

8. British-French appeasement

THE RHINELAND CRISIS (1936)

The British Reaction

Policy Memorandum of the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, March 8, 1936

On March 7, 1936, in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles, troops of the German army entered the demilitarized buffer zone along the River Rhine. Earlier, in 1925, the then German government, in order to facilitate its entry to the League of Nations and regain its status of a great power, had signed an Agreement (the Locarno Pact) with France that provided, under an Italo-British guarantee, for mutual acceptance of their existing border, including the continued demilitarization of the German Rhineland territory, the buffer zone along the French border. With the assumption to dictatorial power of Adolf Hitler in 1933, these earlier arrangements began to dissolve. Germany's unilateral rearmament along with the introduction of the draft in 1933 signaled a new and disruptive direction for German policy with which its former enemies - the democracies of France and Britain - were ill-fitted to cope. This following extract clearly demonstrates the unwillingness of Britain to stand by its guarantee.

Herr Hitler's action is alarming because of the fresh confirmation which it affords of the scant respect paid by German Governments to the sanctity of treaties by reoccupying the Rhineland he has deprived us of the possibility of making to him a concession which might otherwise have been a useful bargaining counter in our hands in the general negotiations with Germany which we had it in contemplation to initiate (...)...

The myth is now exploded that Herr Hitler only repudiates treaties imposed on Germany by force. We must be prepared for him to repudiate any treaty even if freely negotiated (a) when it becomes inconvenient; and (b) when Germany is sufficiently strong and the circumstances are otherwise favorable for doing so.

On the other hand, owing to Germany's material strength and power of mischief in Europe, it is in our interest to conclude with her as far-reaching and enduring a settlement as possible whilst Herr Hitler is still in the mood to do so. But on entering upon this policy we must bear in mind that, whatever time-limits may be laid down in such a settlement, Herr Hitler's signature can only be considered as valid under the conditions specified above.

'Dangerous' agreements would clearly be those in which we agreed with Germany to mutual restrictions or to mutual concessions of a serious character. In such cases it would have to be assumed that Germany might, in given circumstances, repudiate the restrictions, and, if it were within her power to do so, withdraw her concessions; whereas we would continue to consider ourselves bound for the duration of the treaty in all respects. In this category we must expect the French and other Powers to place certain kinds of armaments limitation, agreements for the cession of colonies in return for counter concessions on Germany's part, and undertakings by Germany not to interfere with Austria. But . . . the danger of repudiation by Germany need not in every case mean that an agreement with Germany on these subjects is not worth seeking.

We must discourage any military action by France against Germany. A possible course which might have its advocates would be for the Locarno signatories to call upon Germany to evacuate the Rhineland. It is difficult now to suppose that Herr Hitler could agree to such a demand, and it certainly should not be made unless the Powers, who made it, were prepared to enforce it by military action. Fortunately, M. Flandin [French Foreign Minister] has said that France will not act alone but will take the matter to the Council [of the League of Nations]. This he must be encouraged to do. But we must beware lest the French public, if further irritated or frightened, get restless at such a slow and indecisive action and demand retaliatory action of a military character such, for instance, as the reoccupation of the Saar [German territory ceded to France by the Treaty of Versailles and returned to Germany in 1935]. Such a development must be avoided if possible.

While we obviously cannot object to the Council adopting a 'finding' that Germany has violated the demilitarized zone provisions, this ought to be on the distinct understanding that it is not to be followed by a French attack on Germany and a request for our armed assistance under that article.

We must be ready at the Council to offer the French some satisfaction in return for their acquiescence in this tearing up of articles 42 and 43 of Versailles [i.e., demilitarization of the Rhineland] and of the whole of Locarno. In the face of this fresh and gross insult to the sanctity of treaties, it will be difficult to persuade the French to sign any fresh agreement with Germany in present circumstances.

We might agree to [M. Flandin's suggestion of a formal condemnation by the Council of Germany's action], but we ought to resist [measures that could include economic and financial boycott]. The essential thing will be to induce or cajole France to accept [negotiations with Germany]. The trouble is that we are in a bad position to browbeat her into what we think reasonable,

because, if she wishes to do so, she can always hold us to our Locarno obligations and call upon us to join with her in turning the German forces out of the Rhineland. The strength of our position lies in the fact that France is not in the mood for a military adventure of this sort.
