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The Prelude to 7 March

The present Ethiopian imbroglio is mere child’s play compared with the German problem that will, in some not very distant future, confront His Majesty’s Government.

Eric Phipps Papers, 6 November 1935

[Eden’s] aim is to avert another German war. To do this he is prepared to make great concessions to German appetites providing they will sign a disarmament treaty and join the League of Nations. His idea is to work for this during the next three years and then suddenly put it before the League. I am all in favour of such a far-sighted plan.

Harold Nicolson Diary, 13 February 1936

The demilitarized zone was inevitably among the first targets for any revived Germany in a position to challenge the post-war settlement. No German Government had ever accepted that the zone should remain in existence indefinitely. Its crucial importance for Germany and for any future plans of expansion also pointed to an eventual reoccupation. Nor did Hitler’s past record of treaty violations give any comfort, whatever his protestations that ‘he had no intention of bringing into question again the validity of the 1925 [Locarno] agreements’. As well as the long-term expectations that Germany would attempt to regain full sovereignty over the Rhineland, there were also numerous warnings from sources in and around the zone that actual preparations were being undertaken. By the end of 1935 these had turned into a flood. If, however, there was little doubt that trouble was brewing, there was still uncertainty as to the exact timing and nature of any move. Few expected a sudden or outright military violation of the zone. Rather, it
was felt that Hitler would refute the legal status of Locarno, possibly announce the integration of the existing paramilitary forces in the zone into the Reichswehr or open negotiations with the other Locarno signatories on a revision of the Treaty. With unwarranted confidence Eden and Flandin concluded in January that it was ‘unlikely that [Hitler] would take any precipitate action in the near future’. Nevertheless, forewarned of the dangerous situation confronting them, British and French leaders did instigate an intensified policy debate. What emerged was not, therefore, the product of the crisis meetings of 7 or 8 March but the outcome of many months of discussions. The confident expectation, however, that Germany would avoid taking violent steps, and the generally slow and cumbersome nature of the policy-making machinery, resulted in a decisive lack of speed.

Early in 1936 several events were coming to a head. The appointment of Eden as Foreign Secretary in London gave Britain’s policy towards the German problem a new impetus. In Paris the formation of the caretaker Sarrut Government meant that nothing similar could be expected from there in the immediate future. In fact the opening of the election campaign, the weakening of the French Government and exacerbation of the internal divisions in the country, only acted as further temptations to Hitler to take the initiative. The fact that the Stresa Front was in ruins and relations between Britain and France strained, only further served to incite a move against the zone. The progress made in the German rearmament programme and the consolidation of the Nazi regime made such an act feasible, while the imminent signature of the Franco-Soviet Pact offered a tempting pretext for action.

The alarming reports coming into Paris and London guaranteed an intensive debate on the future of the policy towards the Rhineland and with it the whole policy towards Germany. In London, and to a somewhat lesser extent in Paris, there was an explosion of Cabinet, Foreign Office and military meetings, each accompanied by an inundation of reports and memoranda. These highlighted much that had previously been left undecided and forced both Governments to face up to some awkward issues. The debate revolved around two interrelated questions. First, the reaction to any German breach of the demilitarized zone and, secondly, the general policy towards Germany and any new effort to reach an agreement with her. The reactions to both questions revealed a drift, to an almost paralyzing extent in Paris, and a general desire to appease Germany, most strongly held in Britain.

At the start of this renewed policy debate in London it was made clear by the Foreign Office legal expert that they had only a limited commit-