Hitler and the Rhineland, 1936: A Decisive Turning-Point

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We and all nations have a sense that we have come to the turning point of an age.

Hitler, March 22nd, 1936

It is tempting to look for turning-points in history and try to perceive in them guidelines for later conduct. Hitler's military re-occupation of the Rhineland in March 1936, in breach of the Versailles Treaty and the freely-negotiated Treaty of Locarno, and the failure of France and Britain to offer any resistance to it, is often cited as a supreme example of where the wrong turning was taken. Eden had this precedent in view when Nasser nationalised the Suez Canal; as apparently did Bush when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait. It was at the forefront of Mrs Thatcher's mind when she decided to resist Galtieri's occupation of the Falklands and when she urged Bush to confront Saddam Hussein.

Whether or not the historical analogy was exact or justified in these instances there can be no doubt that the re-militarisation of the Rhineland and its consequences has been widely seen as a turning-point, as an occasion when a different policy would have been possible and, in retrospect, desirable and as a dire warning of the dangers of letting military dictators get away with aggression unscathed. Alexis Leger, who was secretary-general at the Quai d'Orsay 1933-40, believed that it was the Rhineland, not Munich, that made war inevitable.

How this large area of Germany, with a population of 15 million Germans and comprising all German territory on the left bank of the Rhine and a zone reaching to 50 kilometres on the right bank, came to be demilitarised is an essential part of the story.

In the Paris peace negotiations the French originally wanted to incorporate the Rhineland into France, or at least to create there an autonomous buffer state. They were only persuaded to renounce this claim upon various assurances. Among these was an agreement to demilitarise the Rhineland in perpetuity and this was included in the Treaty of Versailles. Another condition was the promise to France of a security guarantee by the US and British governments, the British commitment being contingent upon US fulfilment of theirs. The US government subsequently defaulted on their engagement, upon which Britain's guarantee lapsed. The failure of this guarantee attached France all the more to the importance of the demilitarisation of the Rhineland which she regarded as essential for her long-term security.

From the earliest days of peace the French feared German revenge. To ensure against this they built up a network of agreements in Eastern Europe; the most recent was the Franco-Soviet treaty of mutual assistance of 1935. The Versailles demilitarisation of the Rhineland was given renewed authority by being included in the 1925 Treaty of Locarno, a Treaty of Mutual Guarantee between 'the UK, Belgium, France, Germany and Italy'. The French saw great significance in British participation in Locarno, even if there was a lack of precision in the

Treaty about what hostile act would be regarded as a casus foederis involving action by the other participants.

The Germans protested loudly about the 1935 Franco-Soviet alliance which they said was incompatible with Locarno, whilst refusing to submit the issue to the International Court of Justice as the French suggested. They obviously found it an ideal pretext for the campaign that Hitler decided to launch against the continued demilitarisation of the Rhineland enshrined in Locarno. The Fuhrer had already revealed his bellicosity by withdrawing from the League of Nations and the Disarmament Conference in 1933 and, in breach of Versailles, by re-introducing conscription in March 1935. He gave plenty of warning of his intention to launch a Rhineland coup. The French military attache in Berlin reported on January 15th, 1936: 'I have no doubt that the demilitarised zone will be reoccupied by Germany; it is only the date that is uncertain'. The French Consul in Cologne reported frequently on the preparations being made in the Rhineland to receive German troops.

Nothing, however, was done to forestall Hitler or prepare for counter-action, despite the build-up of threats and preparations in 1936. To understand this we have to be aware of the mood of the times and heed Maitland's dictum: 'It is very difficult to remember that events now in the past were once in the future'.

It was only eighteen years after the end of the Great War in which France had lost 10 per cent of its active male population (the UK, 5 per cent). All sections of opinion in France were united in the view that it must 'never again' be allowed to happen, however divided they were on everything else, enjoying as they did twenty four different governments in a space of ten years. France's military strategy, based on the Maginot Line, was inspired by fear of German revenge and was purely defensive; it also took account of the superiority of the Germans in manpower (population 70 million as compared with France's 42 million) and industrial production which was increasing rapidly whilst France's was declining. The weakness of the franc argued for inaction.

The mood of the British people was no less pacifist than that of the French, but there were deep differences in the attitudes of the two countries. Pro-German feeling in Britain was widespread, a sense that Germany should no longer be regarded as a pariah and that the stringent terms of Versailles should be alleviated. The economic restoration of Europe was seen as being dependent upon the recovery of Germany. By many, Germany was regarded as a bulwark against Bolshevism. There was a desire, expressed by Eden who had become Foreign Secretary in December 1955, to promote some general European settlement founded on a system of collective security -- partly to deflect German attention into south-eastern Europe. The British Cabinet had come to a far-reaching decision the previous year -- on January 14th, 1935 -- that the Rhineland regime was not a vital British interest.

Many in London were placated by Hitler's frequent protestations of friendship. By contrast there was scepticism and sourness over the relationship with Paris. Vansittart, the Permanent Under-Secretary in the Foreign Office, had declared France in the autumn of 1935 to be 'too rotten to honour her bond'. There was bickering about how to handle Mussolini. British repudiation in December 1935 of the Hoare-Laval pact, which was intended to settle relations with Mussolini

following his attack on Ethiopia in August 1935, had whipped up anti-British feeling in French right-wing circles. Then the French refused to agree when the British, swinging to an opposite policy of trying to bring Mussolini down, wished to impose oil sanctions on him -- a step which Mussolini himself admitted later to Hitler would have been 'an incalculable disaster for me'.

Looking back it is striking that at no time during the years leading up to the Second World War was there any prospect of a military alliance between France and the UK, notwithstanding the common threat. Nor, scarcely need it be recalled, was there any chance of an understanding between either country and the USA where the Congress passed Neutrality Acts in August 1935 and February 1936.

By March 1936 the tempo was hotting up. The French Chamber of Deputies had just ratified the Franco-Soviet Pact which Hitler decided to make the main pretext for tearing up Locarno. He was encouraged to advance the date of a Rhineland coup by Mussolini's assurance that he no longer felt bound by the Stresa Front formed in April 1955 between Britain, France and Italy. Flandin who had recently become French Foreign Minister in the new Sarraut Government asked the British Government on March 3rd for assurances that they would stand by their obligations over the Rhineland. Eden's response was to swing to Hitler and to propose to open negotiations for an Anglo-German air pact, which was to be the first stage in bringing about a policy of German-British-French co-operation.

However Hitler was already revolving in an opposite direction and had sent instructions to diplomatic posts informing them that on Saturday, March 7th, he would proclaim 'the restoration of German sovereignty in the demilitarised Rhineland Zone'. The military move was to be accompanied by a series of peace proposals.

To the question that naturally arises, of whether Hitler might have been deterred had he known in advance that he would be met with serious military resistance, the answer is that this might have been so because we know now how strongly the German generals were opposed to sending troops into the Rhineland to face a risk of this kind. The rebuilding of the German army was still at an early stage.

The question nevertheless remains an unreal one because we are also now aware that there was no possibility of the French deciding to issue such a warning. The key here is the negative attitude of the French General Staff. Largely on account of this, French ministers decided on February 27th that in the event of a German violation of the Rhineland Zone they would not act alone but only in concert with the co-signatories of Locarno. This was communicated by Flandin to Eden on March 5th. As already mentioned, the British were in no mind to rattle the sabre over the Rhineland. They believed that the problem should be tackled in negotiation with the Germans. The French were not in fact prepared to countenance any idea of negotiating with the Germans on this problem. But nor were they ready to commit themselves in advance to military resistance in defence of the status quo. They were on the horns of a dilemma such as has frequently afflicted democracies.

The army that Hitler sent into the Rhineland on March 7th was a small one --nineteen infantry battalions and thirteen artillery units -- to link up with the 22,000 local police who were to be

incorporated into the army making a total force of 36,500 men. They were equipped with no offensive weapons such as tanks and with no bombers. The deployment was to be equally discreet: only 3,000 men were to be sent to the frontier posts of Aachen, Trier and Saarbrucken. Of the remaining forces twenty-eight battalions were to be stationed east of the Rhine and seven to the west only a few miles from the river. The main reason for minimising the invasion force was to avoid giving the French grounds for alleging that there had been 'a flagrant violation' such as would have called for immediate retaliation by all signatories of the Locarno Treaty. But the caution was misplaced. French military leaders, far from being liable to provocation on account of German strength, appear to have been ready to exaggerate it in order to magnify the task and risk if they were called upon to resist, thereby rendering such a course of action less likely. The General Staff of the Army reported on March 11th, 1936, that the German forces already in the Rhineland Zone amounted to 90,000, comprising six to seven divisions plus 205,000 auxiliaries amounting to fifteen divisions, making a total force of 295,000 -- or eight times the actual strength.

When French Ministers met in Paris on the morning of March 7th, after hearing the first news of the invasion, the atmosphere, according to Flandin, was one of 'lamentable disarray'. The Cabinet were divided on how to react. Crucial was the opinion of the Chiefs of Staff that if the French invaded the demilitarised zone they would be met by force, which, as already mentioned, they had heavily exaggerated. 'C'est la guerre', declared Gamelin, Chief of the Army General Staff. The French army was organised only for defence, not for offence; there was no unit capable of being put immediately on a war footing; and the idea of sending rapidly a French Expeditionary Force, even if only of a symbolic character, was described later by Gamelin as 'chimerical'.

To intervene militarily would require mobilisation which, again according to Flandin, created an 'outcry' among most of his colleagues who were 'more concerned with domestic than foreign policy' and who had in the forefront of their minds the proximity of the General Election which was only six weeks away. France's immensely inflexible response was summed up in the report of a post-war French parliamentary enquiry:

To force three regiments of the Wehrmacht to withdraw we had to engage the whole French army. And the delay imposed by the triggering of this heavy machine allowed the aggressor to consolidate his position.

In the circumstances the Cabinet decided against an immediate 'action isolee'. As the French parliamentary enquiry put it: 'to postpone our riposte was in practice to renounce it'. Flandin defined French policy as being to restore the status quo in the Rhineland through the League of Nations and with all the necessary pressure being exercised by the Locarno Powers.

De Gaulle has described how Flandin travelled to London 'with a bleeding heart', aware that the French, in the absence of a corps d'elite, were not going to act and that the Fuhrer knew this. Flandin professed disappointment over Eden's attitude. Eden's main aim was to try to prevent the French from retaliating immediately with force by invading the Rhineland, as this could drag Britain in militarily under her Locarno obligations. He favoured trying to resolve the problem by negotiations and relied much on the proposals Hitler had made when announcing his coup, of a non-aggression pact and a demilitarised zone either side of the French-German frontier which

would have meant dismantling the Maginot Line. As Joachim Fest has pointed out in his biography, Hitler had 'the knack of countering every fear he aroused with hope'.

Eden has admitted that he was impressed by the remarks of a taxi driver when he took a cab to reach the Foreign Office that 'I suppose Jerry can do what he likes in his own back-garden can't he?', a reflex which Eden regarded as representative of majority opinion in Britain. It was evidently also the view of political leaders who later came to be known for their staunchness in supporting France and in resisting Germany. Leo Amery wrote in his diary on March 7th, soon after hearing of Hitler's invasion: 'It seems to me futile to take any action against Germany and the whole thing is likely to fizzle out in talk'. Leopold von Hoesch, the German Ambassador to London, reported that at a dinner on March 8th, Duff Cooper, the British Minister of War, had said that:

though the British people were prepared to fight for France in the event of a German incursion into French territory, they would not resort to arms on account of the recent occupation of the Rhineland ... they did not care two hoots about the Germans re-occupying their own territory.

French newspapers and political leaders of both left and right were strikingly unbellicose, except in pursuit of scapegoats. There was criticism of the prime minister, Sarraut, who had tried to awaken public concern by declaring on the radio on Sunday evening, March 8th, that 'we are not going to allow Strasbourg to be exposed to German cannons'. He soon became less militant. The British press were vociferously against the use of force, not just The Times and The Observer but the News Chronicle, the Daily Express and the Daily Herald. With its own particular clairvoyance The Times saw Hitler's destruction of treaties as 'a chance to rebuild'. No meeting or rally of protest against the coup was held either in France or the UK.

There was a flurry of meetings of the Locarno and League Powers in Paris and London. Flandin proposed successive economic and military sanctions. If he could not obtain immediate and active British support then he hoped he would at least come away with a British security guarantee for the future. Eden resisted. His quandary now, as before the coup, was to avoid anything that might lead to arms, yet to elude blame for defaulting on Locarno. It was safe enough to join in condemning Germany for breaking the Treaties, to send Hitler questionnaires and to hold staff talks with the French, the last dismissed by a senior Foreign Office official as 'miserly eyewash'. When Flandin explained to Baldwin that France was not seeking to embroil Britain in war but to secure their acquiescence in 'a simple police operation' by the French, the prime minister answered:

If there is one chance in a hundred that war results from your police action. I do not have the right to commit England; because ... England is not in a state to go to war.

Shortly afterwards Hugh Dalton declared in Parliament that 'pubic opinion in this country would not support, and certainly the Labour Party would not support, the taking of military sanctions or even economic sanctions against Germany at this time'.

Meanwhile the atmosphere in Germany had been far from serene. Albert Speer has described how on the evening of March 7th, Hitler moved to Munich by special train. At one station a

message was handed in. Hitler sighed with relief: 'At last! The King of England (Edward VIII) will not intervene. He is keeping his promise. That means it can all go well.' Hitler was intensely anxious and even later, when he was waging war against almost the entire world, he always termed the remilitarisation of the Rhineland the most daring of his undertakings. In his own words he:

had no army worth mentioning; at that time it would not even have had the fighting strength to maintain itself against the Poles. If the French had taken any action we would have been easily defeated; our resistance would have been over in a few days. And the Air Force we had then was ridiculous -- a few Junkers 52s from Lufthansa and not even enough bombs for them.

There is no doubt about Hitler's nervousness in the initial stages of the re-occupation. In the absence of any resistance, however, he soon recovered; this was thanks largely to the stalwartness of his Foreign Minister, Baron von Neurath, who took the line, 'Now we are in, we stay in'. He may also have been encouraged by a strange piece of information that reached him from the German telephone-tapping service that is revealed in a book by Erich Kordt, an official of the Foreign Ministry close to Ribbentrop. In a telephone conversation with his son who was on the Continent at the time, Winston Churchill was reported by this source to have said that 90 per cent of the British people were opposed to sanctions against Germany.

Historians disagree about what would have happened if Hitler had been resisted. Professor Donald Cameron Watt regards it as a myth to think that the Rhineland crisis was the last great unexploited opportunity to overthrow or stop Hitler without a second World War; and he has strong scholarly support from Professor J.T. Emmerson. They do not believe that the Germans would have withdrawn without a fight. Their view, based on a meticulous study of the documents, is that in the event of French resistance the Germans would have carried out 'a fighting retreat'. In Cameron Watt's words: 'the French invasion would have been treated as a casus belli, at least so far as the military orders go ... and ... would have precipitated a Franco-German war'. He then adds: 'unless Hitler's resolution had faltered'.

Of course we cannot be sure about Hitler's resolution because it was never tested. We do know, however, that according to military orders, the German units, in the event of a hostile French incursion, were 'to occupy the prepared barrier Zones and in them to halt the enemy advance'. As if to qualify this, the orders went on to say that 'all troops are to remain in a state of readiness to be able to withdraw ausrucken! within an hour'. Friedrich Hossbach, Hitler's adjutant, has recorded that 'the withdrawal of these troops behind the Rhine was intended in the event of France resorting to offensive measures'. There are other reports to the same effect.

Much evidence points to the strong impact that a firm military riposte would have made. General Alfred Jodl, Chief of Operations in the Army High Command, said at Nuremburg that had the French marched in they would have blown away his forces. These, a mixed bag of regular troops and para-military units suddenly brought together, would hardly have offered a co-ordinated resistance. Paul Schmidt, Hitler's interpreter, has reported, as Speer has done, on how frequently Hitler recalled the risks he had run over the Rhineland which he described as 'the most nerve-wracking' time of his life because 'the military resources at our disposal would have been quite inadequate for even a moderate resistance'. He spoke in the same vein to Schuschnigg, the

Austrian Chancellor. Such statements are typical of Hitler's warnings and bombast. Nevertheless, we can be sure that the fears of the military were real. A few days after the troops had moved in, Blomberg, the Minister for War, recommended the immediate evacuation of the frontier towns and withdrawal across the Rhine. He was influenced by disturbing reports on the attitude of the Western powers, particularly by a message received from the three Service Attaches in London about the dangers described as 'extremely serious'. Alas, nothing was done by Paris or London to demonstrate seriousness to the point of action. So Hitler triumphed in what General Geyr von Schweppenburg, German Military Attache in London, described as 'a pure gamble'.

As a result of his success Hitler's prestige, internally and internationally, and his self-confidence soared. Henceforth the views of the military counted for less and less. Strategically he had bolted the door into Germany from the west behind which he could rearm with impunity. The validity of France's eastern alliances was undermined. Austria was exposed to German pressure. Belgium returned to its pre-1914 policy of neutrality. Before the end of the year, the Berlin-Rome axis was formed and Hitler concluded the anti-Comintern Pact with Japan. The British and French had been shown to be feeble, irresolute and divided. Rene Massigli then Political Director at the Quai, spoke of the British as 'traitors'. Not least of the consequences was the distrust that was sown between Paris and London, that was to have serious repercussions when the war came. Subsequently, both Eden and Churchill have described how fatal was the failure to resist Hitler in the Rhineland. But neither prescribed this course of action at the time. Sir Alexander Cadogan, Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the Foreign Office, wrote in his diary in December 1941, a week before Pearl Harbor:

Does A Anthony Eden, then Foreign Secretary, as he had been in March 1936!, realise that be is responsible for the great and tragic 'appeasement' -- not reacting to German occupation of the Rhineland in 1936? How lucky he is no --one has ever mentioned that!

Eden assured the House of Commons three weeks after the invasion 'that it is the appeasement of Europe as a whole that we have continually before us'. In the same debate Churchill did not criticise France for her failure to 'rectify the situation by the sword' -- to use his words -- believing that what was needed was to establish effective collective security. The French parliamentary enquiry, already mentioned, was highly critical of France's Rhineland policy, more so than of the British which they said 'was largely influenced by our uncertainties'.

In the light of what we now know about the German military orders, and given the state of opinion in France and Britain and the unpreparedness of the two countries for rapid deployment, it would be wrong to deduce that a decision to resist by force would have been anything but extremely difficult and that it would have brought a quick and peaceful end to the crisis. Nor can we be sure that Hitler would have been overthrown or restrained indefinitely. But he would have been checked and he would have had to withdraw. 'Hitler would certainly have drawn back', General de Gaulle has written, 'He was, in fact, at the beginning of his rearmament effort and still in no condition to face a general conflict'. Even if, in the process, fighting had occurred this would not necessarily have led to full-scale war. It is a fair assumption that frantic efforts would have been made, particularly by the British, to call for negotiations and to stop the bloodshed. Thus, Hitler might have got away without complete humiliation, but so would the French and the British.

Although no hard and fast rule can be formulated on the basis of the Rhineland precedent for how to deal with aggressive dictators so as to topple and emasculate them easily and without conflict, it is possible to draw certain lessons from it: sanctions will not alone suffice to keep the peace, and force must be available and be flexible enough for the purpose; the will to use it has to be there, despite the risks involved; public opinion has to be kept informed; and, to do nothing other than to give the green light to the aggressor will be bound to lead to calamity.

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