

A. J. P. TAYLOR

THE ORIGINS
OF THE
SECOND
WORLD WAR

WITH A PREFACE FOR THE AMERICAN READER
AND A NEW INTRODUCTION, *SECOND THOUGHTS*

SIMON & SCHUSTER PAPERBACKS
New York London Toronto Sydney

CHAPTER FOUR

The End of Versailles

IN 1929 the system of security against Germany, devised in the treaty of Versailles, was still complete. Germany was disarmed; the Rhineland was demilitarised; the victors were ostensibly united; and the system was reinforced by the authority of the League of Nations. Seven years later all this had gone without a blow being struck. International stability was first shaken by the collapse of economic stability in the great Depression which began in October 1929. The Depression had little to do with the preceding war, though men did not think so at the time. It had nothing to do with the surviving provisions of the peace-treaty. The Depression was started by the collapse of a speculative boom in the United States; and the unemployment which followed was swelled by the failure of purchasing power to keep pace with the increased resources of production. Everyone understands this now; just as they know that the way out of a depression is to increase government spending. In 1929 hardly anyone knew it; and the few who did had no influence on policy. It was generally believed that deflation was the only cure. There must be sound money, balanced budgets, cuts in government expenditure, and reductions in wages. Then, presumably, prices would somehow become low enough for people to start buying again.

This policy caused hardship and discontent in every country where it was applied. There was no reason why it should cause international tension. In most countries the Depression led to a turning-away from international affairs. In Great Britain the lowest arms-estimates between the wars were introduced by Neville Chamberlain, chancellor of the exchequer in the National government, in 1932. The French became even less assertive than they had been before. American policy under F. D. Roosevelt became in 1933 markedly more isolationist than it had been under his Republican predecessor. Germany was a special case.

The Germans had experienced the terrible evils of inflation in 1923, and now went equally far in the opposite direction. Most Germans regarded this as inevitable; but the results were highly unpopular. Everyone applauded the measures when applied to others, yet resented them when applied to himself. The Reichstag failed to provide a majority for a deflationist government, though such a government was what it wanted. As a result Brüning governed Germany for more than two years without a majority, imposing deflation by presidential decree. High-minded and sincere, he would not win popularity by mitigating the rigours of deflation; but his government sought popularity by success in foreign affairs. Curtius, his foreign minister, tried to carry economic union with Austria in 1931—a project which offered no economic advantage; and Treviranus, another member of his government, started an agitation against the Polish frontier. In 1932 Papen, Brüning's successor, demanded equality of armaments for Germany. All these things were irrelevant to the economic difficulties, but the ordinary German could not be expected to understand this. He had been told for years that all his troubles were due to the treaty of Versailles; and now that he was in trouble he believed what he had been told. Moreover the Depression removed the strongest argument for doing nothing: prosperity. Men who are well off forget their grievances; in adversity they have nothing else to think about.

There were other reasons for the increase in international difficulties. In 1931 the League of Nations faced its first serious challenge. On 18 September Japanese forces occupied Manchuria, which was theoretically part of China. China appealed to the League for redress. It was not an easy problem. The Japanese had a good case. The authority of the Chinese central government—nowhere strong—did not run in Manchuria, which had been for years in a state of lawless confusion. Japanese trading interests had suffered greatly. There were many precedents in China for independent action—the last being a British landing at Shanghai in 1927. Besides, the League had no means of action. No country, at the height of the economic crisis, welcomed the idea of cutting off its remaining fragment of international trade with Japan. The only Power with any stake in the Far East was Great Britain; and action was to be least expected from the British at the exact moment when they were being forced off the

gold standard and facing a contentious general election. In any case even Great Britain, though a Far Eastern Power, had no means of action. The Washington naval treaty gave Japan a local supremacy in the Far East; and successive British governments confirmed this supremacy when they deliberately postponed the building up of their base at Singapore. What would be gained if the League of Nations condemned Japan? Merely a display of moral rectitude which, in so far as it had any effect, would set Japan against British trading interests. There was one argument in favour of this moral condemnation. The United States, though not a member of the League, were very much a Far Eastern Power; and they propounded "non-recognition" of any territorial change carried through by force. This was consoling to the doctrinaires of Geneva. But, as the Americans did not propose to curtail their trade with Japan, it was less consoling to the Chinese and to the practical sense of the British.

Rightly or wrongly, the British government attached more importance to the restoration of peace than to a display of moral rectitude. Nor was this view confined to the hardened cynics who staffed the foreign office or to the supposedly reactionary politicians—headed by MacDonald—who composed the National government. It was shared by the Labour party who at this time condemned not "aggression" but "war". Any British action against Japan in 1932, if such had been possible, would have met with unanimous opposition from the Left as a wicked defence of Imperialist interests. What the Labour party wanted—and in this it represented a general British feeling—was that Great Britain should not profit from war. Labour proposed a ban on supplying arms to either side, both China and Japan; and this proposal was accepted by the National government. The government went further. The British had always regarded the League as an instrument of conciliation, not a machine of security. They now operated this instrument. The League set up the Lytton commission, actually on Japanese initiative, to discover the facts about Manchuria and to propound a solution. The Commission did not reach a simple verdict. It found that most of the Japanese grievances were justified. Japan was not condemned as an aggressor, though she was condemned for resorting to force before all peaceful means of redress were exhausted. The Japanese withdrew in protest from the League of Nations. But in

fact British policy succeeded. The Chinese reconciled themselves to the loss of a province which they had not controlled for some years; and in 1933 peace was restored between China and Japan. In later years the Manchurian affair assumed a mythical importance. It was treated as a milestone on the road to war, the first decisive "betrayal" of the League, especially by the British government. In reality, the League, under British leadership, had done what the British thought it was designed to do: it had limited a conflict and brought it, however unsatisfactorily, to an end. Moreover, the Manchurian affair, far from weakening the coercive powers of the League, actually brought them into existence. It was thanks to this affair that the League—again on British prompting—set up machinery, hitherto lacking, to organise economic sanctions. This machinery, to everyone's misfortune, made possible the League action over Abyssinia in 1935.

The Manchurian affair had a contemporary importance, though not that subsequently attributed to it. It diverted attention from Europe just at the moment when European questions became acute; and in particular it made the British government exceptionally impatient with European troubles. It reinforced, with unanswerable arguments, the British preference for conciliation as against security. It set the pattern for the arguments which were now unrolled by the meeting of the Disarmament conference early in 1932. The time of this meeting was peculiarly inappropriate. The victorious Powers had been committed to some such act ever since 1919, when the peace treaty had imposed disarmament on Germany as the first step towards "a general limitation of the armaments of all nations". This was far from a promise that the victors would disarm down to the German level; but it was a promise that they would do something. The promise was steadily evaded throughout the nineteen-twenties. This evasion played into German hands. The Germans increasingly insisted that the victors should either fulfil their promise or release Germany from hers. The British Labour government which took office in 1929 seconded this German prompting. Most Englishmen held that great armaments were themselves a cause of war; or—put it another way—that great armaments allowed muddle and misunderstanding to turn into war (as happened in August 1914) before the "cooling-off period" could operate. Ramsay MacDonald, the prime minister, was eager to resume the initiative

which he had taken in 1924 and to complete the work of appeasement. He was mainly responsible for the success of the London naval conference in 1930, which extended to wider classes of vessels the mutual limitation of battleships, agreed by Great Britain, the United States, and Japan in 1921. Even the London conference contained a sinister warning for the future, disregarded at the time. The discussions here first provoked Italy into demanding naval equality with France—a demand which the French were determined to resist; and thus began the estrangement between the two countries which finally carried Italy on to the German side.

In the second Labour government MacDonald grudgingly yielded the Foreign Office to Arthur Henderson. The two men did not see precisely eye to eye. Henderson, unlike MacDonald, had been a Cabinet minister during the World war and could hardly regard that war as an unnecessary folly. Where MacDonald dismissed French anxieties as a fantasy, Henderson wished to reconcile disarmament and security. He proposed to use disarmament as a lever for increasing British commitments to France, rather as Austen Chamberlain before him had hoped to do with Locarno; though of course the commitments would not be onerous when armaments had been everywhere reduced. Henderson held out to the French the prospect that, if they co-operated in disarmament, they would get increased backing from Great Britain in return. This was a good bargain from the French point of view. Though few Frenchmen—or perhaps none—fully realised the ineffectiveness of their army as an offensive weapon, even fewer welcomed the prospect of holding Germany in check for ever, solely by French strength. Security would assume a different aspect when the British, instead of relying on Locarno, had to think in practical military terms. Perhaps they would recognise at last the need for a great French army; alternatively they would increase their own. The French, too, therefore pressed for a Disarmament conference; and with Henderson as president. This was not simply a tribute to his gifts as a conciliator, great as these were. It was also a matter of calculation: Great Britain could hardly escape the increased obligations which would follow from general disarmament when the British foreign secretary was actually in the chair at the Disarmament conference.

Circumstances had gravely changed by the time that the Disarmament conference met in the early days of 1932. The Labour government had fallen. Henderson was no longer foreign secretary; as president of the conference, he could no longer commit Great Britain, but could only push ineffectively a government to which he was politically hostile. MacDonald was no longer pulled along by Henderson; he was, if anything, pulled back by the new foreign secretary, Sir John Simon, a Liberal who almost resigned at the outbreak of war in 1914 and actually resigned in protest against conscription eighteen months later. Simon, like MacDonald, regarded French anxieties as imaginary. Moreover the National government were hard set for economy: far from being willing to increase British commitments, they were eager to reduce still further those that existed. The French found to their dismay that they were being pressed to disarm without receiving any compensation. MacDonald told them again and again: "French demands always created the difficulty that they required of Great Britain that she should assume further obligations, and this at the moment could not be contemplated."¹ The only false note in this statement was the hint that the British attitude might change.

The British had their own device for twisting disarmament in favour of security. Where the French hoped to involve the British, they in their turn hoped to draw in the United States—a party to the Disarmament conference, though not in the League of Nations. This plan had perhaps some sense while the Republicans were in power. It misfired in November 1932 with the election of the Democrat, F. D. Roosevelt, as president. For though the Democrats had been committed to the League of Nations by Wilson in 1919 and though Roosevelt was to embed the United States in world policy later, the vote of November 1932 was a victory for isolationism. The Democrats were now disillusioned Wilsonians. Some believed that Wilson had deceived the American people; others that the European statesmen had deceived Wilson. Nearly all of them believed that the European Powers, especially the former Allies, were incorrigibly wicked and that the less America had to do with Europe the better. The idealism which had once made Americans eager

¹ MacDonald, conversation with Paul-Boncour, 2 Dec. 1932. *British Foreign Policy*, second series, iv. No. 204.

to save the world now made them turn their backs on it. The Democratic majority in Congress carried a series of measures which made it impossible for the United States to play any part in world affairs; and President Roosevelt accepted these measures without any sign of disagreement. Their effect was reinforced by the intensely nationalist economics which accompanied the New Deal. It was a minor sign of the same trend when the Roosevelt régime at last "recognised" Soviet Russia and welcomed Litvinov, the foreign commissar, in Washington. Russia's exclusion from Europe now counted for righteousness in American eyes. No European commitment could be expected from America; and the British themselves were pulled out of Europe by American influence—so far as it counted.

It was a further misfortune for the Disarmament conference that reparations reached a final settlement in the summer of 1932. For, while it would have been admirable if they had been disposed of before, this was the worst moment to do it. The German government, now transferred from Brüning to Papen, was weaker and more unpopular than ever, hence still more anxious for popularity in foreign affairs. Reparations no longer provided a grievance; and the one-sided disarmament of Germany had to take their place. Any real negotiations were impossible; the German government needed a sensational success. The Germans left the Disarmament conference in dramatic protest; and were then tempted back by a promise of "equality of status within a system of security". This promise was meaningless. If the French got security, there would be no equality of status; if they did not get security, there was to be no equality. The promise did not impress the German electors. Nor would they have been impressed even by a real concession. What weighed with them was poverty and mass unemployment; and they treated the wrangling over disarmament as a gigantic red-herring, which indeed it was. The Allied statesmen did their best to help Papen by juggling with words. It did not yet occur to them that there was any serious German danger. In 1932 men feared, and rightly feared, the collapse of Germany, not German strength. How could any competent observer suppose that a country with seven million unemployed, no gold reserves, and an ever-shrinking foreign trade, would suddenly become a great military power? All modern experience taught that power

went with wealth; and in 1932 Germany seemed very poor indeed.

These calculations were turned upside down on 30 January 1933, when Hitler became Chancellor, an event now as encrusted with legend as the arrival in Kent of Hengist and Horsa. It was not a "seizure of power" despite National Socialist boasting. Hitler was appointed Chancellor by President Hindenburg in a strictly constitutional way and for solidly democratic reasons. Whatever ingenious speculators, liberal or Marxist, might say, Hitler was not made Chancellor because he would help the German capitalists to destroy the trade unions, nor because he would give the German generals a great army, still less a great war. He was appointed because he and his Nationalist allies could provide a majority in the Reichstag, and thus end the anomalous four years of government by presidential decree. He was not expected to carry through revolutionary changes in either home or foreign affairs. On the contrary the conservative politicians led by Papen, who recommended him to Hindenburg, kept the key posts for themselves and expected Hitler to be a tame figurehead. These expectations turned out to be wrong. Hitler broke the artificial bonds which had been designed to tie him and gradually became an all-powerful dictator—though more gradually than the legend makes out. He changed most things in Germany. He destroyed political freedom and the rule of law; he transformed German economics and finance; he quarrelled with the Churches; he abolished the separate states and made Germany for the first time a united country. In one sphere alone he changed nothing. His foreign policy was that of his predecessors, of the professional diplomats at the foreign ministry, and indeed of virtually all Germans. Hitler, too, wanted to free Germany from the restrictions of the peace treaty; to restore a great German army; and then to make Germany the greatest power in Europe from her natural weight. There were occasional differences in emphasis. Perhaps Hitler would have concentrated less on Austria and Czechoslovakia if he had not been born a subject of the Habsburg Monarchy; perhaps his Austrian origin made him less hostile originally to the Poles. But the general pattern was unchanged.

This is not the accepted view. Writers of great authority have seen in Hitler a system-maker, deliberately preparing from the

first a great war which would destroy existing civilisation and make him master of the world. In my opinion, statesmen are too absorbed by events to follow a preconceived plan. They take one step, and the next follows from it. The systems are created by historians, as happened with Napoleon; and the systems attributed to Hitler are really those of Hugh Trevor-Roper, Elizabeth Wiskemann, and Alan Bullock. There is some ground for these speculations. Hitler was himself an amateur historian, or rather a generaliser on history; and he created systems in his spare time. These systems were day-dreams. Chaplin grasped this, with an artist's genius, when he showed the Great Dictator transforming the world into a toy balloon and kicking it to the ceiling with the point of his toe. Hitler always saw himself, in these day-dreams, as master of the world. But the world which he dreamt to master and the way he would do it changed with changing circumstances. *Mein Kampf* was written in 1925, under the impact of the French occupation of the Ruhr. Hitler dreamt then of destroying French supremacy in Europe; and the method was to be alliance with Italy and Great Britain. His *Table Talk* was delivered far in occupied territory, during the campaign against Soviet Russia; and then Hitler dreamt of some fantastic Empire which would rationalise his career of conquest. His final legacy was delivered from the Bunker, when he was on the point of suicide; it is not surprising that he transformed this into a doctrine of universal destruction. Academic ingenuity has discovered in these pronouncements the disciple of Nietzsche, the geopolitician, or the emulator of Attila. I hear in them only the generalisations of a powerful, but uninstructed, intellect; dogmas which echo the conversation of any Austrian café or German beer-house.

There was one element of system in Hitler's foreign policy, though it was not new. His outlook was "continental", as Stresemann's had been before him. Hitler did not attempt to revive the "World Policy" which Germany had pursued before 1914; he made no plans for a great battle-fleet; he did not parade a grievance over the lost colonies, except as a device for embarrassing the British; he was not even interested in the Middle East—hence his blindness to the great opportunity in 1940 after the defeat of France. One could attribute this outlook to Hitler's Austrian origin, far from the ocean: or believe that he learnt it

from some geopolitician in Munich. But essentially it reflected the circumstances of the time. Germany had been defeated by the Western Powers in November 1918; and had herself defeated Russia the preceding year. Hitler, like Stresemann, did not challenge the Western settlement. He did not wish to destroy the British Empire, nor even to deprive the French of Alsace and Lorraine. In return, he wanted the Allies to accept the verdict of March 1918; to abandon the artificial undoing of this verdict after November 1918; and to acknowledge that Germany had been victorious in the East. This was not a preposterous programme. Many Englishmen, to say nothing of Milner and Smuts, agreed with it even in 1918; many more did so later; and most Frenchmen were coming round to the same outlook. The national states of Eastern Europe enjoyed little popularity; Soviet Russia still less. When Hitler aspired to restore the settlement of Brest-Litovsk, he could pose also as the champion of European civilisation against Bolshevism and the Red peril. Maybe his ambitions were genuinely limited to the East; maybe conquest there would have been only the preliminary to conquest in Western Europe or on a World scale. No one can tell. Only events could have given the answer; and by a strange twist of circumstances they never did. Against all expectations, Hitler found himself at war with the Western Powers before he had conquered the East. Nevertheless, Eastern expansion was the primary purpose of his policy, if not the only one.

There was nothing original in this policy. The unique quality in Hitler was the gift of translating commonplace thoughts into action. He took seriously what was to others mere talk. The driving force in him was a terrifying literalism. Writers had been running down democracy for half a century. It took Hitler to create a totalitarian dictatorship. Nearly everyone in Germany thought that "something" should be done about unemployment. Hitler was the first to insist on "action". He disregarded the conventional rules; and so stumbled on the economics of full employment, exactly as F. D. Roosevelt did in the United States. Again, there was nothing new in anti-semitism. It had been "the Socialism of fools" for many years. Little had followed from it. Seipel, Austrian Chancellor in the nineteen-twenties, said of the anti-semitism which his party preached but did not

practice: "Das is für die Gasse".¹ Hitler was "die Gasse". Many Germans had qualms as one act of persecution succeeded another, culminating in the unspeakable wickedness of the gas-chambers. But few knew how to protest. Everything which Hitler did against the Jews followed logically from the racial doctrines in which most Germans vaguely believed. It was the same with foreign policy. Not many Germans really cared passionately and persistently whether Germany again dominated Europe. But they talked as if they did. Hitler took them at their word. He made the Germans live up to their professions, or down to them—much to their regret.

In principle and doctrine, Hitler was no more wicked and unscrupulous than many other contemporary statesmen. In wicked acts he outdid them all. The policy of Western statesmen also rested ultimately on force—French policy on the army, British policy on sea-power. But these statesmen hoped that it would not be necessary to use this force. Hitler intended to use his force, or would at any rate threaten to use it. If Western morality seemed superior, this was largely because it was the morality of the *status quo*; Hitler's was the immorality of revision. There was a curious, though only superficial, contradiction in Hitler between aims and methods. His aim was change, the overthrow of the existing European order; his method was patience. Despite his bluster and violent talk, he was a master in the game of waiting. He never made a frontal attack on a prepared position—at least never until his judgement had been corrupted by easy victories. Like Joshua before the walls of Jericho, he preferred to wait until the forces opposing him had been sapped by their own confusions and themselves forced success upon him. He had already applied this method to gain power in Germany. He did not "seize" power. He waited for it to be thrust upon him by the men who had previously tried to keep him out. In January 1933 Papen and Hindenburg were imploring him to become Chancellor; and he graciously consented. So it was to be in foreign affairs. Hitler did not make precise demands. He announced that he was dissatisfied; and then waited for the concessions to pour into his lap, merely holding out his hand for more. Hitler did not know any foreign countries at first hand. He rarely listened to his foreign minister, and

¹ That is for the street—or perhaps the gutter.

never read the reports of his ambassadors. He judged foreign statesmen by intuition. He was convinced that he had taken the measure of all *bourgeois* politicians, German and foreign alike, and that their nerve would crumble before his did. This conviction was near enough to the truth to bring Europe within sight of disaster.

Perhaps this waiting was not at first conscious or deliberate. The greatest masters of statecraft are those who do not know what they are doing. In his first years of power, Hitler did not concern himself much with foreign affairs. He spent most of his time at Berchtesgaden, remote from events, dreaming in his old feckless way. When he turned to practical life, his greatest concern was to keep his own absolute control over the National Socialist party. He watched, and himself promoted, the rivalry between the principal Nazi leaders. Then came the maintenance of Nazi control over the German state and the German people; after that, rearmament and economic expansion. Hitler loved details of machinery—tanks, aeroplanes, guns. He was fascinated by road building, and even more by architectural schemes. Foreign affairs came at the bottom of the list. In any case, there was little he could do until Germany was rearmed. Events imposed upon him the waiting which he preferred. He could safely leave foreign policy to the old professionals of the foreign office. After all, their aims were the same as his; they, too, were concerned to sap the settlement of Versailles. They needed only an occasional spur to action, the sporadic and daring initiative which suddenly brought things to a head.

This pattern was soon shown in the discussions over disarmament. Allied statesmen were under no illusions as to Hitler's intentions. They were given precise and accurate information by their representatives at Berlin—information which Sir John Simon found "terrifying".¹ For that matter they could read the truth in any newspaper, despite the steady expulsion from Germany of British and American correspondents. There is no greater mistake than to suppose that Hitler did not give foreign statesmen plenty of warning. On the contrary he gave them only too much. Western statesmen saw the problem all too clearly. Germany had now a strong government; and this government

¹ Minute by Simon on Phipps to Simon, 31 Jan. 1934. *British Foreign Policy*, second series, vi. No. 240.

would again make Germany a great military power. But what were the Allied statesmen to do? They posed the question to themselves, and to each other, again and again. One obvious course was to intervene and to prevent German rearmament by force. This was suggested by the British military representative at the Disarmament conference¹; it was constantly suggested by the French. The suggestion was repeatedly considered and always turned down. It was unworkable from every aspect. The United States would clearly not take part in intervention. On the contrary American opinion would be violently opposed to it; and this weighed much with Great Britain. British opinion was equally opposed; not only the opinion of the Left, but inside the government itself. Apart from any objections of principle, the government could not contemplate increased expenditure—and an intervention would be expensive—nor had they any armed force to spare. Mussolini also held aloof, already hoping to turn “revisionism” in Italy’s favour. This left only France; and the French were resolute all along that they would not act alone. If they had been honest with themselves, they would have added that they too had no forces capable of intervention. Besides, what would intervention achieve? If Hitler fell, chaos would follow in Germany worse than that which followed the occupation of the Ruhr; if he did not fall, German rearmament would presumably be renewed as soon as the occupying forces were withdrawn.

The alternative on the other side was to do nothing: to abandon the Disarmament conference and let events take their course. Both British and French dismissed this as “inconceivable”; “unthinkable”; “a counsel of despair”. What way out remained? Where was the ingenious twist, always just over the horizon, which would satisfy the Germans without endangering the French? The French went on insisting that they could agree to equality of arms with Germany only if they had a solid British guarantee, backed by staff talks and an enlarged British army. The British as firmly rejected this proposal and argued that since equality would satisfy the Germans, any guarantee would be unnecessary. If Hitler made an agreement, “he might even feel inclined to honour it. . . . His signature would bind all Germany

¹ Memorandum by A. C. Temperley, 10 May 1933. *British Foreign Policy*, second series, v. No. 127.

like no other German's in all her past."¹ If Germany did not keep the agreement, "the strength of world opposition to her cannot be exaggerated";² "the world will know what her real intentions are".³ It is impossible to tell whether the British took their own arguments seriously. Probably they still believed that French intransigence was the main obstacle to a peaceful Europe, and were not over-scrupulous how this obstinacy was removed. The precedent of 1871 was much in their minds. Then Russia had repudiated the clauses of the treaty of Paris which imposed disarmament on her in the Black Sea; and the other Powers had acquiesced on condition that Russia sought approval from an international conference. The public law of Europe was maintained. One conference had made the treaty; therefore another could tear it up. So now the important thing was not to prevent German rearmament, but to ensure that it should take place within the framework of an international agreement. The British supposed, too, that Germany would be willing to pay a price "for legalising her illegalities".⁴ The British always liked to be on the right side of the law themselves, and naturally assumed that the Germans felt the same. It was inconceivable to them that any Power should prefer a return to "international anarchy". And of course Hitler did not intend to return to international anarchy. He too wanted an international order; but it was to be "a new order", not a modified version of the system of 1919.

There was a further consideration which did most of all to determine the atmosphere of these years. Everyone, particularly the British and French, assumed that there was plenty of time. Germany was still virtually disarmed when Hitler came to power. She had no tanks, no aeroplanes, no heavy guns, no trained reservists. It would take her ten years, according to normal experience, to become a formidable military Power. This calculation was not altogether wrong. Hitler and Mussolini shared it. In their conversations they always assumed that 1943

¹ Phipps to Simon, 21 Nov. 1933. *British Foreign Policy*, second series vi. No. 60.

² MacDonald, conversation with Daladier, 16 March 1933. *Ibid.* iv. No. 310.

³ Foreign Office Memorandum, 25 Jan. 1934. *Ibid.* vi. No. 206.

⁴ Minute by Eden on Tyrell to Simon, 8 March 1934. *Ibid.* vi. No. 337.

would be the year of destiny. Many of the early alarms about German rearmament were false alarms. Thus, when Churchill claimed in 1934 that the German air force was much greater than the British government alleged, and Baldwin contradicted him, Baldwin—as we now know from the German records themselves—was right, and Churchill was wrong. Even in 1939 the German army was not equipped for a prolonged war; and in 1940 the German land forces were inferior to the French in everything except leadership. The Western powers made two mistakes. They failed to allow for the fact that Hitler was a gambler who would play for high stakes with inadequate resources. They also failed to allow for the economic achievement of Schacht, who ensured that German resources were less inadequate than they would otherwise have been. Countries with the more or less free economy of the time operated to 75% of their efficiency. Schacht first worked the system of full employment and so used German economic power almost to capacity. This is all commonplace now. It seemed wizardry beyond imagination then.

The Disarmament conference itself did not long survive Hitler's coming. During the summer of 1933 the British and Italians pressed the French to grant Germany a theoretical "equality" of armaments. After all, there was plenty of time before this equality became real. These promptings were nearly successful. The French almost took the plunge. On 22 September British and French ministers met in Paris. The French implied that they would agree to equality or something near it. Then Daladier, the French premier, asked: "what guarantee would there be of the observance of the Convention?" The old difficulty was back again. Simon replied: "His Majesty's Government could not accept new responsibilities in the nature of sanctions. Public opinion in England would not support it." A more authoritative voice than Simon's was heard. Baldwin, leader of the Conservative party and unacknowledged head of the British government, had come from Aix to attend the meeting. He had been brooding during his holiday on the European situation. Now he supported Simon: there could be no new British commitment. He added: "If it could be proved that Germany was rearming, then a new situation would immediately arise, which Europe would have to face. . . . If that situation arose, His Majesty's Government would have to consider it very seriously, but that situation had not yet

arisen."¹ The voice was the voice of Baldwin; the spirit still that of MacDonald. The French were being asked to give up a superiority which they imagined to be real; and were being offered only the prospect that something undefined might be done if the Germans misbehaved. This did not satisfy them. The French withdrew their tentative offer. When the conference resumed, they announced that they would agree to equality with Germany only if the Germans remained disarmed during a further "trial period" of four years.

This was Hitler's opportunity. He knew that France stood alone, that both Great Britain and Italy sympathised with the German position. On 14 October Germany withdrew from the Disarmament conference; a week later she left the League of Nations. Nothing happened. The German Ministers had been terrified by Hitler's initiative. Now he told them: "The situation has developed as expected. Threatening steps against Germany have neither materialised nor are they to be expected. . . . The critical moment has probably passed".² So it proved. Hitler had tried out his method in foreign affairs; and it had worked. He had waited until the opposition to Germany was inwardly demoralised and had then blown it away like thistledown. After all, the French could not very well march into Germany merely because the Germans had left the Disarmament conference. They could act only when Germany actually rearmed; and then it would be too late. The British went on sympathising with Germany's claims. As late as July 1934 *The Times* wrote: "In the years that are coming, there is more reason to fear for Germany than to fear Germany". The Labour party continued to demand general disarmament as the preliminary to security. MacDonald still set the course for both government and opposition. So confident was Hitler that he teased the French by offering to accept inequality—a German army limited to 300,000 men, and an air force half the size of the French. Hitler's confidence was justified: the French were now exasperated beyond endurance. On 17 April 1934, Barthou—right-wing foreign minister in the National government which followed the riots of 6 February—refused to legalise

¹ Anglo-French meeting, 22 Sept. 1933. *British Foreign Policy*, second series, v. No. 406.

² Conference of Ministers, 17 Oct. 1933. *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, series C. ii. No. 9.

any German rearmament, and declared: "France will henceforth assure her security by her own means". The Disarmament conference was dead, despite some posthumous attempts to revive it. The French had fired the starting-pistol for the arms race. Characteristically they then failed to run it. Their arms estimates had been cut down during the preparations for the Disarmament conference, and did not even return to the level of 1932 until 1936.

The end of the Disarmament conference did not necessarily mean war. There was a third course, despite British outcry to the contrary: a return to the traditional instruments of diplomacy. Everyone began shamefacedly to edge back to this course from the moment of Hitler's appearance. Mussolini was the first. He had never liked Geneva and all it stood for. As the senior Fascist in Europe, he was flattered at Hitler's imitation of him, and supposed that Germany would always be Italy's jackal, never the other way round. No doubt he supposed that Hitler's threats and boasts were as empty as his own. At any rate, far from fearing the revival of Germany, he welcomed it as a lever with which to extract concessions for himself from France and perhaps later from Great Britain as well—a point conveniently overlooked by the British. Mussolini proposed a Four Power Pact. The Four Great Powers—Germany, Great Britain, France, and Italy—were to set themselves up as a European directory, laying down the law to the smaller states and carrying through "peaceful revision". The British were delighted. They too wanted to extract concessions from the French—though primarily for Germany's benefit. The idea of Great Britain and Italy benignly mediating between France and Germany was an old one. It was enshrined in Locarno, though then Mussolini had played a subordinate role; it had been advocated by John Morley in 1914, when he had tried to keep Great Britain out of war; it had been supported by Simon and MacDonald in 1914 and was welcomed by them now, so that former Radicals were in the odd position of regarding Mussolini as the chief pillar of European peace. Hitler too was prepared to let Mussolini do the preliminary hunting for him. The French were indignant, imprisoned—as it were—between British and Italian warders. They first acquiesced, though insisting that revision could only be carried through by unanimous consent, including that of the interested parties. Then they used the

excuse of Germany's withdrawal from the League of Nations to wreck the Pact altogether. It was never ratified. Nevertheless it remained the basis of Italian policy for some years, and of British policy almost until the outbreak of war. Even odder, the French came round to it before the end of the story.

The main importance of the Pact at the time was in eastern Europe. Both Soviet Russia and Poland took alarm, though with opposite results. Russia went over from the German side to the French; Poland, to some extent, from the French side to the German. An association of the four European Powers had always been the nightmare of Soviet statesmen: it would be the prelude, they believed, to a new war of intervention. They had guarded against it until the coming of Hitler by encouraging German resentment against France and by promoting the economic and military co-operation with Germany which had been initiated at Rapallo. Now they changed round. Unlike the statesmen of western Europe, they took Hitler's talk seriously. They believed that he meant to destroy Communism not only in Germany but in Russia as well; and they feared that most European statesmen would applaud him if he did. They were convinced that Hitler intended to seize the Ukraine. Their own interest was purely defensive. Their dreams of world revolution had long vanished. Their greatest fear was in the Far East, where—with Japan in Manchuria and at peace with China—they seemed in imminent danger of a Japanese attack. The best Soviet troops were in the Far East; and the Soviet leaders asked of Europe only to be left alone. Where once they had denounced "the slave treaty" of Versailles, they now preached respect for international law; loyally attended the Disarmament conference—formerly a "bourgeois sham"; and in 1934 even joined that other *bourgeois* sham, the League of Nations. Here was an associate ready-made for the French: a Great Power resolute against "revision", who would rescue them from the pressure of Great Britain and Italy. The association drifted into unacknowledged existence during 1933. It was an association of a limited kind. The Russians had swung over to the French system solely because they believed that it would offer them increased security; they did not foresee that it might involve increased obligations. They overrated French strength, both material and moral; and, like everyone except Hitler, they overrated the strength of paper commitments,

despite their ostensible freedom from *bourgeois* morality. They, too, thought it an asset to have international law on their side. The French, on the other hand, did not intend to restore the Russian alliance on any serious scale. They had little faith in Russian strength, and less in Soviet sincerity. They knew that friendship with Soviet Russia was much disapproved of in London; and though they were sometimes irritated at British promptings towards appeasement, they were still more terrified at losing even the thin shreds of British support. The Franco-Soviet rapprochement was a reinsurance, no more.

Even so, it was enough to alarm the directors of German foreign policy. In their eyes, the friendship of Rapallo had been an essential element in German recovery. It had given security against Poland; it had helped to extract concessions from the Western powers; on the practical level, it had assisted some measure of illegal rearmament. Neurath, the foreign minister, said: "We cannot do without Russia's cover for our rear".¹ Bülow, his assistant, wrote: "good German-Soviet relations are of essential importance to Germany".² Hitler alone was unmoved. No doubt his anti-communism was genuine; no doubt, as an Austrian, he did not share the attachment to Russia common among Prussian conservatives; no doubt he saw that a breach between Germany and Soviet Russia would put up his stock as the defender of European civilisation against Communist revolution. His immediate motive, however, was one of practical calculation: Russia could do nothing against Germany. Not merely was she separated from Germany by Poland. The Soviet leaders did not want to do anything. On the contrary, they had gone over to the French side because they believed that this made fewer demands on them and entailed fewer risks than remaining friendly to Germany. They would vote against Germany at Geneva; they would not act. Hitler saw Rapallo dissolve without a twinge.

On the other hand, Poland could act against Germany and was talking of doing so; repeated, though empty, calls came from Warsaw for a preventive war. No German minister since 1918 had contemplated friendship with Poland, even of a temporary

¹ Conference of Ministers, 7 April 1933. *German Foreign Policy*, series C. i. No. 142.

² Bülow to Nadolny, 13 Nov. 1933. *Ibid.* ii. No. 66.

nature; the sore of Danzig and the corridor cut too deep. Hitler was as free from this prejudice as from any other. It was a measure of the mastery which Hitler had already attained over the German "governing-class" that he could disregard their most deep-seated grievance; a measure too of the indifference felt by the German people over their so-called grievances that this disregard passed without any popular murmur. Some Germans consoled themselves that the renunciation was temporary; and Hitler let them think so. His real intention was less fixed one way or the other. Fundamentally he was not interested merely in "revising" Germany's frontiers. He wanted to make Germany dominant in Europe; and for this he was more concerned to transform her neighbours into satellites than to clip off bits of their territory. He followed this policy with Italy, where he renounced what was for him a much deeper grievance than Danzig or the corridor—south Tyrol—in order to secure Italian friendship in exchange. He recognised that Poland, like Italy, was a "revisionist" Power, even though she owed her independence to the Allied victory of 1918; hence he believed that Poland, like Italy and Hungary, would be won to his side. For such a gain, Danzig and the corridor were a price worth paying. Hitler never annexed territory for its own sake. As his later policy showed, he had no objection to preserving other countries so long as they acted as Germany's jackals.

But in this Polish affair, as in most others, Hitler did not take the initiative. He let others do his work for him. Pilsudski and his associates who ruled Poland aspired to play the part of a Great Power. They were indignant at the Four Power Pact which seemed to be directed principally against Poland; and they were alarmed when France and Soviet Russia drew together. The Poles could never forget that, while Danzig and the corridor roused German resentment on their western frontier, they held ten times as much non-Polish territory in the east; and though they feared Germany much, the Polish colonels of Pilsudski's system feared Soviet Russia more. Apart from this, the Poles had been flattered to be France's chief friend in eastern Europe; it was a different matter to act merely as advance guard for a Franco-Soviet alliance. Beck, the foreign minister, always possessed complete self-confidence, though not much else. He was sure that he could treat Hitler as an equal, or even tame the

tiger. He offered better relations with Germany; and Hitler responded. The result was the Non-Aggression Pact of January 1934 between Germany and Poland, another peg removed from the crumbling system of security. Hitler was freed from any threat of Polish support for France; in return, without renouncing Germany's grievances, he promised not to redress them by force—a high-sounding formula much used also by the West German government after the second World war. The agreement was Hitler's first great achievement in foreign affairs; and it brought him much subsequent success. There was in it a deep equivocation as one might expect in an agreement between two such men as Hitler and Beck. Hitler assumed that Poland had been detached from the French system, which indeed she had. He further assumed that "the colonels" would accept the logical consequence of this. Poland would become a loyal satellite, accommodating herself to German plans and German wishes. Beck had proposed the agreement not to become anybody's satellite, but to make Poland more independent than before. So long as she had only the alliance with France, Poland had to follow French policy and, in the new circumstances, might even find herself put under Soviet orders. The agreement with Germany enabled Poland to disregard French promptings; yet at the same time she still had the French alliance to fall back on if Germany became troublesome. The agreement was not a choice in favour of Germany even as between Germany and Russia; it was meant as a device by which Poland could balance the two more securely.

These divergences were for the future. In 1934 the agreement greatly improved Hitler's freedom of manoeuvre. He was not yet ready to take advantage of this. German rearmament had only just begun; and he had domestic worries to keep him busy—opposition both from his old conservative backers and from his own revolutionary followers. This domestic crisis was not overcome until 30 June, when those who had been making trouble were murdered on Hitler's orders. A month later Hindenburg died. Hitler succeeded him as President—another step on the road to supreme power. This was not the moment for an adventurous foreign policy, or indeed for any foreign policy at all. For once the drift of events, on which Hitler relied, turned against him. It was Austria, his own birthplace, which caused

the set-back. This rump-state, last fragment of the Habsburg empire, had had independence artificially imposed upon it by the peacemakers in 1919. Independent Austria was the prime guarantee of Italy's security, the harmless buffer interposed between her and Europe. Italy would lose all aloofness from Europe if Austria were absorbed into Germany or fell under German control. Besides, there were three hundred thousand German-speaking people in what had been South Tyrol and was now Alto Adige: former Austrians, present Italians, always German in national sentiment. Here would be another cause of danger for Italy if German nationalism triumphed in Austria.

Hitler knew well that improved relations with Italy would bring even greater advantage than good relations with Poland. Already in *Mein Kampf* he had pointed to Italy as the predestined ally against France. Now, in 1934, anyone could see that friendship between the two dictators would be of immense value to Germany during the "danger period". Yet it was harder for Hitler to renounce Austria for Italy's sake than it had been for him to postpone controversy over Danzig and the corridor for the sake of Poland. Not harder for him as leader of the German people: they cared little for this supposedly German cause, while many of them felt strongly about Danzig and the corridor. It was harder for him as a man, as one who had been a German nationalist in Austria long before he became the leader of nationalism in Germany. Besides, the Austrian question thrust itself forward even against the needs of high policy. Independent Austria was in poor shape. She had never found self-confidence since the peace treaties, though she had not done badly from an economic point of view. Austrian Clericals and Austrian Socialists remained incurably hostile one to the other; nor were they drawn together even by the threat from Nazi Germany. Instead Dollfuss, the clerical Chancellor, put himself under Italy's guidance; and, prompted by Mussolini, destroyed both the Austrian Socialist movement and the democratic republic in February 1934.

This civil war stirred up in turn the Austrian Nazis. The Clericalist dictatorship was unpopular; the Nazis hoped to capture much of the old Socialist following. They received money and equipment from Germany; they were encouraged by Munich radio. Yet they were not, as foreign powers often thought, mere

German agents to be turned on and off at will. It was easy for Hitler to turn them on; difficult however for him to turn them off, particularly when he reflected that he would be an Austrian Nazi agitator himself if he had not become leader of Germany. The most that could be expected of him was that he should not actively push the Austrian question. He said in the Council of Ministers: "I am ready to write off Austria for years to come, but I cannot say so to Mussolini".¹ The German diplomatists—themselves unable to check Hitler—hoped that he might be pushed into concession if he met Mussolini face to face; and they therefore arranged a meeting of the two dictators at Venice on 14 June. For the first time, though by no means the last, Mussolini was to perform the task that was too difficult for anyone else: he was to "moderate" Hitler.

The meeting did not come up to expectations. The two men agreed in their dislike of France and Soviet Russia; and, in their pleasure at this, forgot to agree about Austria. Hitler renounced, truthfully enough, any desire to annex Austria. "A personage of independent outlook" should become Austrian Chancellor; then there should be free elections, and afterwards the Nazis would join the Government. This was a simple solution; Hitler would get what he wanted without the trouble of fighting for it. Mussolini replied that the Nazis should drop their terroristic campaign, and then Dollfuss would treat them more sympathetically—as he well might once they became harmless.² Hitler, of course, did nothing to fulfil Mussolini's demand. He did not attempt to check the Austrian Nazis; and they, excited by the events of 30 June in Germany, were eager to stage their own blood-bath. On 25 July the Nazis of Vienna occupied the Chancellery; murdered Dollfuss; and attempted to seize power. Hitler, though delighted by Dollfuss's death, could do nothing to help his Austrian adherents. Italian troops were demonstratively moved to the Austrian frontier; and Hitler had to stand helplessly by while Schuschnigg, successor to Dollfuss, restored order under Mussolini's protection.

The Austrian revolt landed Hitler in a gratuitous humiliation.

¹ Memorandum by Bülow, 30 Apr. 1934. *German Foreign Policy*, series C. ii. No. 393.

² Memorandum by Neurath, 15 June 1934; Hassell to Neurath, 21 June 1934. *Ibid.* iii. No. 5 and 26.

It also upset the nice balance from which Mussolini had expected to reap much profit. He had assumed that German policy would develop along its old lines, demanding concessions from France and next from Poland, but leaving Austria alone. He would balance happily between France and Germany, receiving rewards from both, committing himself to neither. Suddenly he found the position reversed: with Austria threatened, he needed backing from France instead of the other way round. Mussolini had to become the upholder of treaties and the champion of collective security, where he had previously been the advocate of revision—at the expense of others. His conversion was welcomed by the British. They consistently exaggerated Italian strength—it is impossible to explain why. They never looked at the hard facts of Italy's economic weakness: at her lack of coal and her comparative lack of heavy industry. Italy was to them simply a "Great Power"; and of course millions even of half-armed men looked formidable when compared to their own limited forces. Also they were taken in by Mussolini's boasting. He called himself a strong man, a warrior-chief, a great statesman; they believed him.

The French were at first less forthcoming. Barthou, the foreign minister, hoped to thwart Germany without paying Mussolini's price. His solution was an Eastern Locarno: France and Russia jointly guaranteeing the existing settlement to the east of Germany, as Great Britain and Italy guaranteed it on the west. This scheme was unwelcome to Germany and Poland, the two Powers most concerned. Germany did not want any extension of French influence in eastern Europe; the Poles were determined that Russia should not be allowed to re-enter European affairs. Hitler, with his usual gift for waiting, sat back and let the Poles wreck the eastern Locarno for him. Barthou was left only with a vague understanding that France and Soviet Russia would act together in the unlikely chance that they were ever asked to do so. In any case, his days were numbered. In October 1934 King Alexander of Yugoslavia visited France to consolidate his alliance with her. At Marseilles he was murdered by a Croat terrorist who had been trained in Italy. Barthou at his side, also wounded by the assassin's bullet, was left to bleed to death on the pavement. Pierre Laval, his successor, was a man of a more modern mould, the cleverest and perhaps the most

unscrupulous of French statesmen. He had started as an extreme Socialist; he had been on the anti-war side during the first World war. Like many lapsed Socialists, Ramsay MacDonald for example, Laval had a poor opinion of Soviet Russia and a high opinion of Fascist Italy. Though he allowed Barthou's policy to drift as far as a Franco-Soviet pact in May 1935, the pact was empty: never reinforced as the old alliance had been by military conversations, never taken seriously by any French government, maybe not by the Soviet government either. All the French got out of it was Stalin's instruction to the French Communist party that they should no longer impede the work of national defence—an instruction almost enough of itself to transform French patriots in their turn into defeatists.

Laval placed all his hopes on Italy. He visited Rome, flattered himself that Mussolini was now cured by the Austrian affair of any revisionist longings. Hitler on his side seemed deliberately bent on consolidating the united front against Germany. He chipped away the remaining restrictions on German armament with increasing contempt; and finally announced the restoration of conscription in March 1935. For once the former victors showed signs of resistance. In April 1935 there was a great gathering at Stresa: MacDonald and Simon, Flandin—French prime minister—and Laval, Mussolini a host in himself. There had been nothing like this since the meetings of the Supreme Council in the days of Lloyd George. It was a last display of Allied solidarity, a mocking echo from the days of victory; all the odder in that the three Powers who had "made the world safe for liberal democracy" were now represented by renegade Socialists, two of whom—MacDonald and Laval—had opposed the war, while the third, Mussolini, had destroyed democracy in his own country. Italy, France and Great Britain solemnly resolved to maintain the existing treaty settlement of Europe and to resist any attempt to change this settlement by force. This was an impressive display of words, though rather late in the day when so much had been changed already. Did any of the three mean what they said? The Italians promised to send troops for the defence of Belfort; the French promised to send troops to Tyrol. But in truth each of the three Powers hoped to receive help from the others without providing any in return; and each rejoiced to see the others in difficulty.

Hitler, on his side, had just received a powerful reinforcement of sentiment. In January 1935, the Saar—detached from Germany in 1919—held a plebiscite on its future destiny. The inhabitants were mostly industrial workers—Social Democrats or Roman Catholics. They knew what awaited them in Germany: dictatorship, destruction of trade unions, persecution of the Christian churches. Yet, in an unquestionably free election, 90% voted for return to Germany. Here was proof that the appeal of German nationalism would be irresistible—in Austria, in Czechoslovakia, in Poland. With this force behind him, Hitler did not worry about old-fashioned diplomatic demonstrations. Less than a month after the meeting at Stresa, he repudiated the remaining disarmament clauses of the treaty of Versailles, “given that the other Powers had not fulfilled the obligation to disarm, incumbent upon them”. At the same time he promised to respect the territorial settlement of Versailles and the provisions of Locarno. The “artificial” system of security was dead—striking proof that a system cannot be a substitute for action, but can only provide opportunities for it. Hitler had shaken off the restrictions on German armament in just over two years; and there had never been a moment when he had had to face real danger. The experience of these two years confirmed what he had already learnt from German politics. He believed that strong nerves would always win; his “bluff”, if it were bluff, would never be called. Henceforth he would advance with “the certainty of a sleep-walker”. The events of the next twelve months only strengthened this certainty.