The Crisis Passes By

Paul-Boncour...would not conceal...that both he and other left-wing politicians had become much perturbed at the extent of the anti-British feeling which was developing in France while there was a similar, if not stronger development of anti-French feeling in Britain...[This was] a serious matter for those who believed, as he did, that the co-operation of the two democracies was indispensable to the maintenance of peace in Europe...he maintained that it was the failure to do anything about Germany’s reoccupation of the zone which had had so disastrous an effect upon French opinion, for those who supported the League and Locarno in France had always stressed the value of British co-operation. French public opinion now felt that that co-operation had not been forthcoming at a critical moment.

Eden Papers, 14 April 1936

After two weeks of often intense discussions the Rhineland crisis gradually petered out. The offer hammered out between the Locarno powers in London and put to Germany predictably proved to be a non-starter. On 20 March it met with a hostile reaction from the League while in Rome Mussolini refused either to endorse or reject the signature of his Ambassador. Behind some obvious delaying tactics the German reply, handed over on 2 April, rejected the proposals. None the less, the British and French continued the almost hopeless task of attempting to bring about an agreement with Berlin. The British were reluctant to say publicly that the talks had broken down lest this should provoke a revival of the demands for sanctions against Germany. A final communiqué was drawn up by the Foreign Office, with the agreement of the French, to further probe German intentions. However, once again its questions
were avoided. Although talks between the Locarno powers and Germany continued half-heartedly, with this last failure the Rhineland crisis had effectively run its course.

Hitler had notched up another considerable foreign policy success. His initial fears were proved groundless. The German coup was eventually achieved with ease, and rapidly, if reluctantly, digested by the rest of Europe. He had succeeded in irrevocably changing the strategic map of Europe with no reaction from London or Paris beyond purely diplomatic complaints and public expressions of outrage. In substance, neither had moved the least force to prevent the operation. For both Britain and France little if nothing had been saved from this diplomatic débâcle. Hopes for agreement with Hitler came to nothing. The vain belief in France that the damage done might be limited by retaining some of the restrictions on German sovereignty over the zone was never realized. However, the crisis, or at least the way in which it was handled, was acclaimed as a triumph for the British Government. If for the French public acclamation seemed less appropriate, Flandin was none the less also able to point to certain gains.

Given the difficult position from which he had been negotiating in London – above all the refusal of France to undertake any action unilaterally – Flandin’s achievements were not negligible. Obviously he had not won the removal of German troops from the zone but this had never been a realistic possibility. He had, however, played his hand with considerable skill. The result that counted above all was London’s agreement to hold staff talks, a long-held ambition of French Governments and military chiefs. Although these were limited in scope, they were an important first step towards the co-ordination of British and French military planning that was to be reinforced in later years. In London, Eden was acclaimed for successfully negotiating the crisis. His speech to the Commons on 26 March in defence of his policy was widely praised. His aim, he told MPs, was the appeasement of Europe as a whole. To this end he had sought to avoid war and then rebuild confidence so as to allow for the opening of talks with Germany. Vansittart, who did not always see eye to eye with his minister, was strong in his praise of Eden’s success in extricating Britain from its dangerously exposed position, saving its international honour and avoiding a breach with France. His handling of the crisis, and in particular his management of the French, was indeed astute. The fears of war following the German re-occupation were prevented from materializing. Beyond this he had reassured the French of Britain’s commitment to Locarno and had gone some way to alleviating their fears by conceding staff talks. This was achieved