during much of the 30's, voiced the rather undiscerning opinion that an armored corps would simply be superfluous since the French Army was already highly mechanized. "We already have a mechanized, motorized, organized reserve," he argued; "Nothing needs to be created, everything exists."[73] Chauvineau agreed with Maurin, asserting that an armée de metier was not only "useless and undesirable," but that it also went against "logic and history."[74]

Finally, there were several practical reasons for rejecting the type of army envisioned by de Gaulle. First of all, many of his critics charged that the five to six years required to train the soldiers of such a force was simply too

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[71]Chauvineau, Invasion, Est-Elle encore Possible?, 101.

[72]Ibid, 149.

[73]de la Gorce, The French Army, 272.

[74]Ibid.

long to justify its existence.[75] Likewise, de Gaulle's adversaries complained that the cost of an armée de metier would be so great that the nation's conscript army would inevitably be reduced to third-rate status due to the resulting lack of funds.[76] France, claimed these observers, could not afford both an armored corps and a national army; she would have to choose between the two. These same critics also pointed out--and correctly so--that there were not nearly enough heavy tanks in the Republic's arsenals at that time (nor could French industry produce enough within the foreseeable future) in order to allow the formation of six armored divisions. In fact, until 1939, French factories turned out only one or two of the heavy "B" tanks per month, and as a result, the Army possessed only seven of these weapons by September of 1936 and only seventy-one by January of 1939.[77]

French Tactical Doctrine

One of the main reasons why the High Command was so unreceptive to the idea of an armée de metier was that the creation of such a force would have been inconsistent with the Army's established tactical doctrine. This doctrine was derived almost entirely from what the French generals perceived as the single greatest lesson of the First World War: the su-

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[75]Pertinax (André Geraud), The Gravediggers of France: Gamelin, Daladier, Reynaud, Pétain and Laval; Military Defeat, Armistice, Counterrevolution (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Doran and Co., Inc., 1944), 329.

[76]Ibid.

[77]Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster, 161.

periority of defensive firepower to the offensive. The advance of technology, they maintained, enabled defenders to concentrate fire in such heavy volume that attackers now stood only the slightest chance of any significant success. Reducing this fundamental principle of modern warfare down to an exact science, one influential member of the French High Command, General Frederic Culmann, calculated that well-prepared defenders suffered only thirty-five percent casualties while almost two thirds of their attackers were either killed or wounded.[78] This was a lesson which had been driven home to the French by the traumatic experience of the First World War, in which hundreds of thousands of French lives had been squandered in hopeless, futile offensives. Furthermore, French military thinkers held that the technological changes which had occurred since the end of the war would only serve to increase the dominance of defensive firepower to an even greater degree.[79]

The law of the superiority of the defensive over the offensive gave birth to an important corollary in the High Command's tactical doctrine. This was the principle of the "continuous front." When two opposing armies clashed for the first time (as in August, 1914), neither would be able to overcome the defensive fire of the other, with the result that the battle lines would quickly stabilize into a "continuous front" of trenches and fortifications. The great military

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[78]Ibid, 74.

[79]Challener, French Theory of the Nation in Arms, 217.

problem posed by the First World War was the inability of either side to make a decisive breach in the lines of their opponent, and only in the last months of the conflict was the French High Command confident that it had finally discovered a solution to the riddle of the continuous front. The events of the summer of 1918 had shown that only after one side had already exhausted its strength in unsuccessful attacks could the other side move to the offensive with a reasonable hope of breaking the enemy's front. But as the High Command was always quick to point out, in order for any offensive to succeed, the attackers first had to build up an overwhelming superiority in manpower and materiel. For example, in his now infamous book, Une Invasion, Est-Elle encore Possible?, General Chauvineau asserted that an offensive required three times the infantry, six times the artillery and twelve times the ammunition that was needed by the defenders.[80] Once this crushing superiority had been established, the attack could then proceed, pushing slowly and methodically ahead under the protection of massive artillery support.[81] Elements such as speed, surprise and the ability to maneuver were, at best, secondary considerations.[82]

And what of the tank, the new wonder weapon which many military experts agreed would change the face of warfare? While the High Command conceded that tanks could play a valu-

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[80]Chauvineau, Invasion, Est-Elle encore Possible?, 122.

[81]Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security", 32.

[82]Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster, 33.

able defensive role on the tactical level as "a strong aid placed at the disposal of the infantry," it refused to accept the theory that armor could function independently in an offensive strategic role.[83] As one training manual clearly pointed out, the Army saw the tank essentially as a sort of mobile fortification: "L'emploi de chars de combat, qui ne sont que de l'infanterie condensée et protegée, permet de reduire l'importance de personel exposé sur la ligne de feu."[84]

The High Command's underestimation of the value of armor stemmed in large part from the checkered performance of tanks during the First World War. While they did achieve some notable successes, the French found these early armored vehicles to be costly, short-ranged, clumsy, difficult to deploy and vulnerable to anti-tank guns.[85] Maintaining that armor could not survive without the close support of infantry, the Army establishment believed that the anti-tank gun would dominate the tank just as artillery and the machine gun dominated the foot soldier.[86] Not only did commanders such as Chauvineau insist that the tank's "pouvoir de destruction est trés faible," but they also asserted that armor could neither conquer nor hold terrain without the help of the infantry.[87] Thus, in the eyes of the High Command, the tank in no way

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[83]Ibid, 137.

[84]Vaisse, Securité d'Abord, 72.

[85]Chauvineau, Invasion, Est-Elle encore Possible?, 101.

[86]de la Gorce, The French Army, 279.

[87]Chauvineau, Invasion, Est-Elle encore Possible?, 101.

constituted the sort of breakthrough weapon that it was once thought to be.

In examining the reasons behind the High Command's refusal to adopt an armée de metier, one must rightly condemn the French military establishment for its lack of imagination, its doctrinaire blindness and its smug complacency. To some degree, this unreceptiveness to new ideas was due to the fact that the Army's top leaders were largely old men in their sixties and seventies who had served under Joffre or Foch during the First World War. As the protégés of France's most illustrious generals, they were apt to suffer from the arrogance of prestige in addition to the inflexibility of old age. Moreover, having emerged triumphant from the war, the military leadership was not inclined to question the tactical and strategic doctrines which had earned victory for France in 1918. Conversely, the Germans, who had been doomed to defeat by the lengthy duration of the conflict, began to look for a new method of winning wars quickly and decisively. It was with this idea in mind that Hitler began the construction of his Panzer divisions in the mid 30's.

But while the High Command remained on the whole decidedly opposed to the creation of an armée de metier, the Army did exhibit a growing tendency during the second half of the 30's to favor the expanded role of armor. Never completely closing their minds against the tank, the Republic's military leaders toyed with the idea of armored divisions throughout the interwar period. However, it was only when it became

widely known that the Reichswehr was experimenting with tanks that the French seriously began to consider forming their own armored units. Under the supervision of Minister of War Daladier, the first step in this direction was taken in 1934 with the creation of six Light Mechanized Divisions (DLM's). Highly motorized but only lightly armored (each DLM was equipped with just one to two hundred light and medium tank). these units could in no way be considered as true armored divisions. Slowly--too slowly--the High Command became more and more amenable to the idea of large tank units. "We are moving in your direction," admitted General Gamelin to Paul Reynaud; "don't hustle the Army."[88] Not until January of 1940, however, did the Army finally form the first of its four armored divisions (a move which was prompted largely by the demonstration of the Panzer divisions' power in the Polish campaign of September, 1939).[89] And like the DLM's, these units were relatively underarmed, each possessing just 156 tanks, only sixty-six of which were the heavy "B" models.[90] Apart from these ten armored formations, the great bulk of the French Army's tanks were scattered from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier in close support of the infantry.[91]

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[88]Namier, Europe in Decay, 41.

[89]Doughty, The Seeds of Disaster, 167.

[90]Ibid.

[91]Hughes, To the Maginot Line, 266.

The Disjunction of French Military and Foreign Policy

In spite of the fact that Clemenceau had committed his country to the containment of German expansion and rearmament for years to come, the Republic's subsequent political and military leaders consciously fashioned an army which was extremely ill equipped to execute such a policy. The adverse effects of the reduction of the length of military service by the civilian government and of the Army's own strategic and tactical doctrines led the High Command to dismiss any thought of an armed response to German revisionism. The construction of the Maginot Line in the early 30's merely confirmed the fact that the French had no intention of sending their army beyond their frontiers in order to enforce the Treaty of Versailles. This is exactly the point made by Minister of War Maurin when, in March of 1935, he reminded the National Assembly that the Republic's armed forces had been conceived and constructed entirely in terms of the defensive:

> Comment peut-on croire que nous songions encore à l'offensive, quand nous avons depensé des milliards pour établir une barrière fortifée? Serions nous assez fous pour aller en avant de cette barrière à je ne sais quoi aventure? Cela, seul, messieurs, vous montre quelle est la pensée du gouvernement, tout au moins en ma personne, connait parfaitement le plan de guerre.[92]

Thus, as Paul Reynaud said, "France n'a pas l'armée de sa politique." But this was not so much a case of an army being incompatible with the foreign policy it was meant to enforce as it was an instance of an army faced with the impossible task of serving two completely opposite foreign pol-

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[92] Paul Reynaud, Le Probleme Militaire Français, 27.

icies at the same time. The first of these policies, that of the strict enforcement of the Treaty of Versailles, was adopted during a period of intense anger and bitterness against Germany which followed naturally in the wake of the war's conclusion. But by the end of 1923, tempers had cooled considerably and the French had grown weary of the ugly and costly business of coercing Germany into fulfilling her treaty obligations. Putting an end to ten years of constant warfare with her neighbor to the east, France finally abandoned the strategy of strict enforcement and replaced it with an almost entirely passive, defensive policy towards Germany--in short, a policy of appeasement. This transformation began with the evacuation of the Ruhr in 1924, continued on into 1925 with the signing of the Treaty of Locarno, and culminated in the late 20's with the creation of a defensive army, the most visible and the most infamous manifestation of which was the construction of the Maginot Line in the early 30's.

The most curious feature of this transition from the resistance of German revisionism to appeasement was that it went unnoticed by so many people, both in France and in the rest of the world. To a large degree, public opinion still expected France to prevent German rearmament and aggression in spite of the fact that, as was evidenced by her construction of a defensive army, she was no longer willing to take active measures in defense of the Treaty of Versailles. After 1924, then, French policy towards Germany consisted of a solid core of appeasement concealed beneath a thin veneer of

intimidation. Right up until the moment when the French government declared war on Germany in September of 1939, its diplomatic strategy amounted to little more than making token gestures of resistance to German revisionism, all the while never intending to make good upon these idle threats. It was only with the outbreak of the Rhineland crisis of March, 1936 that this facade was finally destroyed and appeasement--not resistance--was clearly shown to be the true foreign policy of France. It will be the task of the next and final chapter to demonstrate how the crisis of March 7, 1936 marked the triumph of French appeasement.

CHAPTER VI

THE RHINELAND CRISIS OF MARCH 7, 1936: THE INCONSISTENCIES REVEALED

For several important reasons, a short study of the Rhineland crisis of March, 1936 has been chosen as the subject for the concluding chapter of this thesis. Like the evacuation of the Ruhr in 1924 and the issuing of the Note of April 17, 1934, the Rhineland crisis marked a crucial turning point in French policy towards Germany. First of all, the crisis inaugurated the beginning of the fourth and last phase of French diplomacy in regard to Germany: open appeasement, the total retreat of France before Hitler's *fait accomplis*. The Republic's failure to take decisive action against the Nazi regime at this critical juncture exposed to plain view the fact that French leaders had no intention of using military force to oppose acts of German revisionism. March 7, 1936 also represented France's last opportunity to check the rise of Nazi Germany, for by the time Hitler launched his next coup against Austria in March of 1938, the French no longer possessed the sizeable military advantage they had enjoyed just two years before. As one French deputy, Jacques Bardoux, later pointed out, the consequences of the Republic's failure to respond to

the remilitarization of the Rhineland bore a striking resemblance to the aftermath of another lost opportunity seventy years before: "Si la guerre de 1870 n'a pas été perdue à Sedan mais à Sadowa, en 1866, la guerre de 1940 n'a pas été perdue à Sedan, mais sur la Rhin, en 1936."[1]

Finally, a study of the Rhineland crisis serves as an appropriate conclusion to this thesis because of the way in which it revealed the various illogicalities and inconsistencies inherent within French policy towards Germany, particularly in respect to the yawning gap between the country's foreign and military policies. Rather than focus on the details of the crisis itself, Chapter Six will attempt to examine how these contradictions conspired to launch the last, most spectacular, and most infamous phase of French appeasement. Concentrating in particular on the French Army's role in the crisis, this final chapter will also address the question of why France failed to counteract Hitler's coup, as well as consider how this failure to act constituted one of the clearest examples of French appeasement in the entire interwar era.

France Prepares for the Approaching Crisis

Hitler's remilitarization of the Rhineland came as no surprise to Prime Minister Albert Sarraut and his cabi-

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[1]France, Les Événements Survenus en France de 1933 à 1945: Témoignages et Documents Recueillies par la Commission d'Enquête Parlementaire (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1947), 5: 1409.

net. In fact, French politicians, diplomats, and journalists had been predicting such a move as the logical next step in the dictator's revisionist campaign ever since his announcement of Germany's rearmament a year earlier. With the help of intelligence information gathered by French observers in the Rhineland during the autumn and winter of 1935-1936, some of these prognosticators even managed to estimate the date of the Wehrmacht's entry into the demilitarized zone to within a matter of days. There can therefore be no question that the French government had ample time in which to prepare a response to the impending German strike.

How did the Sarraut cabinet plan to deal with the imminent remilitarization of the Rhineland? In February of 1936 this matter was discussed in a series of exchanges between Foreign Minister Pierre-Etienne Flandin and the two principal representatives of France's military establishment, the Minister of War, General Joseph Maurin, and the French Army's Chief of Staff, General Maurice Gamelin. For his part, Flandin thought that the government should first obtain a firm British commitment to support any measures that France might take in response to a reoccupation, and then explicitly warn Berlin that any attempt to remilitarize the Rhineland would be met by the joint opposition of the two countries.[2] Flandin clearly intended that these

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[2]France, Commission de Publication des Documents Rel-

possible countermeasures should include the use of military force. But when he asked General Maurin what steps the Army was ready to take in the eventuality of the Wehrmacht's entry into the demilitarized zone, the Minister of War delivered the stunning reply that "l'armée française avait été entièrement conçue pour une mission défensive et qu'elle n'avait rien de preparé et encore de prêt pour une intervention militaire."[3]

Alarmed but undaunted, Flandin requested Maurin to formulate plans for a possible counteroffensive into the Rhineland. Five days later, Maurin sent his recommendations to the Foreign Ministry. His position remained essentially unchanged: still refusing to contemplate the dispatch of an expeditionary force into the Rhineland, he advocated only that the government take certain "precautionary measures" (such as the institution of couverture, the mobilization of French industry, and the securing of British military support) in case the reoccupation turned out to be a prelude to a full-scale invasion of France.[4] At the same time, Maurin insisted that the precautions should be kept to a minimum in order not to provide the Germans with

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atifs aux Origines de la Guerre 1939-1945, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 1932-1939, 2e Serie, Tome I (Paris: Imprimerie National, 1963), No. 170, 246.

[3]Pierre-Etienne Flandin, Politique Française, 1919-1940 (Paris: Les Éditions Nouvelles, 1947), 195-196.

[4]France, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 2e Serie, Tome I, No. 170, 246.

a pretext for launching an attack on France.[5]

Flandin attempted twice more to prod the Minister of War into drawing up a plan for military action, but on each occasion Maurin and Gamelin countered with the argument that if France responded militarily to the reoccupation without first obtaining the support of Great Britain and the League, then she risked appearing as the aggressor.[6] This would then serve as a justification for France's Locarno partners to withhold their aid, thus leaving the Republic to face an angry and vengeful Germany alone. Confronted with this logic, Flandin gave up and pushed the matter no further. He did, however, draft his own contingency plan detailing France's probable reaction in the event of the Wehrmacht's entry into the demilitarized zone.

According to this plan, France would not act unilaterally to oppose a remilitarization, but would instead appeal to the League and confer with Britain and the other Locarno signatories in order to secure their cooperation in imposing sanctions against Germany.[7] Just in case the League and the Locarno powers did decide to take military action against Hitler, the High Command was once again instructed to begin preparing for a possible counteroffensive into the Rhineland. Thus, two weeks before the first

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[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid, No. 196, 290-293.

[7] Ibid, No. 241, 339.

German troops ever penetrated the demilitarized zone, Flandin had already decided that France would not reply to a reoccupation with armed force unless she were backed up by allies. And since it was well known that the Republic could count with certainty only upon the Czechs for military support, it appeared as if the outcome of the crisis had been determined even before it had begun.[8]

The French Government Reacts To Hitler's Coup

When units of the German Army finally marched into the demilitarized zone on March 7, only a few members of the Sarraut cabinet gave any indication that they favored an immediate military response to the German *fait accompli*. Foremost among these was the Prime Minister himself, whose famous radio address to the nation on the night of March 8, declaring that France was "not disposed to leave Strasbourg exposed to German guns," initially seemed to imply that the government was going to take decisive action.[9] Foreign Minister Flandin, the other major figure at the center of the drama, emerges from the crisis as something of an enigmatic figure, at times appearing to be genuinely inclined towards a forceful response, but at others pas-

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[8] James Thomas Emmerson, *The Rhineland Crisis, 7 March, 1936: A Study in Multilateral Diplomacy* (Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1977), 118.

[9] Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, "France and the Crisis of March, 1936," trans. Nancy L. Roelker, in *French Society and Culture since the Old Regime*, ed. Evelyn M. Acomb and Marvin L. Brown (San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 253.

sively submitting to the advocates of inaction. Others in Sarraut's cabinet who supported the idea of a military resolution of the crisis included the President of the Council of Ministers and Minister for League of Nations Affairs, Joseph Paul-Boncour, Colonial Minister Georges Mandel, and three lesser known ministers, Mssrs. Comert, Stern, and Guernot. This small band of cabinet ministers was augmented by two top representatives of the French diplomatic corps who also favored armed resistance to Hitler's move: Alexis St. Leger, Secretary General of the Quai d'Orsay, and Rene Massigli, the Quai d'Orsay's Deputy Director for Political Affairs.

During the four days of cabinet discussions which followed the reoccupation, France's military and political leaders offered up a number of arguments both for and against a vigorous reaction to the coup of March 7. Believing the Nazi regime to be still very much on shaky ground, some of the advocates of resistance argued that if the Republic could deliver a setback to Germany in the Rhineland, the more conservative elements in the country (particularly the officer corps) would be strongly encouraged to topple Hitler from power. A few of these optimists even thought that this result could be achieved without the use of military force. Flandin and St. Leger, for example, maintained that Hitler could be made to retreat simply by confronting him with the threat of econom-

ic sanctions in combination with a united diplomatic front of France, Great Britain, and as many other powers as could be enlisted.[10] The Foreign Minister was confident that this strategy would succeed, and even if it didn't, France could always increase the level of pressure to include the use of armed force.

However, Flandin, Sarraut and their allies soon found themselves greatly outnumbered by the partisans of inaction, who clearly constituted the vast majority of both the government and of public opinion. Led by Gamelin and Maurin, these champions of caution immediately fell back upon several very compelling arguments against an active response to the reoccupation. First of all, they pointed out that any attempt to resolve the crisis by means of military force would inevitably have disastrous consequences upon the ailing French economy (devaluation and then the complete collapse of the franc, hyperinflation, etc.).[11] Secondly, the opponents of action brought up the matter of the upcoming national election, for it was obvious to all that a decision to involve the country in a conflict over the Rhineland would amount to a political death sentence for any government then in power. As Flandin wrote in his

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[10] Emmerson, The Rhineland Crisis, 126.

[11] Frederick L. Schuman, Europe on the Eve: The Crisis of Diplomacy, 1933-1939 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), 533.

memoirs: "Chacun et tous pensaient à la reoccupation de la Rhenanie comme à une complication de politique intérieure qui allait réagir sur les élections."[12] And finally, the Sarraut cabinet was almost unanimous in expressing its fear (voiced earlier by Maurin and Gamelin in February) that if France acted unilaterally to expel the German troops from the Rhineland, she would be branded the aggressor, isolated by the other European powers, and left to face Germany alone. Recurring over and over again in the accounts of the crisis, this nightmarish scenario seemed to haunt nearly every member of the French government.

The Decisive Role of the Military

While the great majority of the cabinet ministers were inclined to do nothing about the situation in the Rhineland, it was to be the military--and Generals Maurin and Gamelin in particular--which spearheaded the forces of inaction. Although they didn't refuse to cooperate when Sarraut and Flandin asked them what the Army was prepared to do in response to the reoccupation, the two generals did deliberately try to discourage the government from acting by making it painfully clear to them that armed resistance to the coup would inevitably entail the gravest consequences for France. Gamelin and Maurin were careful to spare none of the lurid and gory details of what these

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[12] Flandin, Politique Française, 200.

consequences would be. To begin with, they informed the politicians--to their utter astonishment--that if they wished the Army to move into the Rhineland, then it would be necessary to trigger a full mobilization of the country's manpower.[13] Flandin and Sarraut responded to this assertion with the logical reply: couldn't the Army prepare an expeditionary force to drive the Germans troops out of the Rhineland without resorting to mobilization?

The Minister of War and the Army Chief of Staff relied upon two key arguments in order to justify their claim that action required mobilization. The first of these constituted one of the cornerstones of French military policy, and should have been anticipated by the civilian ministers, who had been presiding over the formulation of the Army's organizational laws since the early 1920's. This was the High Command's insistence that the standing army must not move beyond the Republic's borders in order to carry out offensive operations until all the nation's reserve classes had been mobilized. Gamelin and Maurin based their second argument for mobilization upon the very tenuous assertion that any military incursion into German territory would automatically mean war. If this were so, then it would be utter insanity for the government not to give the Army the largest possible advantage at the outset of hostilities by declaring mobilization, especially in view of the fact (as

[13]France, Les Événements Survenus en France, 3:604.

the High Command saw it) that Germany would soon catch and surpass France in the number of men that she could put in the field. According to the generals, then, the reoccupation of the Rhineland presented France with what amounted to an all-or-nothing decision: either she had to ignore Hitler's coup or else respond with the maximum amount of military force at her disposal. As Gamelin explained to the Council of Ministers, there was no middle ground:

> Je vous demand avant tous que nous ne reculions pas. Si nous prenons des mesures, cette attitude peut conduire jusqu'à la guerre. À partir du moment ou nous prenons des mesures, ne reculions pas, ou il vaut mieux ne pas en prendre.[14]

But at the same time that Maurin and Gamelin emphasized that mobilization constituted a vital prerequisite for any offensive operations, they also pointed out that a military resolution of the crisis presented many serious difficulties and risks. To begin with, the two generals completely disagreed with the theory that a French counterstroke in the Rhineland would spell the beginning of the end for the Nazi regime. Quite to the contrary, they insisted that any opposition to the reoccupation would only serve to rally the German people even more tightly around Hitler and exacerbate their already intense Francophobia.[15] There was no telling how the madman might retaliate against a French counteroffensive, but Gamelin and

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[14]Ibid, 2:392.

[15]Ibid, 2:448.

Maurin cautioned that France could expect the worst: sinkings by U-boats at sea, terror bombings of Paris, and even a full-scale invasion through Belgium.[16] This last eventuality seemed to hold a particular horror for the generals, who claimed that the reoccupation was really a German trap like those which France encountered in 1870 and in 1914.[17] With the nation's best troops tied down in the Rhineland, Gamelin and Maurin warned that Hitler would use this opportunity to launch a Schlieffen-style attack from the north.[18] But perhaps the most important point of all was raised by the Minister of War, who asserted that the Army (which was only just beginning to recover from the deleterious effects of the one year service law) was simply in no shape to face a conflict with Germany at that time.[19] All these objections to the idea of an armed response to the coup prompted Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, the dean of French diplomatic historians, to write: "On a vraiment l'impression que le but . . . est d'essayer de faire une telle liste des obstacles qui se dressent devant

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[16]France, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 2e Serie, Tome I, No. 392, 504.

[17]France, Les Événements Survenus en France, 2:644.

[18]Jeffery Albert Gunsberg, "'Vaincre ou Mourir': The French High Command and the Defeat of France, 1919-May 1940" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1974), 89.

[19]Judith Hughes, To the Maginot Line: The Politics of French Military Preparations in the 1920's (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 241.

ce projet, pourtant modeste, que vraiment les civils en concluent qu'effectivement il n'y a rien à faire."[20]

The Military Exaggerates Germany's Armed Strength

The principal argument which Gamelin and Maurin used to justify their cautious stance consisted of their claim that Germany's military might--both in the Rhineland and in the country as a whole--had grown to the point where Hitler would be able to repulse any punitive expedition that France could send against him. In the Rhineland alone they asserted--and the Deuxieme Bureau confirmed--that the Germans had amassed some 295,000 troops comprising approximately twenty-one divisions.[21] Although they readily acknowledged the fact that only 30,000 regular soldiers of the Wehrmacht had invaded the demilitarized zone on the 7th, the generals stood firmly behind their allegations. They were able to do this by adding to these two divisions some 265,000 members of various paramilitary organizations who were stationed in the Rhineland prior to the reoccupation, and whom they considered to be fully capable of conducting defensive operations. These forces were composed of 30,000 men each from the Landespolizei (a heavily militarized national police force), Arbeitsdienst (labor corps),

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[20]Jean-Baptiste Duroselle, La Politique Extérieure de la France de 1914 à 1945 (Paris: Centre de Documentation Universitaire, 1968), 243.

[21]France, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 2e Serie, Tome I, No. 392, 504.

and NSKK (Nazi Party motor service), plus 25,000 SS men and 150,000 members of the SA.[22]

In reading through the accounts of the military's reaction to the events of March 7, it is difficult to escape the impression that Gamelin and Maurin deliberately inflated the numbers of German combatants in the Rhineland in order to find an excuse not to act. Presiding over a postwar government inquiry into the events transpiring in France from 1932 to 1945, deputy Louis Marin could not help coming to the same conclusion: "J'ai bien peur," he said at Gamelin's hearing, ". . . qu'il n'y ait eu un forcement des chiffres pour faire peur."[23] Although a case can be made that Gamelin and Maurin truly believed the substance of their claims (up until the end of their lives they never abandoned their original assertions), this is somewhat besides the point. The important fact remains that, with the single exception of the Landespolizei (some of whom had already been incorporated into the Wehrmacht), none of the paramilitary groups mentioned by the Minister of War and the Army Chief of Staff could be considered as possessing any significant military value. While all members of these organizations wore uniforms and some SA and SS men even sported side arms, the emphasis of these associations was clearly on preparation for military service (i.e., physical

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[22] Ibid.

[23] France, Les Événements Survenus en France, 2:511.

conditioning, ideological indoctrination, rudimentary knowledge of firearms, etc.) rather than on combat duty itself.

Attempting to minimize the importance which the generals placed upon the presence of the paramilitary groups, a few cabinet ministers pointed to the fact that, of the nineteen Wehrmacht batallions which had invaded the demilitarized zone on the 7th, only three of them (or about two thousand men) had dared to venture onto the left bank of the Rhine, the rest remaining in that portion of the zone which lay on the eastern shore of the river.[24] Wasn't this an unmistakable sign that the Germans were hesitant and fearful of a French riposte? No, said the generals. Returning to one of their favorite themes, they insisted that the Wehrmacht's weak showing on the left bank of the Rhine was really a trap designed to lure the French Army into the Rhineland while Germany launched an invasion of France through Belgium.[25]

Ultimately, however, the crucial question for Gamelin and Maurin was not how many troops had reoccupied the Rhineland or where they were located, but how many men Germany had under arms at that particular moment. For if French forces did counterattack, this meant war, and then France would be facing not three batallions but the entire German Army. And as the High Command had been warning for

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[24]Emmerson, The Rhineland Crisis, 97.

[25]France, Les Événements Survenus en France, 3:605.

years, this was an army whose capabilities and strength were far greater than most people imagined. At the time of the crisis, Gamelin maintained that the Wehrmacht could field over 800,000 combat ready troops (596,000 conscripts, 150,000 professional soldiers, plus 100,000 Landespolizei), and this number could be multiplied several times over if one took into account all the various paramilitary forces at Hitler's disposal.[26] Thus, according to Gamelin, even with a full mobilization of the nation's manpower, France could hope to do no more than achieve parity with Germany.

Of course, as we now know (and as Gamelin should have known then), these ideas were utter nonsense. The consensus among historians today seems to be that Germany did not overtake France in military strength until the second half of 1937.[27] For his part, Gamelin appears to have overestimated the Wehrmacht's numbers--whether out of fear, out of conviction, or out of deliberate design is once again debatable--by at least a factor of two. The Chief of Staff's claim that Hitler could call upon nearly 850,000 regular troops would have given the Germans approximately fifty-five divisions. But as John Wheeler-Bennet points out, at the time of the crisis the Wehrmacht had still not managed

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[26] Fred Greene, "French Military Leadership and Security against Germany, 1919-1940" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1950), 270.

[27] Robert J. Young, In Command of France: French Foreign Policy and Military Planning, 1933-1940 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1978), 162.

to expand very far beyond the twenty-one divisions which filled its ranks when Hitler reintroduced conscription in March of 1935. In fact, it wasn't even until October of 1936 that the German Army's twenty-eighth division was organized, and only in the following month that the first conscript class levied by the new national service law began to file into the Wehrmacht's training camps.[28] And as one might expect, these newly created units also suffered from shortages of vital supplies and equipment.[29] The Wehrmacht of March, 1936 was therefore hardly the monolithic fighting force that Gamelin imagined it to be.

The Army's Strategic Doctrine Forbids Action

While Gamelin and Maurin cited all the reasons mentioned here so far in order to justify their opposition to a Rhennish counterstroke, their true motives for inaction probably lay much deeper. These motives, one could argue, were firmly rooted in the Army's strategic doctrine--a doctrine which strongly militated against the bold use of offensive military power. As we have already seen in the last chapter, the French High Command had unalterably committed itself to certain basic assumptions about the nature of the next war. For example, it was generally ac-

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[28]John W. Wheeler-Bennet, The Nemesis of Power: The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945 (New York: MacMillan and Co., Ltd., 1953), 349.

[29]Ibid.

cepted that hostilities with Germany would begin with France on the defensive, the French Army moving over to the offensive only when Germany had exhausted itself after several years of fruitless and costly attacks. Above all else the High Command insisted that France must not begin the war by launching--as she did in 1870 and 1914--an impetuous and overambitious offensive which would ultimately turn into a rout and allow the Germans to invade the country. Gamelin and Maurin saw intervention in the Rhineland as just such a venture and therefore did everything in their power to discourage its realization.

Another important argument against a military response to the coup followed logically from the High Command's abolition of the offensive. The whole raison d'être of a demilitarized Rhineland had been to allow French armies to speed across the Rhine bridges unhindered in order to strike deep into the heart of Germany should the need arise. But when this idea was finally abandoned at the beginning of the 1930's due to the Army's increasingly defensive orientation, the demilitarized zone lost its value almost completely. There was no longer any prospect that a French expeditionary force would advance into the Rhineland, and the construction of the Maginot Line rendered the demilitarized zone unnecessary for defensive purposes. As one French general, Narcisse Chauvineau, wrote, the demilitarized zone "n'avait pour nous qu'un intérêt militaire

insignifiant."[30] The Rhineland no longer fit into the Army's strategic plans, and so it was hardly worth fighting a war over the zone when Hitler's troops reoccupied it. To a certain extent the High Command even welcomed the demise of the demilitarized zone: since it was now occupied by German troops and would soon be fortified, the Army now had an excuse for maintaining its exclusively defensive posture.[31]

Gamelin's Modest Proposal

For all the above reasons, then, Gamelin pronounced that "L'idée d'envoyer rapidement en Rhenanie un corps expéditionaire français, même sous une forme plus ou moins symbolique, est chimerique."[32] At the same time, however, he was forced to concede that the final decision on whether or not to take action belonged to the government alone. And although he and Maurin had done everything in their power in order to discourage the cabinet from opting for the path of resistance, he did make it clear that the military would faithfully comply with any decision that the government saw fit to adopt. Since a small but very important minority within the Sarraut cabinet did express some desire to reply to Hitler's fait accompli with armed force,

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[30]General Narcisse Chauvineau, Une Invasion, Est-Elle encore Possible (Paris: Éditions Berger-Levrault, 1939), 205.

[31]Emmerson, The Rhineland Crisis, 51.

[32]France, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 2e Serie, Tome I, No. 525, 698.

Gamelin was therefore obliged to produce--finally--a detailed and concrete plan for a French riposte in the Rhineland.

However, once the politicians heard the specifications of Gamelin's plan, it became immediately obvious that this scheme was little more than an attempt to placate Sarraut and Flandin's pro-resistance faction by making a token gesture at offensive action. The terms of the proposed operation were so ridiculous that there was little chance that the government would approve its implementation. Gamelin's plan called for an occupation of a one hundred square mile section of the Rhineland on the left bank of the Saar River (a region which constituted a scant one percent of the demilitarized zone's total area) by two army corps, to begin eight days after the government made its decision to go ahead with the operation.[33] With much luck and the solid support of Belgian troops attacking from the north, Gamelin thought that the "offensive" might be expanded to include the capture of the Rhennish cities of Kehl, Saarbrück, Köln, and Mainz, but he considered this unlikely.[34] Under no circumstances, insisted Gamelin, could an advance beyond the Rhine be contemplated.[35] As a sop to the politicians, the general consented to delay mo-

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[33]France, Les Événements Survenus en France, 2:514.

[34]Ibid.

[35]Gunsberg, "'Vaincre ou Mourir'", 93.

bilization until the Germans formally declared their resistance by firing the first shots.[36]

As Gamelin never ceased to warn the cabinet, there could be only one possible outcome of this operation: war--a war which would probably last four or five years and which France was by no means assured of winning. Much as happened in August, 1914, he predicted that when the two armies clashed in the Rhineland, the front lines would stabilize and the offensive would result in a stalemate. And as the events of the First World War had also proven, Gamelin emphasized that the Republic's survival and ultimate victory in any conflict with Germany depended to a large degree upon her success in securing the support of allies, and that of Great Britain in particular. It would be an act of madness, he declared, for France to walk blindly into a war with Germany without a firm military or diplomatic commitment from a single major European power. Since France possessed no such commitment at that time, Gamelin concluded that before the government decided to act, it ought to first obtain Britain's unequivocal support for an armed response to Hitler's coup.[37] As we saw earlier, Foreign Minister Flandin had already planned to take such a step in case of a reoccupation, and as this

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[36]France, Les Événements Survenus en France, 2:449.

[37]France, Documents Diplomatiques Français, 2e Serie, Tome I, No. 525, 698.

seemed to be the only way of persuading the Army to take action, the cabinet therefore decided on March 11 that Flandin would travel to London in order to secure British backing for military measures against Germany. In the meantime, the government authorized the execution of the first phase of the couverture process--a step which led to the concentration of thirteen divisions behind the Franco-German border (these divisions were eventually withdrawn by the 17th).[38]

France Turns to Great Britain

If the Rhineland Crisis wasn't over even before it had begun, then it was certainly over by the 11th, when the cabinet decided to consult with London--a step which clearly signaled the government's intention not to oppose the reoccupation with military force. Obviously, if the French had been truly desirous of an armed response to Hitler's fait accompli, then they would have acted immediately without first appealing to the British. As it was, however, the decision to go to London merely confirmed the fact that the nation's leaders were attempting to rationalize their inertia by making resistance contingent upon the unlikely support of an unsympathetic Britain. The French knew all too well that their former ally's policy towards Germany was one of outright appeasement, and they

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[38] Wheeler-Bennet, The Nemesis of Power, 349.

were painfully aware of the fact that the British saw no need whatsoever for a strong reaction to the remilitarization, which they regarded as a minor annoyance at most.

Realistically, then, the French government could not expect Great Britain to support military measures against Germany--at least not willingly. Many observers at the time of the crisis and afterwards have suggested (and not without some justification) that if France had acted unilaterally against Hitler while demanding that Britain honor her obligation under the Treaty of Locarno to come to the Republic's aid, the British might very well have felt compelled to comply.[39] If a French counteroffensive in the Rhineland had provoked war with Germany, then London would without question have sided with France simply as a matter of policy, for no British government would have sat idly by while there was a chance that western Europe might fall under German domination--a fact which the insecure French never seemed to appreciate or even realize. But few Frenchmen were willing to attempt to force Britain into supporting military sanctions against Germany. Such a step, they argued, would permanently ruin Franco-British relations at a particularly crucial time for France (among other things, the Republic was experiencing another one of

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[39] Eva H. Haraszti, The Invaders: Hitler Occupies the Rhineland, trans. Zsofia Laszlo (Budapest: Akadamiai Kiado, 1983), 116.

its periodic financial crises and was seeking British loans in order to alleviate it).[40]

Why, then, did Flandin go to London in order to try to win British support that he knew would almost certainly not be forthcoming? As has already been mentioned, part of the government's motivation lay in its desire--largely unconscious and unspoken--to cloak French appeasement with its British counterpart, to shift the blame away from French weakness and passivity by pretending that the Republic had no choice but to subordinate its foreign policy to that of Britain. And even though the cabinet had specified the purpose of Flandin's mission as the securing of British support, in the face of the overwhelming opposition of the Army and of both French and British opinion to a military response to Hitler's coup, there can be little doubt that anyone ever seriously hoped or believed that the Foreign Minister would accomplish his purported objective.

In reality, Flandin's journey to London was little more than a charade. While maintaining the appearance that France still might resort to armed force, he used the demand for British backing as a bargaining chip in order to wring from Britain a promise of a firmer commitment to French security in the future. More specifically, the London meeting resulted in a deal in which Flandin agreed

[40]Lewis B. Namier, Europe in Decay: A Study in Disintegration (London: MacMillan and Co. Ltd, 1950), 24.

to withdraw his request that Britain honor her Locarno obligations in exchange for her consent to participate in joint military planning sessions with the French General Staff. As it turned out, the French would be greatly disappointed with the results of this bargain: the two staffs held only five days of discussions in 1936, and no more were scheduled until the outbreak of hostilities in September of 1939.[41]

The Guilt of a Nation

In searching for the causes of France's failure to respond to the reoccupation, it is impossible to point to any individual or group of individuals within French society who were either entirely free of blame in the debacle or wholly responsible for it. As with French appeasement in general, the responsibility for the Republic's retreat in March of 1936 lies with an entire people. With the single exception of the Communist Party, virtually every segment of French society opposed a military resolution of the crisis in spite of the fact that many Frenchmen admitted that such a course would have been not only morally correct, but also in the nation's best interests in the long run.[42] It was this unequal struggle between the old instinct of resistance and the much stronger urge towards

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[41]A.J.P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (New York: Athenum, 1961), 76.

[42]Emmerson, The Rhineland Crisis, 116.

appeasement which produced the odd mixture of shame and relief so characteristic of public opinion in the aftermath of the crisis.

The vehemence with which the French people rejected the idea of armed intervention in the Rhineland is truly amazing. Even the government's few gestures of token resistance to the reoccupation were greeted with immediate hostility by the public. Prime Minister Sarraut's radio address to the nation which gave the initial impression that France would oppose the fait accompli was much more criticized than the remilitarization itself.[43] For the crime of delivering this speech the Prime Minister was labled--like Poincaré in 1923--"Sarraut la guerre."[44] One journalist, the socialist Marcel Pivert of La Populaire, even went so far as to condemn the sending of the couverture units to the frontier. In general, there was little condemnation of Hitler's coup from the press and no recommendation for action.[45] The center and right merely advocated that the country quicken the pace of its rearmament and strengthen its diplomatic and military ties with Great Britain; the left continued to insist that unilateral disarmament constituted the best solution to the menace of

[43] Ibid, 117.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid, 116.

Nazism.[46] The mood of the nation in March of 1936 was well summarized by Charles Maurras, the chief of the rightist league Action Française, who penned perhaps the most frequently quoted slogan of the day: "First of all, no war, first of all, we do not want war."[47] Without attitudes such as these, the inertia of the politicians and the generals would not have been possible. Perhaps more than any other single factor, the passivity of French public opinion helped create the atmosphere in which French appeasement could flourish.

In retrospect, however, it is the Republic's military and civilian leaders whose responsibility for the debacle of March, 1936 seems most well-defined--if only because, as the makers of foreign policy, they exerted a direct influence on events. And while the general public can to a certain extent be forgiven for its misguided attitudes during the crisis, one would have expected more from their leaders, who should have known better. As the preceding pages have shown, the onus for the governments inaction falls particularly heavily upon the Army High Command, perhaps the most "dovish" collection of military minds ever assembled. Succumbing to fear and seemingly incapable of perceiving the larger issues beyond the concerns of their own strategic doctrine, the High Command

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[46]Ibid.

[47]Duroselle, "France and the Crisis of March, 1936", 262.

failed miserably in its duty as guardian of the nation's security interests.

And yet, in spite of the heavy burden of guilt which must be assigned to the generals, one could argue that the greatest share of blame for France's default belongs to the politicians. Choosing to follow the passive instincts of the public and the military rather than to rally the nation into action, the Sarraut cabinet displayed an almost total lack of leadership. Even Flandin and Sarraut, the two ministers who demonstrated the strongest disposition towards a forceful response to the reoccupation, did not struggle very hard against the High Command's recommendations of prudence and caution. One of the best examples of the politicians' lack of firmness in the face of the Army's dissuasion occurred during the cabinet meeting on the 9th of March when, after hearing Gamelin's long list of arguments against the use of military force, Foreign Minister Flandin turned to Joseph Paul-Boncour and said, "Monsieur le President du Conseil, je vois qu'il ne faut pas insister."[48] Another cabinet member, Colonial Minister Georges Mandel, recalled that "on the first objection from Maurin," Flandin "closed his file, saying: 'Well, there we are, I see there is nothing to be done.'"[49]

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[48]France, Les Événements Survenus en France, 3;799.

[49]Paul Reynaud, In the Thick of the Fight: 1930-1945, trans. James D. Lambert (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1955), 129.

Of course, a man who would "insist," a man who would pound the table with his fist, raise his voice, and demand that the generals send the Army into the Rhineland without delay was exactly what the Republic needed at this time. But the sad truth was that in the 1930's France simply did not possess leaders of the caliber and stature necessary to meet Hitler's challenge. Clemenceau had gone, de Gaulle had not yet arrived, and men such as Flandin, Sarraut, Maurin, and Gamelin merely reflected the sterile mediocrity which permeated French society from top to bottom during the final years of the Third Republic.

The Inconsistencies Revealed

One could argue that the Rhineland Crisis was the result of the conflict between apppeasement and resistance to German revisionism which had existed in French foreign policy ever since the early 1920's. In spite of the fact that the evacuation of the Ruhr, the signing of the Treaty of Locarno, and the construction of a defensive army had all signaled the transition from a policy of treaty enforcement to one of appeasement, there seemed to exist a certain amount of confusion in French minds concerning the true identity of the nation's foreign policy. To some degree this confusion can be attributed to the fact that the old strategy of treaty enforcement had been only tacitly and not explicitly renounced--hardly surprising since most French leaders recognized appeasement as a shameful, humil-

iating policy which would lead to the abdication of their country from great power status. Few in France (except for Briand and the socialists during the 20's) were inclined to proudly herald the adoption of this diplomacy of retreat. Thus, the misleading impression was created that the Republic would actively oppose future German attempts at revisionism when, in actuality, the whole basis of French policy towards Germany after 1923 was firmly grounded in the practice of appeasement.

This inconsistency within French foreign policy only came to light when Hitler openly challenged France for the first time in March of 1936. The government's failure to take any sort of action at all against the Nazi regime left no doubt as to the true nature of France's diplomatic strategy in regard to Germany. And yet, this truth was perceived much more clearly outside of France than within the Republic itself. Throughout the remainder of the 1930's the French public was haunted by the groundless fear that their leaders might respond to further German attempts at revisionism with armed force. At the same time, a handful of remorseful politicians continued to pay lip service to the idea of containing Germany while giving way to inexorable urge of appeasement. It was only the failure of Flandin and Sarraut to immediately recognize appeasement as the only acceptable course of action for France that turned a foregone conclusion into a full-blown "crisis."

But the political and diplomatic leaders of the other European powers labored under no such illusions. For them, the events of March, 1936 were an unmistakable sign that France had started down the ignominious path of appeasement. As the journalist Genevieve Tabouis recalled, the Rhineland Crisis marked the appearance of an increasing tendency in European diplomatic circles to regard France as a second class power:

> France a great power? It wasn't altogether true any longer. I could feel her loss of prestige on all sides. Grandi, Colonel Beck, and even the Turkish Foreign Minister . . . managed to make me feel their contempt, or, what was harder to bear, their pity for my country. . . France had lost her high place in the world, ceding it step by step to Germany.[50]

First and foremost among those who sensed France's new vulnerability was Adolf Hitler, who would now set about the task of dismantling what remained of the Treaty of Versailles with supreme confidence, and almost with impunity. Had Britain not abandoned her indulgence of Hitler and pledged to fight for Poland in 1939 (a reversal which the French predictably felt compelled to imitate), the sad legacy of French appeasement almost certainly would have continued on into the 1940's.

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[50]Genevieve Tabouis, They Called Me Cassandra (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1942), 278.

CONCLUSION

> And many ask why we have been abandoned, without understanding that our own cause was first abandoned by our own selves.
>
> Georges Clemenceau,
> <u>The Grandeur and Misery of Victory</u>

What was French appeasement? As discussed in this thesis, it consisted of all those attitudes and actions on the part of Frenchmen which allowed Germany to dismantle the Treaty of Versailles and subsequently rise to preeminence in Europe.

What were the most important causes and manifestations of French appeasement? Perhaps the most crucial factor in the Treaty's demise was the fact that the French lacked the necessary willpower to enforce Versailles for any significant length of time. Believing that it could afford their country only temporary security, most Frenchmen gave up hope of preserving the Treaty even before it was signed. At the heart of this despair lay the realization that the Republic simply did not possess the strength to maintain the European status quo by itself. Although Versailles did stipulate that Germany was to remain permanently disarmed, few in France thought that German disarmament could provide their country with anything other than temporary security; Germa-

ny, they maintained, would find a way to rearm no matter what the Allies did to stop her. As a result of this attitude, the French failed to prosecute and enforce Germany's disarmament as effectively as they might have. In addition, France was denied the right to advance her military frontier to the Rhine--a measure which she regarded as one of only two real guarantees of her security available at that time.

The only other postwar arrangement which the French considered as a reliable means of containing Germany consisted of a firm diplomatic and military alliance between Britain and France. But as the events of the early 1920's have shown, the Republic was left without a single major ally who supported her strategy for security. Russia and the United States had withdrawn from Europe entirely; Italy had been disaffected, and Britain was becoming more and more sympathetic towards Germany with each passing day. Thus, for the next twenty years (and particularly after 1923), the French would increasingly soften their policy towards Germany in order to avoid alienating the ally whom they saw as indispensible to their national security. This obsession with Great Britain would continue to grow until, by the mid 30's, the nation's foreign policy had become almost completely enchained to that of Britain.

Just as the critics of Versailles had predicted, France's attempt at strict enforcement of the Treaty had placed an intolerable economic and psychological burden up-

on the war weary Republic. Poincaré's withdrawl of French troops from the Ruhr in January of 1924 signaled the abandonment of the strategy of treaty enforcement and the adoption of what amounted to a policy of appeasement. As seen by the series of socialist governments which conducted the nation's foreign affairs in the second half of the 20's, this policy represented an attempt to reach a general Franco-German entente by making concessions on certain aspects of the Treaty which the Germans considered particularly objectionable. Probably the best example of this sort of diplomacy was the Treaty of Locarno, in which France implicitly agreed to forfeit her right to launch coercive operations against Germany in exchange for the latter's promise to respect western European boundaries. Although the left's leaders didn't realize it at the time, this strategy of conciliation would prove enormously damaging to French security. Placing their trust in German diplomats whose single overriding goal was the destruction of the Treaty of Versailles, the French played directly into Germany's hands.

The psychological effects of the First World War upon France constituted another important factor in the development of French appeasement. The war ground into the French consciousness the sobering realization that, in terms of manpower and industry, the Republic was no match for Germany. This military-industrial disparity soon gave rise to a kind of inferiority complex on the part of France which man-

ifested itself in an acute lack of confidence in her diplomatic relationship with Germany. French appeasement was also caused in part by two forces which arose as a reaction to the events of 1914-1918: pacifism and internationalism. The tremendous losses incurred by France in lives and property during these four years bred a fear and hatred of war among her people which rendered them extremely reluctant to risk any military confrontation with Germany. Closely linked with pacifism was France's rejection of nationalism, widely regarded at that time as one of the chief causes of the war. Embracing the "new diplomacy" of international cooperation and multilateralism, the French increasingly looked to the League of Nations for security against Germany--security which the League was clearly incapable of providing.

Another major aspect of French appeasement consisted of the Republic's failure to properly equip itself with the military resources necessary for an efficient enforcement of the Treaty of Versailles. France's first mistake in this department lay in the postponement of her rearmament until the second half of 1936--a mistake which would later prove fatal. Secondly, French leaders were both unwilling and unable to preserve the two vital alliances with Italy and the Soviet Union which they had concluded during the course of 1935. While the loss of the Italian alliance may have been inevitable, the lapse of the Franco-Soviet Pact was brought about largely by the failure of all but the left wing to

take the Russian alliance seriously, either as a military or a diplomatic measure. To a large degree the demise of the Pact can be attributed to the disruptive influence of "neo-pacifism", the tendency on the part of the French right wing to become simultaneously more anti-Soviet and less anti-German due to its fear and hatred of the rising tide of communism at home. The radicalization of French political life during the second half of the 30's was just one of several pressing domestic problems which diverted the Republic's attention away from the menace of Nazi Germany. Besides this bitter political feud, the French also had to contend with the debilitating effect of the worldwide depression on the nation's economy as well as with serious incidents of labor unrest and violent social strife, all of which tended to undermine France's search for a solution to the German problem.

One of the most crucial elements of French appeasement was the refusal of the Republic's political leaders to order a preventive attack against Germany. Several important factors were involved in the government's rejection of this option. First of all, both civilians and soldiers elected in the latter half of the 1920's to construct a defensively oriented army which would be incapable of taking immediate offensive action beyond the nation's frontiers without the institution of general mobilization. In addition, any idea of a preemptive assault was almost completely ruled out by by the Army's tactical and strategic doctrines, which were

founded largely upon what the High Command perceived as the single great lesson of twentieth century warfare: the domination of the offensive by defensive firepower. For this same reason the military establishment declined to remodel the Army along the lines of an armée de metier, the most suitable weapon for executing a preventive strike against Germany. And finally, the High Command believed that the Army had been rendered incapable of waging a preventive war by several crippling problems which afflicted it during much of the 1930's: the institution of one year military service, the onset of the "hollow years," the proliferation of reservists, inadequate training of conscripts, and poor morale among the ranks of the professional troops. In turn, all of these handicaps led both French military and civilian leaders to exaggerate the strength and capabilities of Germany's armed forces to the point where the Nazi regime appeared too strong to be safely challenged.

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