



The German Occupation of the Rhineland

What should Britain do about it?

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Introduction

On March 7th 1936 German troops marched into the Rhineland. This action was directly against the Treaty of Versailles which had laid out the terms which the defeated Germany had accepted. It was Hitler's first illegal act in foreign relations since coming to power in 1933 and it threw the European allies, especially France and Britain, into confusion. What should they do about his actions?

These documents reveal the motives and attitudes of the British government as they discuss their options. They are all extracts from the Minutes of the Cabinet Meeting on March 11th, 1936.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs was Anthony Eden, the Prime Minister was Stanley Baldwin.

Tasks

Look at Source 1

1. This is a document where the Foreign Secretary describes a meeting he has had with the French, Belgian and Italian governments.
 - a) What clues are there that the British Cabinet thought the situation was serious?
 - b) What was British policy for dealing with the crisis?
 - c) How did this policy go down with our allies?
 - d) Why do you think they reacted in this way?
 - e) What did Anthony Eden expect the allies to do next?
 - f) Why would this put Britain "in an impossible position"?

Look at Source 2

2. This is another section from the document seen in Source 1.
 - a) What does this tell us about Baldwin's attitude to:
 - War?
 - Communism?
 - b) How might each of these worries affect how Britain would deal with the crisis?

Look at Source 3

3. a) According to this document, why was Britain unready to go to war with Germany over the Rhineland?
 - b) How would this affect our readiness to go along with what France wanted?.

Look at Source 4

4. What arguments are put here for and against economic sanctions against Germany?
5. The Foreign Secretary puts forward his suggestion for dealing with the situation:
 - a) What deal does Anthony Eden want to offer Germany?
 - b) What do you think were Eden's motives in making this offer to Germany?
 - c) Did this deal abide by the terms of the Treaties of Versailles and Locarno?
 - d) Why do you think he didn't consult the League of Nations?
6. a) British policy towards Germany at this time is called appeasement. Use your answers to questions 2(a), 3(a), 4(a) and 5(a) to describe what appeasement was and why Britain took this line.
 - b) Do you think Eden could have handled the situation differently?

Background

According to the Treaty of Versailles, the Rhineland, a strip of land inside Germany bordering on France, Belgium and the Netherlands, was to be de-militarised. That is, no German troops were to be stationed inside that area or any fortifications built. The aim was to increase French security by making it impossible for Germany to invade France unawares.

Other terms restricted the German army to 100,000 men and the navy to just 36 ships. Germany objected to the terms of the Treaty but were told to sign it or the war would begin again.

The Treaty also set up the League of Nations, an international peace-keeping organisation. It was based on the idea of collective security, that is, the nations of the world would act together (collectively) to preserve peace. Unfortunately, one of the most powerful, the USA, did not join the League.

Germany in the 1920s was keen to get back on normal terms with other nations and signed the Treaty of Locarno. By this treaty Germany agreed to accept the terms of the Versailles Treaty, at least on her western borders.

France continued to worry about their safety against Germany particularly after Adolf Hitler became Chancellor of Germany in 1933. He had always declared his firm intention of overthrowing the Treaty of Versailles and uniting all Germans in one country, even if it led to war. Germany began to re-arm. Could France trust collective security, or should they find military allies?

In May, 1935 France signed a treaty of friendship and mutual support with the USSR.

Germany claimed the treaty was hostile to them and Hitler used this as an excuse to send German troops into the Rhineland in March 1936, contrary to the terms of the treaties of Versailles and Locarno. It was a gamble on his part and his generals were nervous about it. German re-armament had not yet reached a point where they felt ready to take on a well-armed nation like France.

Following the discussions described in the documents, the British Foreign Secretary, Anthony Eden, did indeed meet the German ambassador and make his proposals. Hitler refused to withdraw his troops, and put pressure on the League of Nations to act. France was on the verge of a general election and would not act without Britain's support, however the British people felt that the Treaty of Versailles was unfair on Germany and was over restrictive, and so partly because of this, the British government decided to do nothing.

Hitler moved on from the occupation of the Rhineland in 1936, to the annexation of Austria and the seizure of the Sudetenland in 1938, to the take-over of the rest of Czechoslovakia in March 1939 and then Poland in September 1939. We know that those men sitting round the Cabinet table in Downing Street in March 1936 had no idea that they were only three and a half years away from war. We must not judge them with hindsight.

Teachers Notes

The background information on the treaties and the League and the need to carry information about several countries and their attitudes all make this hard. It is also hard for us to realise that, at that time, as Eden says in Source 1, "our influence was greater than that of any other nation."

However, appeasement is an important phase in British foreign policy: it helps to explain why the Second World War broke out when and how it did. It also traumatised a generation of British politicians into trying to redeem themselves, from Suez in 1956 to the Falklands in 1982.

The extracts from the Cabinet minutes show how little room for manoeuvre British politicians actually had. It was going to be re-played again over Czechoslovakia in 1938, but all the key issues are mentioned here:

- Horror of war
- Unpreparedness for war
- Belief that Communism was an evil to be avoided at any cost
- Mistrust of our key allies
- Weakness of the League of Nations
- Recognition that the Treaty of Versailles may have been wrong in parts and readiness to revise it.
- Assumption that Hitler was a reasonable politician with reasonable demands and should be dealt with as such.
- For these reasons a study of the Rhineland crisis is a good case-study of British appeasement policy

Sources

Source 1 - 5 FO 371/19892 - Minutes from the Foreign Office meeting on the Treaty of Locarno in 1936

Schemes of Work

Hot war, cold war why did the major twentieth-century conflicts affect so many people?

Key Stage 3, Unit 18.

Source 1 : The Foreign Secretary describes a meeting he has had with the French, Belgian and Italian governments (FO 371/19892)

Extract from Cabinet Conclusions 18(36). 11th March, 1936. 319

GERMANY. 1. The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs gave the Cabinet an account of the conversations he and the Lord Privy Seal had held with representatives of the French, Belgian and Italian Governments in Paris on the previous day. Both Ministers were impressed by the complexity and gravity of the situation which confronted Europe, and more especially our own country as one of the guarantors of Locarno. On the outcome of the present situation depended the course of events in Europe over the next ten years, and it had to be remembered that our influence was greater than that of any other nation.

The Locarno Treaty.

German Re-occupation of the Demilitarised Zone.

(Previous Reference: Cabinet 17(36) Conclusion 1).
(Copy attached)

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The Ministers had soon discovered that our policy of condemning the German action and then developing a constructive policy to re-establish the European situation had no chance of acceptance.

he thought it inevitable that the French and Belgians would both announce their intention - if Germany could not be persuaded to evacuate the demilitarised zone - to ask the Council of the League of make a pronouncement. Then, if Germany was still obdurate, they would proceed to military measures and ask us to do the same. In that case we should have to decide whether we intended to fulfil our Treaty obligation - and we should be in an impossible position if we refused.

Source 1 : Transcript of The Foreign Secretary describes a meeting he has had with the French, Belgian and Italian governments (FO 371/19892)

Germany

The Locarno Treaty

German Re-occupation of the Demilitarised Zone.

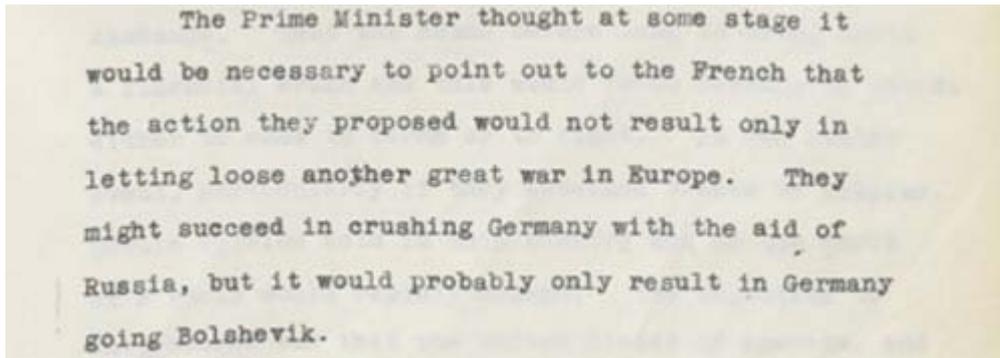
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Source 2 : Extract from a document where The Foreign Secretary describes a meeting he has had with the French, Belgian and Italian governments (FO 371/19892)



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The Prime Minister thought at some stage it would be necessary to point our to the French that the action they proposed would not result only in letting loose another great war in Europe. They might succeed in crushing Germany with the aid of Russia, but it would probably only result in Germany going Bolshevik.

[A Bolshevik was a member of the Russian Communist party after 1918]

Source 3 : Extract from a document where The Foreign Secretary describes a meeting he has had with the French, Belgian and Italian governments (FO 371/19892)

In this connection it was suggested that a stage would very soon be reached in the forthcoming conversations when it might be necessary to tell the French our position as to the possibility of fulfilling our obligations under the Locarno Treaty. That subject, it was admitted, might be fraught with grave issues for the future of the League of Nations and the principle of collective security. From information given by the Service Ministers it transpired that our position at home and in home waters was a disadvantageous one, whether from the point of view of the Navy, Army or Air Force, or anti-aircraft defence. In addition, public opinion was strongly opposed to any military action against the Germans in the demilitarised zone. In particular, the ex-Service men were very anti-French. Moreover, many people,

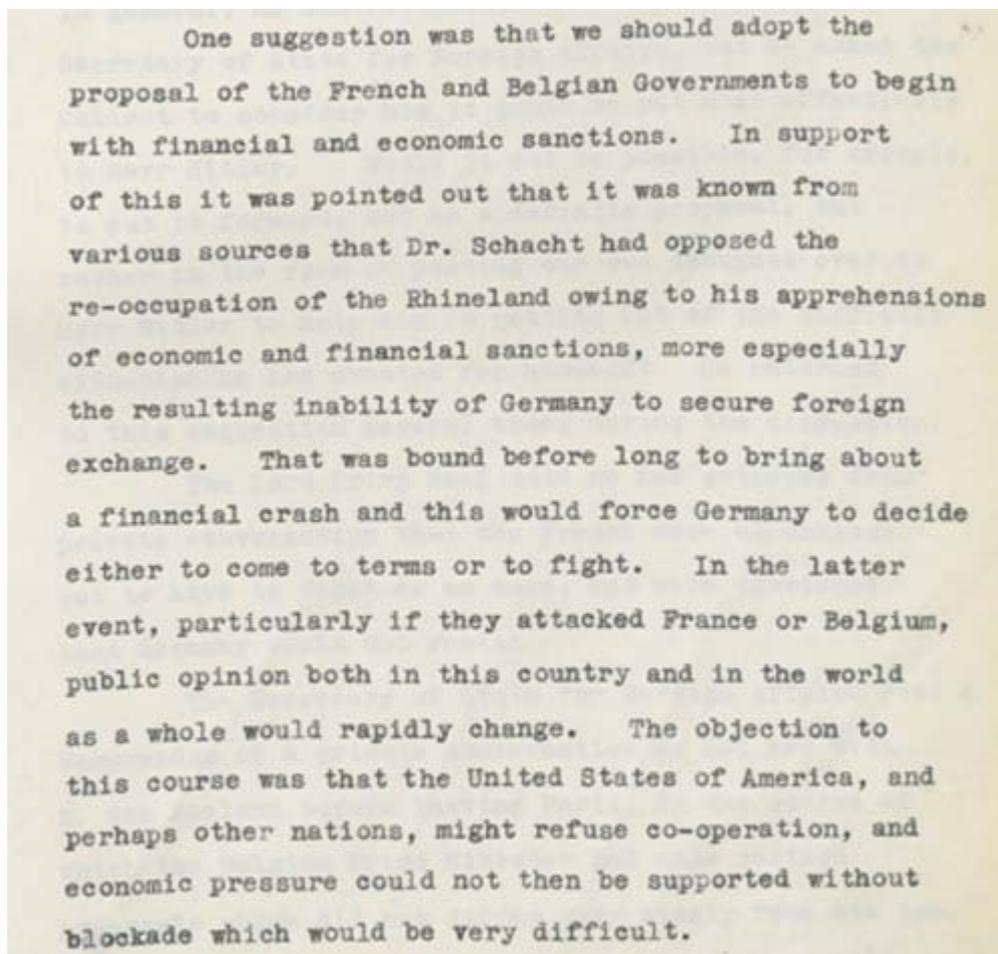
perhaps most people, were saying openly that they did not see why the Germans should not re-occupy the Rhineland. In these circumstances, it was generally accepted that it was worth taking almost any risk in order to escape from that situation.

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Source 4 : Extract from a document where The Foreign Secretary describes a meeting he has had with the French, Belgian and Italian governments (FO 371/19892)



One suggestion was that we should adopt the proposal of the French and Belgian Governments to begin with financial and economic sanctions. In support of this it was pointed out that it was known from various sources that Dr. Schacht had opposed the re-occupation of the Rhineland owing to his apprehensions of economic and financial sanctions, more especially the resulting inability of Germany to secure foreign exchange. That was bound before long to bring about a financial crash and this would force Germany to decide either to come to terms or to fight. In the latter event, particularly if they attacked France or Belgium, public opinion both in this country and in the world as a whole would rapidly change. The objection to this course was that the United States of America, and perhaps other nations, might refuse co-operation, and economic pressure could not then be supported without blockade which would be very difficult.

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[Dr Schacht was the President of the Reichsbank, the central bank of Germany at this time]

Source 5 : Extract from a document where The Foreign Secretary describes a meeting he has had with the French, Belgian and Italian governments (FO 371/19892)

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs' suggestion was as follows:

To send for the German Ambassador that very evening. To tell him of the acute consciousness of His Majesty's Government of the very grave situation created by the German action, and to speak quite plainly as to the feelings of His Majesty's Government and of the House of Commons on the subject. He would point out the difficulties into which the Germans had plunged His Majesty's Government and would remind him of our own guarantee under the Treaty of Locarno and of what our obligations are, as well as of our reputation for fulfilling our obligations. To emphasise how inexcusable the German action was vis-à-vis Belgium who had no part in the Franco-Soviet Alliance. He would emphasise that despite all this we were anxious to obtain a peaceful settlement; that we were not asking for anything impossible; but that we wanted some contribution from Germany to give our efforts some prospect of success in the difficult circumstances. What he would ask Hitler to say would be that, having stated that he wanted to negotiate a series of new pacts as a basis for peace in Europe, he would, as a proof of his intentions, withdraw all his forces from the Rhineland over and above the troops necessary for a symbolic occupation. In addition that, pending the conclusion of the new pacts, for the regularisation of the situation, he should not reinforce the "symbolic" troops, nor build fortifications in the demilitarised zone. He proposed to fortify this request by reminding the German Ambassador that in his first communication he had stated that the number of troops would be small and limited to a symbolic occupation.

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