Chapter 13: “From peace to the Eve of War 1932-1937”

Introduction

At the opening of the 1930s there was no doubt that Europe was at peace. The economic depression was severe, but the friction it generated fell far short of any impulse towards war. In the Far East, the Japanese army occupied Manchuria at the end of 1931; but Manchuria was far away, China had never settled down to an orderly existence, and there seemed no good reason to expect this episode to have more than local consequences. After 1941 and the great war in the Pacific, it was often argued that such a view was complacent and mistaken, and that the road to the Second World War, even in Europe, started with the Japanese occupation of Manchuria, which set off a chain reaction of aggression. There seems little substance in this argument. It was several years before Japan moved again to attack China in 1937, and any effect on Mussolini over Abyssinia or Hitler over the Rhineland can only have amounted to marginal encouragement to do what they intended to do anyway. The Manchurian episode did not endanger the peace of Europe.

European peace rested upon two foundations. The first was the international co-operation which marked the late 1920s, as demonstrated in the Locarno treaties and the heyday of the League of Nations. Even those who wished to change the status quo thought in this period in terms of negotiation, not force. The second was the harsher reality that the preponderance of power and prestige lay with the states which wished to maintain the settlement of 1919, and principally with France. In this situation, prestige was as important as power: as long as the reputation of the French Army and faith in French will-power remained intact, the European system set up in 1919 could be sustained.

Between 1932 and 1937 both these foundations were progressively undermined. The Locarno treaties were broken, the League of Nations discredited, and French influence in Europe was replaced by that of Germany. How this came about may be illustrated by examining a number of significant events: the Disarmament Conference of 1932-34, the Abyssinian crisis of 1935-36, the German occupation of the Rhineland in March 1936, and the first stages of the Spanish Civil War in 1936-37. Through all these events ran the theme of the revival of German power and growth of German armaments, and the reaction of France and Britain to these developments.

Disarmament Conference of 1932-34

In retrospect, the Geneva Disarmament Conference of 1932-34 wears an air of slightly farcical unreality, heavily tinged with cynicism. Its oratory was interminable and empty. Its attempts to distinguish between offensive and defensive weapons were absurd - as a British delegate observed with some asperity, it largely depended which end of the weapon one was standing at. Participants attempted, with transparent ingenuity, to restrict armaments of which they possessed none or for which they had no use. Yet despite all this, the conference was the focus of widespread hope and aspiration, and it had important effects on international affairs.

The British government was the prisoner of the Disarmament Conference and the disarmament idea. In 1932 the government agreed in principle to abandon the assumption that no major war was expected for ten years, but it also decided that while the Disarmament Conference was in session no action would be taken to rearm. It was politically impossible to begin rearmament during the conference. Instead, the British laboured tirelessly to find the basis for an agreement on arms limitation, which meant primarily in their view reconciling the positions of France and Germany, by bringing French armaments down and allowing German armaments to rise. When Germany first left the conference, at the end of 1932, Britain played the leading part in wooing her back with a formula that accepted German equality of rights in armaments in a system which would provide security for all nations, an important step towards acknowledging German claims. The British later proposed an increase in the German Army from 100,000 to 200,000, while the French Army would be reduced, and then agreed that Germany should have an air force half the size of the French. Public respectability was thus conferred on the idea of German rearmament, which was already secretly under way, as the British government well knew. By the time it was openly proclaimed in March 1935, it had already been discounted in advance.

The French government too, under pressure from domestic opinion and reluctant to isolate itself from Britain, made considerable concessions during the conference. Following Britain's lead, the French abandoned their long-standing insistence on security as the precondition for disarmament, putting
in its place the idea of verification to ensure that an agreement was being observed. It is true that by this means they hoped to ascertain the extent of existing German rearmament, but it also meant an implicit acceptance that rearmament could not be prevented. Only as late as April 1934 did the French government declare that the latest German budget showed a clear intention to rearm, and therefore France would not discuss the recent German proposals for a ‘disarmament’ agreement.

This brought the Disarmament Conference to an end, but by that time a good deal of damage had been done. The first fifteen months of the Nazi regime coincided with the last phase of the conference, which offered excellent cover for the first risky stages of German rearmament. Neither Britain nor for a long time France would risk the opprobrium of torpedoing the conference by denouncing Germany. Even when the Germans finally left the conference in October 1933, the British spent another six months trying to tempt them back. The cover was perfect, and the first steps in the restoration of German power were taken while all eyes were fixed firmly on the illusory hopes of the Disarmament Conference.

**Abyssinian Crisis of 1935-36**

Even when disarmament failed, the League of Nations still represented the other great hope of the 1920s: peace through collective security. This hope foundered in the Abyssinian crisis of 1935-36, which ironically might not have been a serious issue at all without the existence of the League. Before 1914 it was customary for European states to occupy parts of Africa, and under pre-1914 rules, if Italy secured the consent of Britain and France as the major colonial powers, there was no reason why she should not conquer Abyssinia. But since 1920 new rules were supposed to apply. Abyssinia was a member of the League of Nations, and so a crisis arose.

Ever since the defeat of an Italian Army at Adowa in 1896, revenge for this humiliation had been in Italian minds. Mussolini began to consider an invasion of Abyssinia in 1925; plans took definite shape in 1932, with autumn 1935 as a likely date; and at the end of December 1934 the Duce laid down that the Italian objective must be nothing less than the total conquest of the country. The year 1935 appeared to offer favourable circumstances for the Italian enterprise. In 1934 there had been an attempted Nazi coup in Austria, but it had been defeated, and the country had settled down. Laval visited Mussolini in January 1935 and signed the Rome accords, which settled a number of African questions that had long been at issue between France and Italy. It remains an open question whether in his conversations Laval offered Mussolini a free hand in Abyssinia, or whether, as he always claimed, he referred only to a free hand in economic affairs. At any rate, Mussolini drew encouragement from Laval’s visit, which was followed by the Franco-Italian military agreements of May and June 1935. The links between the two countries became close.

On 11-14 April 1935 there was a conference between Italy, France, and Britain at Stresa, to discuss the recent announcement of German rearmament and the position of Austria. By this time, the buildup of Italian forces in East Africa was obvious. Abyssinia was discussed by officials outside the formal sessions, and a British representative gave a diplomatically phrased warning that the consequences of an invasion could not be foreseen. However, the Italians secured a copy of an assessment by an inter-departmental committee in June 1935, concluding that no vital British interests in Abyssinia or neighbouring countries obliged Britain to resist an Italian conquest. With this document in his hands, Mussolini might reasonably assume that the British government would not oppose him. He had no grasp of the significance of League sentiment in Britain, or of the range of influences which could be brought to bear upon a British Cabinet. His information was correct, but its context was inadequate.

On 3 October 1935 the Italian invasion of Abyssinia began. Britain and France met it with a two-sided (not to say two-faced) policy. First, on British initiative, and not least because a general election was impending in Britain, the League was mobilized to condemn Italian aggression. On 18 November a limited range of economic sanctions was imposed on Italy (to the surprise of some British ministers, notably Neville Chamberlain, who had expected that sanctions would only be investigated and found to be useless). The sanctions that were in fact applied were sufficient to cause considerable difficulties for the Italian economy, and no small damage to the countries which applied them, but they did not include an oil embargo. This was partly because the USA was an important supplier of oil to Italy, and also because an oil sanction might lead to war, which was not a risk the British wanted to take; though they took the precaution of moving naval reinforcements to the Mediterranean. In these measures, France was a reluctant participant, delaying sanctions for as long as possible, and temporizing over British requests to use French naval bases in the event of hostilities. The second line of policy was in practice preferred by both countries. This was to negotiate a settlement with Italy at the expense of Abyssinia. Talks on such
a project were pursued by officials in Paris, culminating in an agreement between Sir Samuel Hoare, the British Foreign Secretary, and Laval on 8 December 1935. In broad terms, the proposal was that Abyssinia should cede a large area to Italy outright, with another area reserved for Italian economic influence and exploitation. A rump Abyssinian state would survive, receiving as compensation a strip of British Somaliland giving access to the sea. These terms were to be put to Mussolini, Haile Selassie (Emperor of Abyssinia), and to the League. In fact, they were rapidly leaked to the French press, and when news of them reached Britain they were denounced by the League of Nations Union, by MPs, and by some Conservative stalwarts in the constituencies, a combination of pressure group and parliamentary opinion which was sufficient to persuade the government to draw back. Hoare resigned as Foreign Secretary, and the proposals were abandoned.

The Italians pursued their invasion of Abyssinia, using aircraft and mustard gas to secure a quicker victory than was generally expected. The capital, Addis Ababa, was occupied in May 1936, and Mussolini proclaimed King Victor Emmanuel as Emperor of Abyssinia.

The reasons why Britain and France followed their ambiguous policy were clear. The British wanted a League policy, to please the electorate and Parliament, and also, in the case of some individuals, out of genuine attachment to the League. But they also wanted to avoid a breach with Italy, and had no wish to court a naval war in the Mediterranean when they were vastly conscious of weakness in the Far East. The French had every reason to maintain the military agreements which they had only just reached with Italy, and yet they dared not break with Britain. The reasoning seemed sound, but the results were disastrous. There was enough realpolitik to undermine the League, and enough League sentiment to nullify the realpolitik. Neither line was pursued to a full, perhaps even leading to the fall of Hitler. 'Police action' was a favourite phrase, implying the brushing away of a screen of German forces, perhaps even leading to the fall of Hitler. 'Police action' was a favourite phrase, implying the brushing away of a screen of German forces, ready to retreat at the sight of French uniforms. Hitler later remarked that if

From being a member of an anti-German coalition, Italy began to cultivate German friendship. It was a turning-point in European affairs, and the turn was towards war.

**German Occupation of the Rhineland in March 1936**

With the Abyssinian crisis persisting, and dissension rife between Britain, France, and Italy, Germany was presented with an opportunity to move into the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland. This zone was set up under the Treaty of Versailles, and reaffirmed by the Treaty of Locarno, with Britain and Italy acting as its guarantors. What exactly their guarantee entailed was not precisely defined, but in any case it was inoperative by early 1936. As early as January 1935 the British Cabinet had concluded that the demilitarized zone was not a vital British interest; and in February 1936 Mussolini assured Hitler that he would not join in any action under the Locarno Treaty. The opening for Germany was there for the taking. A pretext of sorts was presented in February 1936 when the French Chamber of Deputies ratified the Franco-Soviet Treaty signed in May 1935. Germany claimed that the terms of this treaty were incompatible with those of Locarno, which had thus been rendered null and void.

It had been the fixed intention of all German governments to do away with the demilitarized zone when it became possible to do so, partly because it was an affront to German sovereignty and self-respect, and partly because it left the Rhineland exposed to attack. For some time, France and Britain had been expecting Germany to open negotiations to bring the zone to an end. Hitler chose instead to act, and on 7 March 1936 troops moved into the Rhineland. But at the same time he offered negotiation, in the shape of a set of new proposals: non-aggression pacts with France and Belgium, the limitation of air forces, new demilitarized zones on both sides of the Franco-German border (which if accepted would have meant the French dismantling large parts of the Maginot Line). The mixture of military fait accompli with diplomatic smoke-screen was masterly, and the temptation for nervous and peace-loving governments to examine the offers was overwhelming.

All turned on the response of the French and British governments to the German move. Much later comment on the crisis has assumed that an immediate military response was simple, and would have been rapidly successful, perhaps even leading to the fall of Hitler. 'Police action' was a favourite phrase, implying the brushing away of a screen of German forces, ready to retreat at the sight of French uniforms. Hitler later remarked that if
the French had marched, the Germans would have had to withdraw, their tails between their legs. Closer examination, however, reveals a different picture.

The German forces which moved into the former demilitarized zones consisted of about 10,000 men, organised into 12 infantry battalions and 8 groups of artillery. There were also 22,700 armed police, who on 8 March were incorporated into the army as 21 further infantry battalions. These units were formed into 4 new infantry divisions, and after the end of March further forces moved in to form 2 more divisions in the zone. Behind these forces lay the rest of the German Army, made up of 24 infantry and 3 Panzer divisions, not as yet fully trained or equipped since the great expansion of 1935. The Luftwaffe was strong in numbers but not yet supplied with modern aircraft.

The German forces which moved into the Rhineland zone were not large. Most of them were deployed on the east bank of the Rhine (where the demilitarized zone extended to a depth of 50 kilometres), and in bridgeheads on the west bank. Only 3 battalions advanced well beyond the river itself, to Aachen, Trier and Saarbrucken, towards the frontiers of the Low Countries, Luxemburg and France respectively. It has often been assumed that if the French had intervened, the German troops would have withdrawn without a fight. In the words of the most authoritative German account, this assumption is 'altogether unfounded'. In fact, in the event of a French intervention, the three forward battalions were instructed to co-operate with the existing frontier troops and conduct a fighting retreat, using prepared obstacles to obstruct the French advance. The river itself would then be defended. It was in any case unlikely that Hitler would simply have allowed the French to occupy the whole zone, which included part of the Ruhr industrial area on the east bank of the Rhine; or that German troops would passively abandon territory they had just entered with much flourish and display.

It was therefore entirely sensible for the French to be prepared for serious action, not a military promenade, if they moved to expel the German forces. The French General Staff, however, proceeded to exaggerate the problem by producing a grossly inflated estimate of the German forces in the Rhineland zone. They gave an accurate figure for the army units, but added 235,000 auxiliaries, supposedly organised into 15 further divisions. The General Staff then insisted, on the basis of these figures, that it could not take even limited action to occupy part of the Rhineland without a partial mobilization of the reserves, involving calling up a million men in seven days.

The French high command thus added its own self-induced difficulties to a perfectly real military problem. To mobilize a million reservists would have the temporary effect of decreasing the fighting power of the army, by producing a mass of men who would have to be organised and equipped. Moreover, mobilization would have serious social and economic effects on the country when a general election was due to be held in two months' time. The existing government, under Albert Sarraut, was acknowledged to be only a stop-gap until the elections, which the Popular Front coalition was expected to win. In such circumstances, it would have needed a bold and determined government, confident of parliamentary and popular support, to call up a million men and launch a serious military operation - in effect, go to war.

The government was neither bold nor determined. Sarraut was no Poincare or Clemenceau, but a run-of-the-mill politician of the later Third Republic. In the country, the almost unanimous view of the press on 8 March and the following days was to renounce the idea of war, or action of any kind, except (in the socialist papers) an appeal to the League. The same message came from trade unions, ex-servicemen's organisations, and the political parties. Left and Right each accused the other of wanting war. In fact, neither did: there must be no war over the Rhineland.

The government turned to Britain. The Foreign Minister, Flandin, went to London on 11 March to ask for British support for actions which he speciously claimed to be planning against Germany. He met no encouragement from either the Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, or the Prime Minister, Baldwin. The almost unanimous view of the British press and the political parties was that the Germans had only moved into their own territory - 'their own back garden' was a phrase with much homely appeal. The government had long expected the remilitarization of the Rhineland, and did not think it would vitally affect British interests. Eden's reaction, when he heard the news of the occupation along with Hitler's proposals for new pacts, was to try for a fresh agreement with Germany. So far from wishing to support the French in any immediate action against Germany, he was anxious to restrain them, and prevent them from spoiling the apparent opportunity of coming to terms with Hitler. Eden therefore told Flandin, on his visit to London, that they should examine Hitler's proposals carefully; though he also offered some modest reassurance to France by agreeing to military staff talks. This response allowed Flandin to return to
Paris and add one more reason for inaction to those which already existed: the British would not move. As Eden explained to the House of Commons on 26 March: 'It is the appeasement of Europe as a whole that we have constantly before us'.

So the crisis passed. The French Army limited its actions to cancelling leave and moving some units to the frontier to man the Maginot defences. On the diplomatic side, the British government, in consultation with France, put various questions to Germany to elucidate the meaning of Hitler’s offers of new agreements. There was no reply. Meanwhile, the Germans pressed on with the fortification of their frontier with France.

The Rhineland occupation has been rightly seen as a crucial point in the move towards war. It is often presented as the great ‘might have been’: the last chance to stop Hitler without war. This puts the issue wrongly. The opportunity open to France was to stop Hitler by war, not without war. It would have been necessary to invade German territory, and to fight the German forces if, as seems probable, they resisted. It is true that this war would have been fought in more favourable military circumstances than the later one; and if the French had shown boldness and determination it could surely have been won. But the political circumstances rendered such a course almost impossible. The ‘might have been’ on which so many regrets and recriminations have been lavished was not seriously considered by anyone, and if attempted would have been universally condemned by politicians and public in both France and Britain. Only the Pope told the French Ambassador to the Holy See, on 16 March, that if the French had moved 200,000 troops into the Rhineland they would have done everyone a great service. It was stern advice from His Holiness, but there was no chance that it would be followed. The real weight of the event lay not in any ‘might have been’, but in its actual consequences. Of these, some of the most important were felt in Germany, where Hitler held a plebiscite on 29 March 1936 to approve the occupation of the Rhineland. The result - a 99 per cent Yes vote - was certainly contrived, to say the least; but even so there was no doubt that the successful venture in the Rhineland produced a great surge in Hitler’s popularity. After a difficult winter of food shortages and general discontent, this was an important political result of the Rhineland coup. Militarily, the Germans were able to start work on the Siegfried Line, covering the frontier with France and so closing the door which the demilitarized zone had been intended to keep open.

France suffered precisely the opposite strategic consequences. The demilitarized zone had been the last safeguard left from the 1919 settlement. On 30 April 1936, General Gamelin told his government that if (he really meant when) the Germans fortified the Rhineland, the French Army would be unable to invade Germany. The Germans could hold the frontier with comparatively few troops, while in the east they attacked Czechoslovakia or Poland. The defensive organisation of the French Army had already undermined the basis of French alliances in eastern Europe, and now that basis was vanishing completely. There was an even more fundamental result: France’s complete lack of will to maintain the 1919 settlement had been openly exposed. If France would not fight over the Rhineland, the immediate guarantee of her own security, would she go to war at all?

The Rhineland coup also had consequences for other countries, and most ominously for Belgium. On 6 March, the day before the German occupation, the Belgian government renounced its alliance with France, and in October it declared a policy of ‘independence’, claiming neutral status without going back to the full juridical neutrality of pre-1914 years. France was now faced with a hopeless dilemma. To fortify the Belgian frontier was extremely expensive, and would abandon Belgium to a German invasion; yet to leave it unfortified meant laying open the north-eastern frontier of France. The Belgians, for their part, had apparently decided that they were better off without any alliance with France; yet the tacit assumption behind their ‘independence’ was still that the French would come to their help in the event of a German attack. It was an illogical position. The danger of a German invasion was not diminished, but if the French came in as rescuers they would do so without preparation. The new position of Belgium added to the instability of western Europe, and played into the hands of Germany.

**Spanish Civil War in 1936-37**

Less than five months after the German occupation of the Rhineland, civil war broke out in Spain. The causes of this conflict were deeply rooted in Spanish history; the issues at stake were complicated; and each side in the war was divided within itself. The right-wing (or nationalist) side was largely made up of monarchists, the officer corps, and the Catholic hierarchy; but the monarchists were split between Alfonsists and Carlists, and the small Fascist Party, the Falange, claimed to be revolutionary and modernizing rather than reactionary. On the Left, supporting the republican government of Spain, were socialists, anarchists, and a small Communist Party, all opposed to one another in various ways. There were also strong separatist movements in Catalonia and the Basque country, which in
The war began with a military rising to overthrow the republic and its Popular Front government, brought to power by a general election in February 1936. The revolt began in Spanish Morocco on 17 July 1936, and spread to Spain the next day. Its object was a rapid seizure of power, but the republican government put up a determined resistance, holding on to Madrid, Barcelona, and large parts of central and western Spain. The result was that an attempted coup d'état became a civil war which lasted nearly three years, until the end of March 1939. It was a bloody struggle, in which both sides committed atrocities, and whose deep-rooted complexities tended to be hidden by a smoke-screen of slogans and propaganda. Supporters of the republic claimed to be fighting against a fascist dictatorship in defence of democracy or socialism (or both). Nationalists presented themselves as the champions of order and Christian civilization, at grips with red revolution and a communist plot.

Such views were at best gross simplifications, but they met with ready support outside Spain, where there was a strong inclination for men to project their own fears and hopes upon the Spanish Civil War. Outsiders created the war in their own image, and saw it as an extension of their own struggles. The conflict drew in individuals by a magnetism of idealism and commitment which can exert its attractive power even now. But of itself this did not mean that the Spanish Civil War was bound to become a European crisis. Indeed, in many circumstances the governments of Europe would doubtless have been content to allow the Spaniards to pursue their internecine feuds alone. In the event, a number of foreign governments took a very different line, and outside intervention became a commitment to a long and dreary war; but Mussolini's reputation rather than promoting it in Spain. A Popular Front victory in Spain, with Italian anti-fascists prominent, would be a dangerous precedent. Within Spain, the Italians understood clearly that they were giving aid to conservative generals, not to Spanish fascists, and they did little to further the cause of the Falange. Above all, intervention became a matter of prestige. What began as small-scale help for a supposedly rapid coup became a commitment to a long and dreary war; but Mussolini's reputation and that of Italian fascism were at stake, and retreat was impossible. The Italians made little attempt to press economic demands, except in the simplest sense of trying to secure payment for their aid - not always with success. The whole Italian operation in Spain was carried out with surprisingly little precise result being sought. What was attained was simply the aim of victory for the side that Mussolini had backed.

German intervention began with the provision of transport aircraft in July 1936. At the end of October, the Germans offered to send a combat force to Spain, on condition that it should be under a German commander,
specialists, probably did not number more than 1,000 at any one time.

Soviet personnel in Spain, mainly tank and aircraft, were in action at Madrid at the end of October, and the first fighter aircraft flown by Soviet pilots) on 4 November. Shipments of equipment were frequent up to March 1937, diminished after that date, and ended in the middle of 1938. The total aid sent is uncertain, but probably amounted to about 1,000 aircraft, 900 tanks, 1,500 guns, and large quantities of small arms and ammunition. Soviet personnel in Spain, mainly tank and aircraft specialists, probably did not number more than 1,000 at any one time.

Hitler's first quick decision at Bayreuth, which began the intervention, seems to have been motivated by a desire to prevent what he saw as a Bolshevik regime controlling Spain. The despatch of the Condor Legion seems to have owed something to sheer pique. Ciano, the Italian Foreign Minister, visited Berlin in October 1936, and showed Hitler British documents obtained by Italian intelligence in which Eden described Germany as being ruled by a band of adventurers. Hitler at once suggested that Germany and Italy should go over to the offensive against the democracies, and they agreed forthwith to increase their help to Franco. But pique was very much accompanied by calculation. The Condor Legion's operations gave the German Air Force combat experience and an opportunity for self-advertisement. In terms of foreign policy, Hitler was happy to see the war kept going. It provided an opportunity to consolidate the alliance with Italy, and it appeared to open wide possibilities of war between France and Italy, or of civil strife in France. Moreover, the Germans insisted that they should receive precise economic concessions in return for their aid, notably in the shape of a measure of control over the Spanish iron-ore mines. The last deliveries of German aid, at the end of 1938, were made in return for specific concessions on German holdings in Spanish mining companies.

The other great power to intervene on a substantial scale was the Soviet Union, which provided assistance to the republican government. The first shipment of rifles and ammunition left the Soviet Union on 18 September 1936, and arrived on the 26th, followed in October by about 100 aircraft and 100 tanks, with some 500 specialist troops. Soviet tanks were in action at Madrid at the end of October, and the first fighter aircraft (flown by Soviet pilots) on 4 November. Shipments of equipment were frequent up to March 1937, diminished after that date, and ended in the middle of 1938. The total aid sent is uncertain, but probably amounted to about 1,000 aircraft, 900 tanks, 1,500 guns, and large quantities of small arms and ammunition. Soviet personnel in Spain, mainly tank and aircraft specialists, probably did not number more than 1,000 at any one time.

Soviet military advisers were very important in the republican armies. Most republican generals had a Soviet officer on their staffs, and General Pavlov, the Soviet tank commander in Spain, sometimes led his units in action. The advisers themselves were watched by the NKVD, whose operations in Spain were controlled by Alexander Orlov.

Soviet assistance to the republic also took the indirect form of the International Brigades, units of volunteers recruited and organised through the machinery of the Comintern and individual communist parties. Most passed through France, where a barracks was set up at Perpignan, and the French Communist Party formed a shipping company, France-Navigation, to provide sea transport from Marseilles. Numbers serving in the Brigades probably reached a total of between 25,000 and 35,000, with perhaps 15,000-18,000 in Spain at any one time. This was not a large force, but its psychological impact was considerable. The Brigades went into action in defence of Madrid in November 1936, and by the time they were withdrawn from Spain in November 1938 they had played a substantial military role as well as creating one of the legends of the twentieth century.

Soviet motivation, as so often, was enigmatic. The ideological dimension was surely important: this was the era of the Popular Front movement, and it was presumably impossible for the Soviet Union and the communist parties to stand idly by in the Spanish struggle. Stalin was the acknowledged leader of the international proletariat, and he had to act as such. That the Soviet Union was the only great power to help the republic became, in fact, a crucial propaganda asset for the communists. In strategic terms, Spain was too far distant to matter much to the Soviet Union. It may be that after the Franco-Soviet Treaty of 1935 Stalin preferred France not to face the enemy on the Pyrenees; but since neither the French nor the Soviets chose to make much of their alliance, this motive appears no more than tenuous. It may well be that, like Hitler, Stalin was content to see the Spanish Civil War continue, absorbing some of the attention of the capitalist states in a far-distant corner of Europe. The great purges in the Soviet Union presumably occupied most of Stalin's attention from 1936 to 1938, and Spain was probably only of peripheral interest to him. At any rate, he provided enough help to keep the republic going, but not enough to enable it to win. He pulled out in the autumn of 1938, and at an early stage he secured payment by getting most of the Spanish gold reserves (worth about $US 500 million) sent to the Soviet Union at the end of October 1936. Meanwhile, as a by-product of intervention, he used the presence of the NKVD in Spain to eliminate Trotskyists, anarchists, and other enemies.
All this intervention in the Civil War went on while the powers concerned were parties to a non-intervention Agreement, and members of a non-intervention Committee were meeting regularly in London. This macabre piece of play-acting may be explained by looking at the policies of France and Britain. France was closely concerned with events in Spain, both as a geographical neighbour and because in 1936 both countries had Popular Front governments. When approached for help by the Spanish government on 20 July 1936, the French Premier, Leon Blum, at once agreed in principle and asked for a list of what was needed. During the next few days, the French government changed its mind no fewer than three times, ending during the night of 8/9 August by forbidding the despatch of war material or even civil aircraft to Spain. On 1 August the government decided to propose to other states a general policy of non-intervention, and by 15 August this emerged as a formal Franco-British proposal for a Non-intervention Agreement. Other governments accepted, and the Non-intervention Committee held its first meeting in London on 9 September. During this period of vacillation, aid of various kinds in fact passed through France to Spain: 38 aircraft were sent during the week of 2–9 August, and a further 56 afterwards. The border was opened occasionally during 1937 and 1938, and the government turned a blind eye to the transit camps of the International Brigades. In general, however, the policy of non-intervention, once begun, was adhered to.

It was a policy which ran counter to Blum’s personal sentiments and his first reaction. It was not a decision reached primarily on strategic grounds, though the strategic arguments were marginally in favour of it. In support of intervention was the likelihood that a nationalist victory might produce a hostile government in Spain, which might allow the use of Spanish territory by the enemies of France. On the other hand, intervention would use up military resources needed by the French armed forces, risked spreading the war, and might force the nationalists into a hostility which was by no means inevitable. The French General Staff believed that the nationalists would win, but that after victory they would get rid of all foreign forces and follow their own policy. The main impulse for non-intervention, however, came from French internal politics. Blum rapidly found that his Cabinet was split on the issue, and the stability of his government was in jeopardy when it had barely been in existence for two months. Blum was also afraid that intervention might bring France itself to the brink of civil war, which in view of the country’s internal divisions was not a groundless fear. In addition, he was afraid of alienating Britain, whose government was opposed to intervention; though this factor was not so important as has sometimes been argued.

The balance was thus tipped in favour of non-intervention. In the event, it appears that most Frenchmen were relieved to see their country stand aloof from the war, though the communists and some socialists agitated vociferously for action on behalf of the republic, and much of the Right was ardently pro-nationalist. The non-intervention policy was sustained in the Chamber of Deputies without undue difficulty, despite the fact that the Non-intervention Agreement was openly flouted by Germany, Italy, and the USSR. To abandon it would risk domestic difficulties, and perhaps also a confrontation with the Axis powers which France had good reason to avoid. It seemed better to pretend that the agreement was working, or could somehow be made to work better in future.

The position of the British government was very similar, though its motivation was different. The sympathies of the government lay mainly with the nationalists, who seemed more likely to protect British commercial interests and investments in Spain. For this purpose, a British diplomatic agent was appointed to Franco’s government at an early stage, though formal recognition was only given (by Britain and France together) in February 1939. The main considerations behind British policy, however, were political and strategic. First, the British government was anxious that the war should not spread, and produce a general European conflict. Second, as a part of a wider policy, British sights were set from mid-1936 to 1939 on improving relations with Italy, and perhaps detaching her from Germany. Third, the British were anxious to ensure that whatever Spanish government emerged victorious from the Civil War should be at least benevolently neutral towards Britain. Put in crude terms, this meant a wish not to fall out with the likely winner, which the British government expected to be the nationalists. As a policy, it was perhaps ignoble, and it certainly required a great deal of pretence; but it was far from being unreasonable.

On these grounds, the British government seized eagerly on the proposal for a Non-intervention Agreement, and held on to it despite all adversities. Baldwin defended British policy by analogy with a dam: a leaky dam, holding back at least some of the potential flow of arms to Spain, and preventing the war from spreading from Spain to the rest of Europe, was better than no dam at all. To keep up the pretence of the Non-intervention Agreement involved all kinds of shifts and expedients, smacking of hypocrisy and cowardice. For example, the German and Italian fleets were brought into the non-intervention patrol, even though their countries were blatantly interventionist. The government had to contend with the unease of
some of its own supporters as well as the anger of the Labour opposition, which advocated allowing the republican government to purchase arms in Britain.

Only once did the British and French depart from their complaisant attitude towards Axis activities in Spain. In August 1937 there were several attacks on merchant ships heading for republican ports by so-called ‘pirate’ submarines, which were well known to be Italian. On 31 August a torpedo was fired at (but missed) the British destroyer Havock. At this point, the British and French governments called a conference of interested states (except Spain) at Nyon. Italy and Germany declined the invitation, and in their absence the conference (10-14 September) agreed that British and French warships should patrol the western Mediterranean and attack any unidentified submarine forthwith. The attacks ceased, but the moral effect of the Anglo-French show of strength was weakened by their agreement almost immediately afterwards to allow Italy to join in the antisubmarine patrol. As it happened, the Italian campaign had in any case been suspended on 4 September, before the conference met, so the effects of the conference were less clear-cut than they appeared at the time.

There was widespread apprehension that the Spanish Civil War might at any moment spill over and precipitate a general European conflict. The Italian submarine campaign and the attack on HMS Havock provided a sharp demonstration of how this might come about. What would have happened if the Havock had been hit, or if her depth-charges, dropped in retaliation, had sunk an Italian submarine? The same sort of thing might have happened in the land campaigns, where it was perfectly possible that Italian or German forces could have engaged Soviet tanks and their crews. War by the extension of some such incident in Spain or off the coast seemed a distinct possibility. Such fears were intensified by the emotions which gathered round the war. For anti-fascists all over Europe, the Spanish War, and in particular the siege of Madrid, became the symbol of their struggle against the enemy; and some men hoped rather than feared that the war would touch off a wider conflict. With so many people regarding the Civil War as a European war by proxy, there was always the possibility that it might turn into a European war in reality.

Much of this now appears exaggerated, even fanciful. The Spanish Civil War produced much high drama and emotion, but it did not precipitate a European war. Neither Germany nor the USSR had anything at stake in Spain that was worth fighting a European war about, and they made their contributions to the conflict in carefully measured doses. Italy was more deeply committed, because Mussolini's prestige was at stake, and he might have been willing to go to any lengths to maintain it. But Italy alone was unlikely to produce a European war out of the Spanish conflict; and in any case the Italian side never looked like losing. By the end of 1937 Spain was ceasing to be a major international issue - the Nyon conference of September 1937 was the last flurry of diplomatic activity on a Spanish question. As the serious movement towards a European war gained momentum in 1938 and 1939, Spain was only on the periphery of affairs, and the Civil War came to an anti-climactic end five months before hostilities began in Poland. In the European war that followed, the Axis powers received less help from Spain than they looked for. Franco had accepted their help, and paid for it when he had to, but he always sought to protect Spanish interests as he saw them. In the wider war, he gave help to the Axis powers in a limited fashion, but continued to put Spanish interests first.

Was the whole furore over Spain, then, merely much ado about nothing? In European terms, and if the issues could be reduced to cold fact, probably so. But beliefs are every bit as important as realities. War was a reality in Spain, and an atmosphere of war spread to much of Europe. Fears of general war emanating from Spain had their own weight, especially in France and Britain. This was not all. Spain made war respectable again. Many a formerly anti-militarist socialist felt that the defence of the republic was more important than pacifism. Andre Malraux, a French left-wing writer who fought for the republic, depicted in his novel L’Espoir (1937) anarchist troops making Homeric speeches before going out to certain death against Italian tanks. Heroism, and even heroics, were back in fashion. When a republican commander in Madrid was asked where his men should retreat if they had to, he replied 'To the cemetery', a phrase which was reported at the time, and has been remembered since, with admiration. They were brave words; but if they had come from Haig during the First World War they would have been treated differently. The spell cast by the war has not yet lost its power; have there been any anti-war novels or films about the Spanish Civil War?

At the more sober level of diplomacy, the Spanish War introduced a further element of discord. It brought Italy and Germany closer together. It was an obstacle to the improvement of relations between Italy and France or Britain. The prominent role of the International Brigades and the communist agitation about Spain throughout Europe revived the vision of international communism, to the exhilaration of some and the terror of
of a potentially dangerous and disruptive kind. In October 1933 Germany announced its resignation from the League of Nations and departure from the Disarmament Conference. This appeared to involve some risk of retaliation from France or Britain, but Hitler rightly predicted that after some protests the western powers would renew their attempts to negotiate with Germany about armaments. The move was popular in Germany, and was confirmed by a plebiscite on 12 November. In theory, it should have diminished German respectability in the international community; but in practice it did not. The other adventure was in Austria. On 25 July 1934 Austrian Nazis broke into the Chancellery in Vienna, shot the Chancellor, Dollfuss, and proclaimed over the radio that he had resigned. Other members of the government rallied, and the assassins had to surrender. Outside Vienna, the Austrian army and police defeated risings in five of the nine provinces. Mussolini at once declared his support for Austrian independence, and had troops already on manoeuvres in the Alps to back up his point. The coup failed. No one doubted German complicity in these events. Bands of Austrian Nazis were based in Bavaria; and when Dollfuss's assassins surrendered they unsuccessfully asked for safe conduct to the German border. Hitler strenuously declared his innocence, and it was doubtless true that strictly in terms of government activity Germany was not involved. But in terms of party conspiracy things were very different. There is clear evidence that Hitler expected the coup which was attempted on 25 July, and anticipated that the Austrian government would be overthrown by the end of the day. The German and Austrian Nazis worked closely together, and the whole enterprise, with its use of violence combined with propaganda, was a portent of the Nazi style in foreign policy. If Europe had been alert, much might have been learned from it. Moreover, the defeat of the rising showed that determined opposition, even in a small country, could check Nazi aggression; a lesson which seems to have been largely ignored at the time and forgotten later. In the event, Hitler managed both to live down the attempted coup and to survive its defeat. The respectable and aristocratic von Papen was sent as Ambassador to Vienna to soothe Austrian susceptibilities; and German policy settled down to attain the Anschluss by more patient methods.

Despite these two episodes, the Nazi regime made an essentially cautious and peaceable start in its foreign policy. It became more daring and assertive in 1935 and 1936. In January 1935 Hitler secured the last advantage to be expected from the Versailles Treaty, when the plebiscite in the Saar prescribed that instrument produced an overwhelming vote for reunion with Germany. There was nothing further to be gained from the treaty, and Hitler was free to discard it if he could do so with impunity. He
Hitler had no such doubts. As Donald Watt has written, 'Mussolini's role publicly about the existence of a 'Rome-Berlin Axis'. It was true that the policy. Shortly before this, on 1 November 1936, Mussolini had spoken to Schuschnigg, visited Rome, and was told that Italy could no longer in practice a German satellite. In April 1937 the Austrian Chancellor, Ambassador in Rome that he would have no objection if Austria became a German state recognized Austria sovereignty and Austria acknowledged that it was a good by an Austro-German agreement. Both ventures were successful, though the German generals had though they were too risky. Success breeds intervention Agreement. Both ventures were successful, though the German generals had though they were too risky. Success breeds success, and the momentum of Nazi foreign policy was building up.

In his writings, Hitler had looked to alliances with Italy and Britain to bring Germany out of isolation and prepare the way for an advance in eastern Europe. By the end of 1937 an alliance with Italy was in the making. The set-back of the failed coup in Austria in 1934 made good by an Austro-German agreement in July 1936, in which Germany recognized Austrian sovereignty and Austria acknowledged that it was a German state - an imprecise but potentially far-reaching phrase. Italy accepted this agreement, and its support for Austria progressively diminished. As early as January 1936 Mussolini told the German Ambassador in Rome that he would have no objection if Austria became in practice a German satellite. In April 1937 the Austrian Chancellor, Schuschnigg, visited Rome, and was told that Italy could no longer defend Austria militarily, and his only hope lay in following a Germanic policy. Shortly before this, on 1 November 1936, Mussolini had spoken publicly about the existence of a 'Rome-Berlin Axis'. It was true that the value of an Italian alliance to Germany was open to question - for example, German generals had a low opinion of the Italian army. But Hitler had no such doubts. As Donald Watt has written, 'Mussolini's role as Hitler's indispensable ally rested in Hitler's mind and there alone.' For German foreign policy as it was then conducted, that was quite enough.

German policy towards Britain was less clear-cut. Sometimes Hitler worked hard at building up relations with Britain. He met Eden in 1934 and Simon in 1935, and he angled for an invitation to go to London to see Baldwin. He also received a stream of unofficial visitors, including Lloyd George, Lord Allen of Hurtwood (a pacifist Labour peer), and Ward Price, an influential journalist. After each visit, Hitler reaped a goodly harvest of praise for the qualities of his character and the peaceable nature of his intentions. Equally the British government showed itself eager to negotiate with Germany, especially on questions of armaments and economics. To all appearances, an agreement with Britain, if not an alliance, was there for Germany to take. But in the event Hitler never pressed his overtures beyond the stage reached in the Naval Agreement of 1935; and sometimes when the door to something further seemed open he made no move to go through it. In 1937 the German Foreign Minister, von Neurath, accepted an invitation to visit London; but it appears that the German government made no serious preparations for his visit, which was called off on the flimsy pretext of an almost certainly non-existent torpedo attack on a German cruiser off Spain. If an agreement with Britain was so firmly on Hitler's agenda, as he himself had written earlier, such behaviour is hard to explain. However, in the short run this German hesitation had no serious consequences. British policy was favourable towards Germany, and played almost as much into German hands as if an alliance had existed.

During the whole of this period, and especially after March 1935, German military strength developed at a remarkable rate. By the end of 1937 the army had achieved the first stage of its expansion, and the strength (and even more the reputation) of the Luftwaffe was formidable in relation to any of its possible opponents. Germany had become, in a mere four years, the strongest military power in Europe.

The rise of Germany was matched by the decline of France, which at the beginning of 1933 still retained a position of some strength, but by the end of 1937 had fallen into weakness and passivity. In part this was the result of internal problems - social and political conflicts, unstable governments, and a worsening economic situation. But in part the decline came from a failure to grapple with the problems presented by the rise of Germany. Only Louis Barthou, who was Foreign Minister from February to October 1934, made a determined effort to cope with these problems. Barthou had no doubt that the policy of conciliation practised by Briand and continued through most of
the life of the Disarmament Conference must be abandoned. French security was at stake: it could no longer be attained through the League, so it must be sought by alliances. Barthou set himself to revive France's alliances with Poland, Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Rumania. He recognized that an alliance with Italy would be useful. Above all, he sought an alliance with the Soviet Union. Though sternly anti-communist within France, he would have no truck with the view that Germany was preferable to the USSR on grounds of ideology: power politics and geography were what counted for Barthou. He visited Warsaw in April 1934 to try to repair the Polish alliance, and to encourage the Poles to improve their relations with the Soviet Union. He toured other eastern European capitals to promote his idea of an eastern pact, which was designed to draw in the USSR as a guarantor in eastern Europe on the lines of the Locarno treaties in the west. It may well be that these efforts were foredoomed to failure because they sought to reconcile the irreconcilable: the states of eastern Europe had no wish to be guaranteed by the Soviet Union, a prospect which they regarded as somewhat akin to the sheep being guaranteed by the wolf. But at least Barthou knew his own mind, and tackled the problems with a courage and energy often lacking in others. He was also willing to treat the British with a brusqueness that had not been seen since Poincare's time, and to disregard their tendency to obstruct any improvement in Franco-Soviet relations.

On 9 October 1934 King Alexander of Yugoslavia, on a visit to France, was assassinated by an agent of Croat terrorists. Barthou, who was riding in the same carriage, died of his wounds. His successor as Foreign Minister was Laval, who replaced Barthou's clear-cut policy with a series of half-measures. He reached agreements with Italy in January 1935 and the following months, but under pressure from Britain, he threw them overboard during the Abyssinian crisis. He signed a treaty with the Soviet Union in May 1935, but then took it through a long and unnecessary process of discussion by parliamentary committees and ratification by Chamber and Senate. He hoped to use his agreement with both countries not so much against Germany as to pave the way for an agreement with Germany. Moreover, he reaped the results which were almost bound to follow a treaty with the USSR: dismay and distrust on the part of eastern European states, with the exception of Czechoslovakia. The result was a confusion and uncertainty in which France was thrown back into dependence on Britain, with unhappy results.

From the French point of view, British foreign policy was at its worst in 1935. In March the Foreign Secretary, Simon, went ahead with a visit to Berlin immediately after Germany announced its open rearmament. In June Britain concluded the Naval Agreement with Germany without consulting France, even though French interests were directly involved. In October and November Britain led France into the fiasco of sanctions against Italy over Abyssinia. Laval was later to gain a reputation for being pro-German; but in 1935 it was the British who were far ahead of him in going to meet the Germans and playing into their hands. But however unreliable or ill-judged British policy might be, the French at this state found their dependence on Britain inescapable. The alternative of throwing French policy into reverse, seeking the best available terms from Germany, and accepting the consequences, was a course that was not yet seriously contemplated.

The German remilitarization of the Rhineland in March 1936 marked both a strategic and a psychological surrender by France; and there was no recovery later in the year. The advent of Blum's Popular Front government placed a further, ideological, barrier in the way of restoring relations with Italy. An attempt to revive the Little Entente in eastern Europe found Yugoslavia and Rumania reluctant to offend the Germans or to court economic reprisals from them. Relations with the Soviet Union were not developed. The Soviets pressed hard for military conversations, and the French finally agreed in November 1936; but in practice they continued to stall by making sure that the talks contained little substance.

By 1937 France was reduced to almost complete passivity. The Foreign Ministry watched the growth of German power with a clear-sighted fascination, unwilling to accept but unable to prevent it. Old allies in eastern Europe were cool. Italian friendship had been thrown away, and that of the USSR had not been fully secured. The British were unreliable. The French knew they needed allies, but in practice they were grievously alone.

**Conclusion**

By the end of 1937 the state of Europe had changed profoundly from that of 1932. The balance of power and prestige had swung decisively away from the states which supported the status quo of 1919, and particularly France, towards those which sought change, notably Italy and Germany. Of these two powers, Italy was the more obviously active. Mussolini was positively happy to be seen using force, whether in Abyssinia or in Spain. After the Dollfuss crisis of 1934, when Italy acted for the last time to maintain the status quo in Austria, every Italian move was a blow to the
stability of Europe: in particular, it was no small matter to outface and effectively destroy the League of Nations. The Italian role in these years, and the damage inflicted on Europe, was out of proportion to Italy's actual weight among the powers. But though Italy was the more active, Germany was by far the more formidable of the two revisionist states. By 1937 Germany had become in terms of land and air power the strongest country in Europe. The economy was booming. The Nazi leaders were full of confidence, well justified by a record of almost unbroken success. In political, military, and psychological terms, Germany held the initiative in Europe, and the events of the next few years developed from what her rulers, and above all Hitler, chose to do with it.