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The French Foreign Policy  
between 1935 and 1938:  
The Popular Front and Appeasement

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## Introduction

The 1930's have been characterised by a series of international crisis which have developed to what we know as the Second World War. In those years, France has been one of the most important countries and one of the most involved in all the crisis. Therefore, in this thesis I will analyse the foreign policy of the French government in the years between 1935 and 1938. Those years have been defined mainly by the appeasement policy in terms of the foreign affairs. Appeasement can be defined as: "to yield or concede to the belligerent demands of (a nation, group, person, etc.) in a conciliatory effort, sometimes at the expense of justice or other principles."<sup>1</sup>

In fact, in the period between 1935 and 1938, France has been forced to give up on intervening and concede territories to Germany on behalf of the Hitler's military foreign policy.

To understand why France has followed a policy of appeasement we have to go back at the beginning of the decade, as we know, the world economy was hit by the US financial crisis of 1929, with the Wall Street Crash, creating resentment in countries such as Germany. However, France, as I will analyse in the first chapter was hit by the financial crisis only in 1931. The financial crisis is one of the fundamental steps towards the policy of appeasement for two main reasons: firstly, because of the failures of several governments between 1931 and 1936, the Popular Front (which will be analysed later) rose to power, secondly, United Kingdom succeeded in taking an economic advantage over France which resulted in a dependency of "the Hexagon" on the Crown and at the same time, because of the bad financial situation, France could not create a proper re-armament program, basing its defensive strategy on the Maginot line.

As previously stated, one of the key elements of the Appeasement policy was the Popular Front as they governed France from 1936 to 1938. The Popular Front was a coalition among the three main leftist parties: the French Communist Party, the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO, therefore the Socialist party) and the Radical Party; the economic crisis gave them more appeal and this is the main why they won the elections in 1936. However, the differences between the Radical party and the communist party was one of the main reason for the failure of their foreign policy, plus a spread of pacifism among the Socialist Party considering that France had suffered an enormous number of casualties and damages during the first world war.

In the first chapter then, a part from the economic crisis and the rise of the popular front, the Franco – Soviet Pact will be analysed, this is an important step towards the policy of appeasement as it represents the first differences between the United Kingdom and France and as if it had reached its original aim, it would have

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.dictionary.com/browse>

been an important success for the French government. In fact, the United Kingdom vetoed an alliance between France and the Soviet Union because of the fear of a spread of communism, this led the USSR in signing the Non-aggression Pact in August 1939 with Germany and actually start the second world war.

In the second chapter, the appeasement policy will be interpreted as a policy of non-intervention as the aim of both policies was to avoid a second world conflict. The three main cases which will be analysed are the Italian – Ethiopian conflict, in which the non-intervention was a pretext for a Mediterranean Appeasement, the rearmament of the Rhineland, as one of the main violation by Hitler of the Treaty of Versailles and the Spanish Civil War, which shows all the division inside the Popular Front.

In the last chapter, I will analyse the relationship between the French and British foreign policy over all the events occurred in the 1930's, in order to have a deeper idea of the why of the appeasement. This will then end with the Munich conference, which is the conclusion and the keystone of the failure of the appeasement policy of the allies.

The ultimate aim of this thesis is to show that the events occurred in the 1930's could have had a different ending, especially if people could perceive in a better way Hitler's view of expansion, and if United Kingdom and France put their differences aside and cooperate to stop Germany at the beginning of its expansion. I will show the impact of the Popular Front on the French Foreign Policy trying to analyse their role in the appeasement policy.

Before starting the dissertation, I will do a literature review of the sources I will use throughout the research.

## **1.1 Literature review**

In order to conduct this research, I will analyse a series of reviews, academic articles and books, however, to have a better understanding of the why of the appeasement, it is fundamental to comprehend the time period and the perceptions of the different political actors. This is why I will analyse the newspaper of the time to have a better understanding of what was the opinion of the parties at the time, what people perceived and why.

All the biographic references are the result of a series of research that confirm as written, therefore, if the references look like taken from a single source, other sources will confirm for it even if they have not been mentioned.

Since this thesis focuses on the French foreign policy, a series of documents and books came from the French literature. However, as taking information from just one point of view could result biased, international sources will be the most relevant.

To make the bibliography more relevant, some of the sources have been found in French and Belgium library, plus the Italian National Library in which it was possible to find sources from everywhere in the world.

In order to understand the point of view of the population, which is very important to understand this dissertation, French newspaper have been used to understand what the different political actors and the citizens.

An important contribution has been made by Glyn Stone from which some parts of his analysis concerning the policy of the French Minister Yvon Delbos have been taken.

In the first chapter, I analysed the economic background under which the Popular Front came to power. This work has been done by highlighting the different policies of the several governments and the French Gross Domestic Power by using economic reviews. For the analysis of the Franco – Soviet Pact, I have found documents and speeches of the actors in which there are evidences of the problems in making a full military alliance between the two countries, while as stated before, the reaction of the French Newspaper have been very important to understand the popular feeling concerning the rise to power of the Popular Front.

In the second chapter, to analyse to policy of non-intervention in the three cases, statements of the officials of the government have been used. This work has been done thanks to the knowledge of the French Language. Those documents and comments have been fundamental to understand the reality of the situations and to also have a better comprehension of the why of the policies.

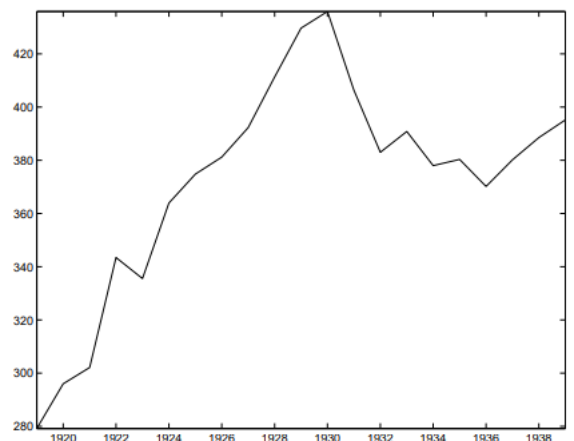
In the last and third chapter, the main source has been Martin Thomas and his book concerning the relationship between United Kingdom and Popular Front. Firstly, all the facts states have been checked, this is why it will appear as a singular source, secondly, it was vital to reach the conclusion. The book is an analysis of all the main events occurred in the 1930's in which the Popular Front had a major role. As we will see later, the relationship between the Popular Front and the British government is at the base of this dissertation.

## Chapter 1

### The French Economic crisis of the 1930's

To understand the why of the formation of the Popular front it is very important to analyse the economic conditions of France in the 1930's. As we all know, in the October of 1929, Wall Street crashed leading to the biggest financial crisis the World had ever seen. Moreover, if we consider the fact that the United States of America were taking the lead as the main financial power and as the main economic partner for many European States after the end of the first world war, it is easy to imagine to what extent the crisis spread out.<sup>2</sup> In fact, countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom particularly suffered the economic crisis, but what happened to France?

As we will see, France did not initially suffer the economic crisis, but it started in 1931.



As shown on this graph, the Gross Domestic Product of France started to fall in 1931, the experience of the National Bloc government did not properly face the crisis, leading to several changes of government until 1936, when the Popular Front won the elections creating the first socialist government in France.

However, in what consisted the economic crisis of 1931? Why did it take place later?

France was successful in not suffering the initial wave of financial crisis after the Wall Street Crash in 1929 as it had devaluated its money; leaving prices lower than worldwide. Unemployment did not initially increase for two main whys: firstly, the production did not fall in the first stage of the crisis, secondly, the unemployment rate was not very high before the crisis as after the First World War, the amount of French casualties was very high, about 1.3 million of soldiers had died, therefore the birth rate fell. Moreover, France had the biggest amount of reserves of Gold, making more difficult to decrease under crisis. Then, in 1931

<sup>2</sup> Dietmar Rothermund, *The Global Impact of the Great Depression, 1929-1939* (London: Routledge, 1996), 59

<sup>3</sup> BEAUDRY, Paul; PORTIER, Franck. *The French depression in the 1930s*. *Review of Economic Dynamics*, 2002, 5.1: 75.

production fell by 10%, the first signs of unemployment appeared, and the industry decreased its reduction by 25%. In addition, in the same year the United Kingdom devaluated the pound, accelerating the process of economic crisis in France; for the first-time prices were higher in France than in the United Kingdom.<sup>4</sup> In addition, France decreased its exports to Germany due to restriction policies plus adding more tariff on their products. This led to a friction between the two countries having a negative effect on the Franco – German trade relations. This situation was solved only once the two governments decided to remove those tariffs and regulations as they signed a trade agreement on February 1931.<sup>5</sup>

The 1932, as shown by the graph, was a year of economic revival. Firstly, the crisis logically helped the left in winning the elections. The new government was led by Harriot, a member of the radical party, and was supported by the socialist area in the Parliament, especially by the SFIO (Section française de l'Internationale ouvrière), which was the main party in that sphere. The Harriot government failed in taking major steps against the crisis, applying little changes such as the reduction of deficit which however, had a positive result.<sup>6</sup>

On the 14<sup>th</sup> December 1932, the French Chamber of Deputies refused to repay the debts owned by the US, leading to the end of the Harriot's government. This political crisis did not have repercussions of the economic revival that continued until the summer of 1933 which resulted in the industry to have the same production level it had before the crisis. Between the summer of 1933 and the February 1934, three different governments changed as they were unable to face the economic crisis. Moreover, chaos and political unrest took place in the same time period due to the Stavisky judicial scandal and the Lagny rail accident, in which 200 people died.<sup>7</sup> The Stavisky scandal consisted in a financial scandal operated by Alexandre Stavisky, a young Jew emigrated in France when he was a child, who had a close relationship with the Radical Prime Minister Camille Chautemps. After the discover of the financial scandal, Chautemps was forced to dismiss and was replaced by another Radical Member, Daladier, who, as first act, fired the prefect of the Paris Police, that had always been close to the far right.<sup>8</sup>

These events led to manifestation by the rightist movements on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 1934, these events led to the formation of a coalition government, led by Gaston Doumergue, that excluded the socialists and the communists from the power. Its succeeded in stopping the political unrest created in the precedent months, but at the same time, its policies of systematic deflation could not stop the economic and the financial crisis. Any other attempt by the Doumergue's government to balance the deficit by a higher taxation and a reduction of public expenditure was a failure, the industrial production continued to fall until June 1934.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Idem, pag. 23

<sup>5</sup> Haim Shamir, "Economic Crisis and French Foreign Policy: 1930-1936", 1989: 98

<sup>6</sup> Alfred Sauvy, pag. 25

<sup>7</sup> Idem. Pag. 26

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100529778>

<sup>9</sup> Idem pag. 27

Moreover, France was penalised by a devaluation of the dollar and other currencies applied by the US, Germany, Italy and Czechoslovakia that had adopted controls on exchanges. This manoeuvre penalised France, Belgium, Switzerland and the Netherlands that had gold block and had prices above the world prices. The government had to decide which direction to take to decrease the French prices: devaluation or deflation. However, while the conservative and liberal parties continued with deflation, the socialists and the communists refused to accept both devaluation and deflation. Additionally, in 1934, France lost gold for an amount equivalent to 6200 million of francs (not that much compared to the reserves of 82 milliard), but this showed a new economic trend in the French economic crisis.<sup>10</sup>

While the Doumergue's government was able to contrast the political chaos that had occurred in the first years of 1930's, under an economic point of view it could not do much, this led to the formation of a new government in November 1934, led by Pierre-Etienne Flandin. His government lasted for about seven months, but this brief timeframe, he reached several success under the foreign policies point of view, such as the Stresa Agreement, the Franco-Soviet Pact of May 1935 and when Hitler re-militarised the Rhineland, he was the foreign minister under the Laval's government. Under the economic point of view, he thought that the market would have adjusted the prices by itself. At the beginning of 1935, the crisis had slowed down, but it had severely hit France. The industrial production was only at 78% compared to the pre-crisis time, steel production lost 40%. The position of Flandin became harsher when the Belgian Franc was devaluated, leaving the French Franc in a more critic position, this led to a loss of reserves by the French Central Bank. At this point Flandin did not have the trust of the Parliament and on the 31<sup>st</sup> May 1935 Pierre Laval took its place as French Prime Minister. He started a new and sever policy of deflation, moreover, he made severe cuts to the public expenditure (about 10%), by reducing salaries, superannuation and pensions-rates. Furthermore, he authorised reductions in rent, fixed-interest payments and on the price of some services such as gas and electricity. Because of those cuts, workmen which for the moment had not been hit by the Laval's policies, were expecting their wages to be reduced. Laval's deflation caused a major reaction among the leftist parties; on the 14<sup>th</sup> of July 1935, the three main parties of the left: the Radicals, the Socialists and the Communists demonstrated against the government and their manoeuvre. This was the first step into the formation of the Popular Front which would have won the elections held in 1936.<sup>11</sup>

While the foreign policy of the Popular front will be analysed later in the context of the appeasement, we can conclude this first part analysing this bizarre coalition from an economic point of view. The Popular Front was able to revive French economy; firstly, all branches of production started to rise again, secondly, the Popular Front continued to possess the treasury bonds discounted by the Banque de France which added resources to the treasury and gave the incentive to businessmen without having disadvantages from the electoral point of

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<sup>10</sup> Idem, pag 29-30

<sup>11</sup> Idem, pag 32-33



view (we have to take into account that the elections would have taken place on 1936). The importance of the elections, in addition, distracted the population from the loss of reserves by the Central Bank.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Franco-Soviet Pact of May 1935**

In the 1930's, Stalin had decided to abandon the USSR's isolation, but we have to take into account that most of the European Countries had decided to help the White Army in the Civil War that spread in the Russian Empire after the second revolution of 1917. However, France was the first country that recognised the Socialist Republic as a legitimate state in 1924 by the Harriot's government. In 1932, another Radical Prime Minister, Paul Boncour, signed a non-aggression pact between France and the USSR. However, the main why of the Treaty that would have been signed in 1935 was the fact that Germany had left the League of Nations on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1933, under the new leadership of Adolph Hitler. After this major loss for the League of Nations, France needed the support of USSR to keep peace in Europe and avoid an escalation that would have meant war.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, France wanted the Socialist Republic to join the League of Nations, and the possible agreement had to respect the Locarno Treaty (signed in the December 1925<sup>14</sup>). On December 1933, Stalin accepted those conditions, but at the same time, he wanted to include Poland, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Finland and the Baltic States. Among those countries, then, the Oriental Pact was discussed; this other pact is important as it will be at the base of the Pact between USSR and France.<sup>15</sup>

However, under the Doumergue's governments (considering that its government aimed in excluding the Socialists and the Communists from the power), negotiation with USSR slowed down; at the same time, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of April 1934, the French government received a proposal concerning an agreement with Germany, but it was officially refused as it was not convenient for the French, after that, the negotiations with the USSR restarted. In this time frame, the main problems of the negotiations were which countries to include in the pact and the question of Germany and how to deal with it. In fact, the different treaties have been proposed by the USSR to France: the first one concerned the so called "Pacte Oriental" (Oriental Pact) that was about a mutual defensive assistance in case of aggression from a signing nation of the pact against another signing nation. Countries included in this pact were: the USSR, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany and the Baltic States. The

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<sup>12</sup> Idem. Pag. 35

<sup>13</sup> BOISDRON, Matthieu. Le projet de pacte oriental (février 1934-mai 1935). *Guerres mondiales et conflits contemporains*, 2005, 4: 23

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pact-of-Locarno>

<sup>15</sup> Matthieu Boisdrón. Pag. 25

second one, that was the Pact between France and USSR, concerned the mutual defensive assistance, especially if Germany would have violated the Locarno Treaty or the Oriental Pact.<sup>16</sup>

One of the main problems of the Oriental Pact was the inclusion of Germany, in fact, they advocated for equal rights concerning re-armament and dis-armament. At this point, if Germany accepted or not the pact was not vital: if it signed, it would have been forced to not aggress its neighbours (the other countries would have reacted), if it did not sign, Germany would have been forced to accept the conditions of its refusal, including the fact of being surrounded by nations that were bonded by a pact.<sup>17</sup>

Another main step towards the Franco – Soviet Pact, was the entrance of the USSR in the League of Nations. This event took place on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1934, then after several months of negotiations, considering that France was also treating another pact with the other fascist dictator Mussolini, which will be analysed later, on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1935 the Franco – Soviet Pact was signed. The intervention of the Radical Party was vital, as they were in favour of the pact with the USSR and at the same time, they were supporting and putting pressure on the government. However, after the signing of the Pact, the Parliament did not ratify it, the ratification took place almost a year later, on the March 1936. Between May 1935 and March 1936, all the big powers in Europe tried to negotiate with Germany too, which shows the first important signs of the appeasement policy applied by the Allies in favour of Hitler and his foreign policy. One of the best example is the Naval Agreement between the United Kingdom and Germany, which was signed in June 1935; while the USSR, on April 1936 (therefore one month after the ratification of the Franco – Soviet Pact), signed a commercial agreement with Germany. More importantly, on the 6<sup>th</sup> of March 1936, Hitler remilitarised the Rhineland, violating the Treaty of Versailles and furthermore, France did not react. Even if both Poland and the USSR had proposed assistance to the French Government, they refused, preferring a verbal reaction against Germany. This event showed how weak the Franco – Soviet Pact was; what was supposed to stop Germany from its rise to power, became favourable to Hitler's plan as it gave the opportunity of remilitarise Germany without the opposition of the Allies as the Germany Dictator could rely on the fact that the Franco – Soviet Pact was violating the Terms of the Locarno Treaty.<sup>18</sup>

Another failure of the Franco – Soviet Pact was the inability of the two countries in reaching a full military alliance, which could be agreed if we think that during the Rightist government of Laval (the period in which the negotiations slowed down), the main pressures for an agreement came from the Socialists and the Communists, which would have taken the power in the election of 1936 thanks to the Popular Front.<sup>19</sup> The main why of this step back by the French government was that they did not consider the intervention of the

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<sup>16</sup> Idem. Pag. 26

<sup>17</sup> Idem. Pag. 28

<sup>18</sup> Idem. Pag 29-30

<sup>19</sup> Dreifort, John E. "The French Popular Front and the Franco-Soviet Pact, 1936-37: A Dilemma in Foreign Policy." *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 2/3 (1976): 217

USSR army as of primary importance, also due to the fact that Germany and the Soviet Union did not share national boundaries and moreover, several reports claimed the Red Army to not be ready for a conflict and improperly equipped.<sup>20</sup>

In 1937, the USSR tried to re-discuss a possible military alliance with France; by promising that in case of war with Germany, the Red Army would have promptly intervened, if Poland and Romaine allowed the passage of the Soviet Troops, if not, they would have supplied armies and materials. However, France could not make the same promises, as in case of war, they would have needed all their resources for their industries. New negotiations started for a military alliance between Czechoslovakia, USSR and France, but because of the Munich Conference, they did not have the time to be continued.<sup>21</sup>

Another element which discouraged the military alliance between France and the USSR, was the relation with the United Kingdom. The British alliance was the main point of the foreign policy of the Popular Front. Therefore, the French government was reluctant in doing something that could have worsen the alliance with the British Empire led by the Conservative party which had made quite clearly that it did not favour a full alliance between the French and the Soviet Union. In addition the French public opinion was against a possible manipulation of their domestic policies by the Comintern, which acted by the French communist party.<sup>22</sup>

The Popular Front, led by Blum has to be blamed for the incapacity in negotiating a significant military agreement with the USSR, especially for not understanding the importance of the Red Army for a possible conflict. We can also assume that, the Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939 was also signed because of the lack of a strong alliance between the Allies and the USSR. This event can be linked to the appeasement strategy as a full Pact between the French and the Soviet Union could be interpreted as a pretext for war against Germany, while Pacifism was still spread out in the Western Europe, as shown by the non-intervention of the United Kingdom and France in the Spanish Civil War; a case that will be analysed later.<sup>23</sup>

At the end, the negotiations between USSR and France ended as Stalin started his political purges against the high command of the Red Army at the end of May 1937. In addition, the French doubts over Soviet military credibility, the ideological concerns of the French governing elite and British opposition, the ideas of ending the Franco-Soviet military alliance were never very credible considering also that in August 1939 the Soviet Union did ask the same request of the spring of 1937 which was the inclusion in this alliance of the French Allies: Poland and Romania, which France would have never accepted.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Idem. Pag. 219

<sup>21</sup> Idem. Pag 221

<sup>22</sup> Idem. Pag 224

<sup>23</sup> Idem. Pag 228

<sup>24</sup> René Girault and Robert Frank, *Turbulente Europe et Nouveaux Mondes: Histoire des Relations Internationales Contemporaines Vol. II: 1914-1941* (Paris: Masson, 1988), pp. 214-15.

To have a better understanding of the public opinion in France about the Franco – Soviet Pact, several newspapers of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May 1935 (the day after the signing) that are close to the different French Parties will be analysed.

Figure 2<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k2980485/f1.item>

Figure 3<sup>26</sup>

Figure 3



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<sup>26</sup> <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k821915d/f1.item>

<sup>27</sup> <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4051328/f1.item>

For example, by reading “L’Humanité” the newspaper close to the Communist Party, the Franco – Soviet Pact is perceived as an important victory by the Communist party in France. Moreover, it highlights the peaceful foreign policy of the USSR led by its foreign commissioner Litvinov.

“Le Populaire”, the socialist newspaper gives more importance on some elections that will be held during the weekend, while gives little attention and information about the Pact. While we can consider it like a victory for the communist party, the SFIO could not give too much importance to a success of an ally.

At the same time, “Le Figarò”, which is not related to any party, but has a centre-right point of view, undelights the fact that the Agreement between the two nations is not as extended as it was supposed to be at the beginning of the negotiations, moreover, underlines the problem that the Pact may cause between the United Kingdom and France.

## **Le Front Populaire**

The victory of the Popular Front in the elections of 1936 represented a major victory for the left in period in which the extreme right was threatening Europe. Hitler had just remilitarised the Rhineland and France did not intervene, Mussolini had annexed Ethiopia in the reborn Italian Empire and also in France, the extreme right had created political chaos while the financial crisis was faced by a reduction in the public expenditure and salaries creating discontent among the French population.<sup>28</sup>

The elections, which were held at the end of April and on the first Sunday of May (as there were seats which had been won at the second turn) gave a strong majority to the Popular Front with 386 seats over the 614; the socialist party was the party with the largest amount of seats: 146, in fact the expressed Leon Blum as the new Prime Minister.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> BONNEFOUS, EDOUARD. "LE FRONT POPULAIRE." *Revue Des Deux Mondes (1829-1971)*, 1966, 4.

<sup>29</sup> Pickersgill, J. W. "The Front Populaire and the French Elections of 1936." *Political Science Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (1939): 70



Figure 4.



Figure 5



<sup>30</sup> <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6638211/f1.image>

<sup>31</sup> <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k8222869/f1.image>

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One of the main problems the Blum's government had to face were the continuous strikes organised by the workers, especially done against the reform applied by the Laval's government previously discussed. In fact, the Popular Front had presented itself at the elections with a singular program that succeeded in accomplishing the requests coming from various categories of the electoral base. In fact, while the Communist party had always represented the lower classes, the Radical Party was mainly voted by the middle class. However, to face the strikes, the Blum's government promoted the 40 hours working week. Those strikes continued also after the victory of the Popular Front because the Communist, even if they were part of the coalition, decided to not get any ministry. Therefore, they had two main means to force the Socialists and the Radicals to promote the entire program proposed by the Popular Front: strikes and votes in favour of the government.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>32</sup> <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k406703r/f1.image>

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Social Francais (French Social Party), this event is important in the context of the Spanish Civil War as France continued under the Blum's government to follow the policy of non-intervention. The Spanish Civil War is a great example of the French appeasement policy, inside the Popular Front there were two main blocks, the pacifists led by the Socialists and those who wanted to intervene in favour of the Frente Popular (The Spanish Popular Front that was fighting against Franco). The policy of non-intervention was also agreed by the United Kingdom (that did not have the same sympathy for the Frente Popular as the Blum's government), and as stated before, the keystone of the foreign policy of the Popular Front was the relation with the United Kingdom. Probably, both countries thought Germany was not ready for a total war yet.<sup>34</sup> One of the main problems that also force France to keep an appeasement policy toward Germany and Italy was the way the military budget was used: most of it was used to create a defensive line (Line Maginot) in the shared borders with Germany, while in the borders with Belgium, little defences were made.<sup>35</sup>

After major political crisis inside the coalition, mainly because of the differences between the Radicals and the Communists, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of April 1938, the Blum's government ends, followed by the end of the Popular Front. In fact, the new government was led by Eduard Daladier, a member of the Radical Party which was supported by the moderate parties too. The decisive event which signed the rupture between the Radicals and the Communists was the Munich Conference, that took place in October 1938.<sup>36</sup>

While from the domestic point of view the Popular Front was able to revive the French economy after the deflation done by the Laval's government, increasing the rights of the workers, especially in the first months after the victory in the elections, from the foreign point of view the reputation of France suffered under several aspects. Firstly, they did not conclude a full agreement with the Soviet Union, which was one of the main causes of the Nazi – Soviet Pact and as consequence the Second World War; secondly, they still depended on the British foreign policy and did not have the same influence over Europe, for example France did not forbid the United Kingdom from reaching a naval agreement with Germany, but the UK did not want a military alliance with the Soviet Union, this can be explained by the different views the governments had on the Treaty of Versailles, as we know, France wanted a total defeat of the German Empire while the United Kingdom was more moderate thinking that a possible feeling of revenge by Germans could be used as pretext for another war. Moreover, the coalition was fragmentated between the pacifist and those who wanted to intervene, like shown by the Spanish Civil War.

The main reason for the Blum's pacifism was his fear of a defeat of France in case of preventive war, if France was defeated by the Nazis, the outcome can be easily imagined, but even if France defeated Germany thanks to the help of the Soviet Union, little would have changed as France would have been forced to rely on the

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<sup>34</sup> Idem. Pag. 9-11

<sup>35</sup> Idem. Pag. 14

<sup>36</sup> Idem. Pag. 18

USSR losing an important ally such as the United Kingdom, while a victory of France against Germany was unlikely as the British followed an appeasement policy because of pacifism, and France was relying more on a defensive strategy rather than an offensive one.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Dreifort, John E. "The French Popular Front and the Franco-Soviet Pact, 1936-37: A Dilemma in Foreign Policy." *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 2/3 (1976): 217-220.

## Chapter 2

### Appeasement and non-intervention

In this second chapter we will analyse three key cases of the appeasement policy adopted by the French Government in the years between 1935 – 1938. We will focus on three cases in which France decided to non-intervene in major international crisis; the non-intervention policy can be interpreted as part of the appeasement policy for one major factor: appeasement was done in order to prevent war as pacifism was spread out in both the United Kingdom and France and also because it was thought by the British counterpart that the Treaty of Versailles was too harsh against Germany. Therefore, taken in this context, non-intervention is an extreme part of the appeasement, as intervening would have led to conflict.

### The Mediterranean Appeasement

Italian support in case of a war against Germany was vital for France; Germany would have been encircled and the allies would have the control of the Mediterranean sea, making easier the passage of troops through the north African colonies and also strengthening the defences at the border with Germany thanks to the troops stationed in the Alps.<sup>38</sup> Italy was still not allied with Germany and Mussolini had moved its troops when Hitler tried to unite Germany with Austria in 1934.<sup>39</sup> In fact France and Italy reached an agreement in 1935, while both countries agreed on the necessity of keeping Austria out from an alliance with Germany, France would have not intervened in the Italian – Abyssinian war (required by Mussolini for the recreation of the Italian Empire), this agreement was supposed to be a first step towards a stronger alliance. In the same year, in fact, Hitler had reached a naval agreement with the United Kingdom, re-introduced military conscription and recreated the military air force (Luftwaffe), France was in need of allies. Because of the violation of the Versailles treaty and the Locarno treaty by Germany, Mussolini felt himself allowed to start a colonial expansion in Ethiopia (which was member of the League of Nations). At this point the French Prime Minister Naval had to choose between its new ally Mussolini or Great Britain that wanted to maintain peace.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Salerno, Reynolds M. "The French Navy and the Appeasement of Italy, 1937-9." *The English Historical Review* 112, no. 445 (1997): 66

<sup>39</sup> Gooch, John "Mussolini and his generals, the armed force and fascist foreign policy, 1922-40", n. 212-213

<sup>40</sup> Reynolds M. Salerno. Pag. 70

At the end the French Cabinet decided to impose little sanctions on Italy: an oil embargo and the closing of the Suez Canal. Because of the sanctions imposed by France and Great Britain, Mussolini decided that the Italian foreign policy was in contrast with that one of the Allies and decided to ally with Germany. Firstly, Mussolini was ready to change opinion on the Anschluss which he had previously stopped by moving troops on the borders with Austria, secondly, the following year Hitler and Mussolini signed the Rome – Berlin Axis.<sup>41</sup>

The alliance with Italy was strongly supported by the French Marine Force, especially by Jean Decoux, leading strategist of the French Navy, who advocated an alliance with Mussolini in order to have the control of the Mediterranean Sea and wanted an appeasement with Italy by firstly allowing the Italian – Abyssinian War without an intervention of the League of Nations (neither sanctions) and was ready to re-discuss the Locarno treaty making it a (Mediterranean Locarno Treaty) which in the name of the civilisation of Africa.<sup>42</sup>

Laval's policy of appeasing Italy was shared by few (including Decoux), most of the Generals of the French Army preferred to keep the alliance with the United Kingdom untouched, and the British did not support the foreign policy of Mussolini. This meant that an alliance between France and Italy was not possible, the rift became larger when Italy supported Germany in the re-militarisation of the Rhineland and especially in 1936, with the Spanish Civil War. In fact, at the beginning of the conflict between Republicans and supporters of Franco, part of the Popular Front wanted to support the Spanish Popular Front, while Mussolini and Hitler supported Franco; while the United Kingdom preferred the non-intervention.<sup>43</sup> France foreign policy towards Italy changed because of the victory of the Popular Front in the elections in 1936, one of the main difference compared to Laval's government was the change in the Admiral in Command of the French Navy, from Durand-Viel (who supported Decoux's vision) to Francois Darlan (who was a strong supporter of Blum's policies). While Durand-Viel was lobbying for an agreement with Italy, Darlan wanted a Naval alliance with the United Kingdom by understanding their priorities (which was not the dominance of the western Mediterranean Sea, unlikely Durand-Viel and Decoux's visions) and having a more aggressive posture towards Italy. He wanted to accelerate the rearmament of the French Navy by passing the idea of the Italian Navy as the biggest threat for the French security, however the rearmament he dreamed was not possible because of the financial situation of France under the popular front, which preferred to insist in economic policies aimed to help the workers, and which cut the defensive budget (most of the defensive budget was used to build the Maginot Line).<sup>44,45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Idem. Pag. 75

<sup>42</sup> Idem. Pag. 77

<sup>43</sup> Idem. Pag. 80

<sup>44</sup> Idem. Pag. 84

<sup>45</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 149

Durand-Viel, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of June 1936 declared to his colleagues: ' *France has no interest in assisting the construction of an anti-Italian coalition . . . as, without a doubt, the logical consequence of this would be the quest for close agreement between Rome and Berlin, an agreement which would put us, on sea as on land, in a dangerous position.*'<sup>46</sup>

The United Kingdom and France tried to discuss for a strategy in case of war with Italy, while France insisted on a preventive attack on the Italian colonies in North Africa, the British could not move their fleet, especially as they needed it in case of war in South Asia and more importantly to contrast a possible invasion of Singapore by the Japanese Empire. In order to appease Mussolini, and keep his neutrality in the Mediterranean, both France and United Kingdom recognised the new Italian Empire and did not react when Italy invaded Albania alarming Greece which was a British ally. There were two main whys for appeasing Italy, firstly, after Franco's victory in Spain, France was encircled by fascist States and could not win on a triple front war, secondly, Mussolini's colonial request could be easily met and at the same time he had an important influence on Hitler's foreign policy, therefore the allies hoped to appease Germany through Italy. France was forced to not-intervene in the Mediterranean, it could not rely on the help of the British fleet and could not match up the tons of the Italian Navy.<sup>47</sup>

While Italy and the United Kingdom reached an agreement, the Easter Pact, which concerned Italian intervention in the Spanish Civil War and the Colonial question in the Mediterranean (the Pact was signed on April 1938)<sup>48</sup>, France was not sure about appeasing Italy as it needed the control of the Mediterranean to reach its allies in the east and keep a two fronts war with Germany which was still the biggest threat to French security. After the end of the Popular Front, the new government was led by Delardier, a centrist, he appointed Bonnet as foreign minister and both wanted to avoid war with Italy, in contrast with the strategy of the French Navy. However, Bonnet's and Delardier's views on Italy changed after the Munich conference, they understood that Italy was trying to split France and the United Kingdom, this led to a total change in the policy of France towards Italy, in fact the French Navy started to re-arm for a conflict against Italy. The problem was that re-armament started too late to be effective considering the inefficiency of the Maginot Line during the invasion of France in 1940.<sup>49</sup>

We can say that the policy of appeasement towards Italy was not effective, it showed how the French foreign policy was based on the United Kingdom, it gave time and strength to both Germany and Italy to re-arm giving

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<sup>46</sup> 'Renseignements numériques sur les armements navals français, 1922-1943', 15 May 1938; Reynolds M. Salerno, "Multilateral Strategy and Diplomacy: The Anglo-German Naval Agreement and the Mediterranean Crisis, 1935-1936" p. 59

<sup>47</sup> Reynolds M. Salerno. Pag. 88

<sup>48</sup> <http://www.worldlii.org/int/other/LNTSer/1939/42.html>

<sup>49</sup> Reynolds M. Salerno. Pag 93-98

them also territorial concessions. The Allies did not understand that Mussolini was closer to Hitler rather than on democracies, and hoped for too much time to have Italy as an ally combined to the inefficiency of both countries in founding a common strategy for the Mediterranean sea resulted in a loss of time which could be used to get ready for war.<sup>50</sup>

### **The Rhineland Crisis, March 1936**

One of the most relevant cases of the French appeasement is the Rhineland crisis, when Hitler remilitarised the area infringing the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Treaty. It is generally agreed that this was one of the last occasions to stop Hitler's foreign policy from its beginning for two main whys: Germany was not ready for a conflict and a failure would have decrease Hitler's popularity.<sup>51</sup>

The demilitarisation of the Rhineland was one of points of the Treaty of Versailles, as the Rhine was a natural barrier between Germany and France, but when the remilitarisation started, it was not as relevant as it could be twenty years before.<sup>52</sup> In fact, weapons had progressed, which means that military vehicles such as tanks and airplanes would have taken few minutes to pass over the Rhineland making the remilitarisation not so relevant. However, the strategy was risky for Hitler's too, it was the first German operation since the Treaty of Versailles, the rearmament had just started<sup>53</sup> and in case of a French countermove, the German army would have been forced to retreat (according to German strategists). Still, France was building the Maginot Line and French Generals relied on the fact that German troops could not pass through that sector in case of a second invasion and could not rely on the British (which did not consider the of vital importance the question of the Rhineland) support neither on the Italians. In fact, before remilitarising the Rhineland, Hitler was accusing France of the Franco-Soviet Pact, and was relying on Mussolini, the Duce was in open conflict with the United Kingdom after the sanctions imposed because of the Abyssinian War and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February he made clear to Hitler that in case of remilitarisation of the Rhineland, Italy would have not reacted.<sup>54</sup>

Another factor that led to the non-intervention was the zone was already militarised, about 20000 men were serving under the uniforms of the military-police as well as a an air regiment under the jurisdiction of the

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<sup>50</sup> Reynold M. Salerno. Pag. 102-104

<sup>51</sup> Parker, R. A. C. "The First Capitulation: France and the Rhineland Crisis of 1936." *World Politics* 8, no. 3 (1956): 355

<sup>52</sup> Idem. Pag. 358

<sup>53</sup> Fischer, Klaus (1995). *Nazi Germany: A New History*, p. 408

<sup>54</sup> Parker. Pag. 361

police, and in May 1935, French intelligence had noted more reports coming from the Rhine region concerning construction of military roads, barracks and extension of the airfield.<sup>55</sup>

In addition, French Secret Services overestimated the German forces throughout 1936, because of the speed of the German re-armament and the increase in security from a spread of data by the Nazi government, for France it was impossible to have a real figure of the German threat.<sup>56</sup>

Therefore, when in the 7<sup>th</sup> of March Hitler sent its troops, France was expecting it, however, the non-intervention was caused by a lack in easily deployable army too, the French government had invested little resource in the development of mobile force. In 1935, the situation for the French army was not at its best, it had only 200 usable tanks, and few new B1 model (which was a modern tank), it had not antitank weapons and lacked modern artillery (except for those used in the Maginot line), the situation started to improve only in the early months of 1936, but it was too late.<sup>57</sup> The upcoming elections, won by the Popular Front were another factor that led to the non-intervention, Socialists had always advocated against military mobilisation if and only under the League of Nations and wanted to reach agreement with both Italy and Germany through diplomacy, therefore, in the absence of a direct attack on French soil, any movement could result in a loss of votes. In November 1935, the French Military High Commission and the French government agreed on the fact that they needed to gain time for proper rearmament.<sup>58</sup>

France wanted to put the question of the Rhineland to the League of Nations, as noted by the Foreign Minister M. Fladdin in a speech on the 10th of March:

*“The French Government did not by this mean to indicate that they would refuse in the future to pursue negotiations with Germany on questions interesting Germany and the Locarno Powers; but that such negotiations would only be possible when international law had been re-established in its full value . . .”*<sup>59</sup>

However, France could not rely on the British's support as demonstrated by several declarations by Lord Lothian, one of the best British ambassadors and also one of strongest supporter of the appeasement policy:

*“...no more than the Germans walking into their own backyard.”*<sup>60</sup>

Considering the situation of the French army and the financial crisis that had hit the nation, the government could not afford a general mobilisation against Germany. The cost of a coverture (which is a step beyond general mobilisation) costed around 30 million francs per day, which was the total cost of the French army in

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<sup>55</sup> Idem. Pag. 364

<sup>56</sup> Peter Jackson, “France and the Nazi Menace. Intelligence and policy making 1933-39” (2000): 164

<sup>57</sup> Parker. Pag.366

<sup>58</sup> Idem. Pag. 368

<sup>59</sup> <https://schoolshistory.org.uk/topics/world-history/interwar-period-c1918-1945/reoccupation-rhineland-international-response/>

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.gcsehistory.org.uk/modernworld/appeasement/rhineland.htm>

a month. Moreover, a general mobilisation would have indirect costs too, for example the industry would have lost workers (which would have gone to the front) reducing the output and an increase in the financial crisis.<sup>61</sup>

Finally, France could not properly react to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, it did not have the proper financial situation for a countermove, however, the most important factor that led to the non-intervention of the French Army was the lack of the British support.<sup>62</sup>

In addition, France hoped to appease Germany by avoiding a countermove in the Rhineland in order to re-open conversation for a new Locarno Treaty, possible with the re-entry of Germany into the League of Nations and also a new agreement concerning Air Force disarmament, especially for what concerned bombers. However, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of March, the British Ambassador in Berlin, Sir Eric Philipps, informed London that Hitler did not want to start any conversation with France.<sup>63</sup>

Even after the Rhineland crisis, the Sarraut's government (the transitional government between Laval's and Blum's) had tried to restart conversation with Italy, but once the Front Populaire came to power, the ideological differences between Fascist Italy and Blum's coalition led to the breakdown of any possible agreement.<sup>64</sup>

### **French non-intervention in the Spanish Civil War**

In the Spanish elections of February 1936, in a political situation similar to France, the Spanish Popular Front, composed by the Communist Party, the Socialist Party, the Radical Party and by several leftists organizations reached the 47% of the votes against the 46% of the rightist coalition giving them the majority of the seats in the National Assembly. The victory of the left led several Generals of the Spanish Army in starting a coup d'état against the central government and in July 1936, the Spanish Civil War started between the Republicans (in favour of the Popular Front) and the Nationalists (in favour of Franco and the Spanish Generals). This Civil War is one of the main step that lead to the Second World War, and France played a major role.<sup>65</sup>

The two weeks between the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July and the 8<sup>th</sup> of August 1936 have been one of the most important weeks in terms of the policy of non-intervention led by the Allies. In fact, while up to the first date, the French Prime minister Leon Blum was ready to help the Spanish Popular Front sending military aid, on the second date he proposed a non-intervention Pact among the major European Forces. One of the main events that took place

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<sup>61</sup> Parker. Pag. 369-370

<sup>62</sup> Idem. Pag. 373

<sup>63</sup> Martin Thomas, Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 37

<sup>64</sup> Martin Thomas, Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 45

<sup>65</sup> Fischer Conar, "Europe between Democracy and Dictatorship – 1900-1945"



in these two weeks was Blum's visit to London, in order to discuss about the Franco-British Alliance and the equilibrium of Europe after the rise to power of Mussolini and Hitler and all the major international crisis.<sup>66</sup> While the French Leader was ready to supply the Spanish Government against Franco, it is still unclear who from the Chamberlain's Ministers told to Blum that they would have not intervened. The United Kingdom was still strong supporter of the appeasement and did not want to intervene hoping to keep also the other European states out from the conflict. France had a different point of view, if Franco won, in case of a conflict it would have been encircled by Fascist States. However, this time, the non-intervention of France was not caused by the British appeasement policy, but by the French National Assembly.<sup>67</sup>

The French intervention in favour of the Republicans could lead to the resignation of Blum as Prime minister and to the end of the experience of the Popular Front. He understood that France could not directly deliver armies to the Spanish Government, therefore, he gave the materials to the Mexican Government leaving to them the decision of what to do with it. Darlan tried a second mission in London to have British support, but once he came back to France, he reported to Blum that if French intervention escalated into war, the United Kingdom would have not intervened in favour of France.<sup>68</sup>

After this second refusal, France proposed the non-intervention, under British influence, which forced the Labour Party in accepting it. Moreover, only Romania and Czechoslovakia were ready to support French intervention. The non-intervention policy adopted by Blum split the country even more deeply, the among the rightist party the motto "Better Hitler than Blum" started to be spread, the communist party did not approve the foreign policy of the Popular Front as they wanted to intervene in favour of the Republicans, this internal division led to the collapse of the coalition.<sup>69</sup>

Blum was following a double policy of appeasement, one in the foreign affairs towards the Fascist powers, the second one towards its own coalition, resulting in a dependence on United Kingdom in the matters of foreign policies. At the end, the Popular Front opted for a soft non-intervention policy, which meant a non-official support for the Spanish Republicans but at the same time France was providing weapons and military support. However, neither France or Soviet Union could match German and Italian arms support without decreasing the process of remilitarisation.<sup>70</sup> Blum was also persuaded in following a soft non-intervention policy because of the fear of risking support at the advantage of the Communist party. Both parties could not complete their programmes in the internal affairs, but if the popular front followed the Communists' will, it would have been a clear victory for them resulting in an increase of consensus, moreover, the Radical party

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<sup>66</sup> Gallagher, M. D. "Leon Blum and the Spanish Civil War." *Journal of Contemporary History* 6, no. 3 (1971): 56.

<sup>67</sup> Idem. Pag. 57

<sup>68</sup> Idem. Pag. 59-60

<sup>69</sup> Idem. Pag. 62-64

<sup>70</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 94

had taken at its advantage the anti-communist propaganda used by the right-wing. In October, the Soviet Union abandoned the non-intervention committee and increasing its aid to the Republicans, this led to a split in the Popular Front as the Communist party intended in following the USSR's example, while the Socialists party wanted to maintain the British's policy.<sup>71</sup>

The British non-intervention was also caused by the fact that they did not know who to support in the Civil War; the Conservative party was anti-bolshevism while the Labour party was in favour of the Spanish Popular front against Franco and the Spanish Generals.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, the main cause of British non-intervention was their commercial interests in Spain; the United Kingdom composed 40% of the foreign investments in Spain, they owned the Rio Tinto mining conglomerate which was one of the main mining producer in the world and the British Cabinet was afraid of the spread of rumours of sovietisation of Spain coming from the diplomats. We can say that the United Kingdom had two primary objectives in the non-intervention policy, firstly, they wanted to prevent war between the leftists France and Soviet Union against the fascist Powers, secondly, they wanted to protect their commercial affairs in Spain, and the non-intervention would have continued the trading affairs whatever Franco or the Republicans won.<sup>73</sup>

A Non-intervention committee was formed, aiming in preventing foreign powers from supporting Franco or the Republicans, two of the main objectives of this committee were the coasts patrolling and the prohibition of foreign volunteers to enter Spain to fight.<sup>74</sup> However, the Non-intervention committee was unable in stopping the flow of volunteers, especially those coming from Italy, in addition, the British cabinet started to be more divided on the Spanish question, on the other hand, a part from the French Communist Party, the Blum's ministers (we have to remember that Blum's government was formed by Socialist and Radical ministers with the external support of the Communists) were no longer divided on the question of the Spanish Civil War.<sup>75</sup>

Although the Pact had become a reality by the time Delbos became foreign minister in May, having been ratified by the French Senate on 28 February 1936 and having provided Hitler with a pretext to remilitarize the Rhineland, the Soviets were anxious to strengthen it with the signing of a military convention and, accordingly, discussions took place between the Popular Front government and the Soviets during 1936 and 1937. However, there was no question of the French engaging in close military cooperation with Soviet Russia, not only because of ideological hostility on the part of the French general staff which Delbos and other

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<sup>71</sup> Idem. Pag 96

<sup>72</sup> Whealey R.H. (1971) Foreign Intervention in the Spanish Civil War. In: Carr R. (eds) The Republic and the Civil War in Spain. Problems in Focus Series. Palgrave, London

<sup>73</sup> Idem. Pag. 93

<sup>74</sup> Idem. Pag. 104

<sup>75</sup> Idem. Pag. 105

ministers shared – the French generals genuinely feared, and the Spanish Civil War accentuated that fear,<sup>76</sup> that too close contact with the Soviets could encourage subversion in the army and the spread of communism in France – but also because of reservations about the quality of the Soviet armed forces whose military capacity was, in the words of General Victor-Henri Schweisguth who had attended Soviet manoeuvres in September 1936, ‘a great sham’.<sup>77</sup> These reservations were shared to some extent by the British military authorities.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> See Peter Jackson, ‘French Strategy and the Spanish Civil War’ in Christian Leitz and David Dunthorn (eds), *Spain in an International Context, 1936-1959* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1999), pp.60-1 and Jordan, *The Popular Front and Central Europe*, pp.208-9.

<sup>77</sup> Young, *In Command of France*, pp.145-7. Martin Alexander, *The Republic in Danger: General Maurice Gamelin and the Politics of French Defence, 1933-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp.292-3. Anthony Adamthwaite, *Grandeur and Misery: France's Bid for Power in Europe, 1914-1940* (London: Arnold, 1995), p.208. Patrice Buffotot, ‘The French High Command and the Franco-Soviet Alliance, 1933-1939’, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 5/4 (1982), pp.549-51. Michael Carley, ‘Prelude to Defeat: Franco-Soviet Relations, 1919-1939’ in Joel Blatt (ed.), *The French Defeat of 1940: Reassessments* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1998), p.193.

<sup>78</sup> James Herndon, ‘British Perceptions of Soviet Military Capability, 1935-1939’ in Wolfgang Mommsen and Lothar Kettenacker (eds), *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), p.302.

## Chapter 3

### From appeasement to appeasement

France has followed the policy of appeasement throughout the 30's, the main why was its closeness to the British Foreign Policy, as we have analysed in the previous chapter, the London's decisions had an important impact on French non-intervention, and Paris has always tried to not worse its relationship with the United Kingdom. Both countries, as we will see later, in the first years of the appeasement policy have tried to preserve peace by giving concessions to Hitler and Mussolini in the hope of starting a new disarmament age, like it took place after the Locarno conference. However, once the Allies understood that Hitler would have not stopped its request, both countries had to prepare their armies for a new war starting to rearm, therefore they used the policy of appeasement on the behalf of other countries that trusted the Western democracies in order to get more time to be ready for the conflict. This is why we can say that there has been a change in the policy of appeasement, what had started to preserve peace in Europe has became one of the pretexts to start war. In this chapter we will analyse the relationships between France and the United Kingdom in the 30's, focusing of course in the time period concerning the appeasement policy as it is one of the key point that led to war, their hope for a western pact and the steps that led to the Munich conference.

### Franco – British relations in the 30's

Among the men who governed the United Kingdom and France in the late years of the 30's, the most had seen the horrors caused by the first World War fighting together against Germany. This experience has been fundamental in the seek of peace for Europe and the adoption of the policy of appeasement.<sup>79</sup> While in the first years the appeasement was used to maintain peace, later, once the two Allies understood that war was inevitable, the appeasement had the goal of gaining time for rearmament.

One of the biggest threats to the relations between United Kingdom and France was the Naval Pact between the British and Germany which violated the Treaty of Versailles and the Locarno Treaty, that generated the jealousy of the French cabinet. Moreover, the figure of Pierre Laval as French Prime minster could compromise the relations between the two ancient allies, in fact, most of the ministers of the British cabinet

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<sup>79</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 7

disliked him. Moreover, tensions between the two were created when France did not support strong sanctions, or even worse actions, against Italy during the Abyssinians War, this led to the dismissal of Laval as Prime Minister.<sup>80</sup>

During the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, it was thought that the United Kingdom would have intervened as French territorial integrity was vital for the British Interests. However, an obligatory expedition was against the role of the United Kingdom as mediatory, and it would have prevented any possible agreement between them and Germany.

“Anglo-French alliance would give British sanction to a French security policy considered fundamentally defective. Britain would become the agent of an encirclement strategy lacking the necessary strategic coherence to work as an effective deterrent to German expansionism. Superficially, the prospects for an improvement in Anglo-French relations did not look good.” Cit.<sup>81</sup>

While it was general thought that the relations between the two countries would have improved after the dismissal of Laval, the election of Blum led to worse situation. Even if for both Blum and Yvon Delbos, Minister of Foreign Affairs the priority was “*unconditional support of the Great English democracy*”<sup>82</sup>, as stated on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June in front of the National Assembly<sup>83</sup>, among the rightist parties in the United Kingdom there was the idea of the Popular Front as a communist threat, especially when they wanted the restoration of the Locarno Treaty rather than new discussion with the new Fascist Powers for the security of Europe.<sup>84</sup>

New problems in the relations between the two allies rose during the evolution of appeasement to Germany through the concessions of colonies.<sup>85</sup> We have to remember that one of the terms of the Versailles treaty was the loss of Germany of all its colonies.<sup>86</sup> Even if colonial concessions would have represented a détente between United Kingdom and Germany, it would have represented a big victory for Hitler’s foreign policy, and thanks to the new colonies, he would have had new raw materials to use for the rearmament,<sup>87</sup> this problem led to the end of the idea of colonial concession to Germany.

*None the less, colonial restitution remained the best means of reaching a general settlement with Germany, particularly after Lord Halifax’s visit to Berlin in November 1937. When Delbos and Chautemps met Eden*

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<sup>80</sup> Idem. Pag. 15

<sup>81</sup> Idem. Pag. 26

<sup>82</sup> Clerk memo, "French Internal Situation", 11 May 1936. Regarding the PF programme, see Davis A. L. Levy, "The French Popular Front, 1936-1937", in Graham and Preston, *The Popular Front in Europe*, pp. 64-7; Adrian Rossiter, "Popular Front Economic Policy and the Matignon Negotiations", *HJ*, 30, 3, 1987, pp. 663-84

<sup>83</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 55

<sup>84</sup> Philippe Chassaigne and Michael Dockrill, eds., *Anglo-French Relations, 1898-1998: From Fashoda to Jospin* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 9

<sup>85</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 58

<sup>86</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/event/Treaty-of-Versailles-1919>

<sup>87</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 63

*and Chamberlain in London at the end of the month it was clear that the British ministers saw colonies as the way forward. Eden and Chamberlain agreed with Delbos that no negotiations on colonies would take place before a discussion of the other elements of a general settlement – disarmament, Germany's return to the League of Nations and the conclusion of a western pact. Directly following the conversations it was announced publicly for the first time that the British and French governments were prepared to study the colonial question.*<sup>88</sup>

Another factor that led to worse relations was Chamberlain's policy on the British expeditionary forces, that were supposed to intervene in continental Europe; he reduced the size of this force and added budget to the Royal Air Force, as he was convinced that a superiority in the skies was better than troops on the ground. Moreover, a lot of British Politicians thought that a German – British Agreement would have been the best route towards European Security considering the worsening financial situation of France in the summer of 1937.<sup>89</sup>

The relations between those two countries started to improve only after the end of the Popular Front Era, with the formation of the government led by Daladier in April 1938. Chamberlain had previously complained that France *'has been in a terribly weak condition being continually subject to attacks on the franc & flight of capital together with industrial troubles & discontent which seriously affects her production of all kinds & particularly of arms & equipment'*<sup>90</sup>.

However, after the Anschluss of March 1938, and considering the German interests on Sudetenland, Chamberlain informed the French Cabinet that the United Kingdom was not ready to intervene if France would have reacted against Germany in name of the Franco – Czechoslovakian alliance. The French hoped for a possible agreement among all the parts that would have favoured the Czech population. In order to appease the French Cabinet in making concessions in favour of the Czech question, Chamberlain re-opened talking between France and the United Kingdom on limited air, naval and army among the European powers.<sup>91</sup> However, the idea of joint planning for the tactical question was not well accepted by the ministry of the Air and the Navy, for example, the Air Ministry's director of plans, Group Captain John Slessor, put it in June: *'A nation cannot undertake the discussion of war plans with a potential ally without in fact incurring a moral commitment, no matter what disclaimers of liability and responsibility are stipulated as basis of the conversations.'*<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> 'Visit of the French Ministers to London, 29-30 Nov.1937: Memorandum by Eden', 6 Dec.1937. TNA (PRO), CAB 27/626 FP (36) 40. DDF, 2nd series, vol. VII, nos. 287, 291, 297, pp.518-45, 554, 573-4. See also Andrew Crozier, 'Imperial Decline and the Colonial Question in Anglo-German Relations, 1919-1939', *European Studies Review*, 11/2 (1981), pp.231-2.

<sup>89</sup> Philippe Chassaigne and Michael Dockrill, Pag. 97

<sup>90</sup> Neville Chamberlain Diary, 19 February 1938, Chamberlain MSS, NC2 /24A, University of Birmingham.

<sup>91</sup> Philippe Chassaigne and Michael Dockrill. Pag. 99

<sup>92</sup> Minute by Group Captain J. G. Slessor, 17 June 1938, AIR 9/78, Public Record Office

In the months of August and September, the United Kingdom because of the policy of appeasement was even more determined to make France abandon the Franco – Czech Agreement in order to start conversation with Adolph Hitler and try to avoid war or at least gain time for proper rearmament, Daladier agreed on the fact that avoiding war was vital and was ready to not intervene in favour of Czechoslovakia.<sup>93</sup> France took advantage of the British fears on German intention in order to ask for more troops in the expeditionary forces, even if Chamberlain had previously stated that he would have not increased the amount of forces.<sup>94,95</sup>

Starting from October 1936, the French foreign policy was more dependent on the British cabinet because of three main causes: firstly, the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War and the non-intervention Policy (started from August 1936), secondly, the devaluation of the Franc that took place in September and which made France more dependent on foreign investment (coming from the United Kingdom and the United States) and thirdly, by the declaration of neutrality by Belgium. France and Belgium had a strong military alliance, one country would have intervened in favour of the other in case of German invasion, because of this declaration of neutrality, France had not all of its border protected, the Maginot line covered only the borders with Germany and Italy, therefore, in order to defend the border with Belgium, France had to rely mainly on the British Expeditionary forces.<sup>96</sup>

*For his part, Eden agreed with Vansittart in December 1937 that while the air defence of the United Kingdom was the first priority, if France (and the Low Countries) were overrun Britain's position would be impossible 'no matter how densely we had packed this country with anti-aircraft guns and no matter how many Fighter Squadrons we had constructed'.<sup>97</sup> The prospects of a British expeditionary force, no matter how small, were extremely unlikely during the period that Eden and Delbos remained at their posts. By the time the British alliance was secured by France in February-March 1939 with its promise of an expeditionary force, Eden and Delbos no longer wielded influence on the respective policies of their governments.<sup>98</sup>*

The devaluation of the franc resulted in France signing a tripartite agreement with United States and United Kingdom on the 28<sup>th</sup> September, also to reduce the industrial unrest created by the monetary crisis. This agreement tied Blum's government to the British cabinet.<sup>99</sup> One of the main problems among the European powers emerged when the French government wanted the restoration and the modification of the Locarno treaty with the creation of a new Western Pact with the aim of disarmament and the United Kingdom agreed

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<sup>93</sup> Philippe Chassaigne and Michael Dockrill, pag.100

<sup>94</sup> Philippe Chassaigne and Michael Dockrill, pag., 101

<sup>95</sup> Pownall Diaries, 7, 14, 21, 28 November 1938, pp. 165–72

<sup>96</sup> Martin Thomas pag.69

<sup>97</sup> Vansittart to Eden, 17 Dec. 1937. Avon Papers, FO 954 FP/37/20.

<sup>98</sup> Glyn Stone "YVON DELBOS AND ANTHONY EDEN: ANGLO-FRENCH COOPERATION, 1936-38"

<sup>99</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 70

on the condition that they would have listened all the necessity of the European Powers. However, at the same time, new evidences of the Berlin – Rome Axis developed, resulting in a failure for the Blum's government and a stop in the conversations of the Western Pact.<sup>100</sup>

In October, the primary short objective for the United Kingdom was the appeasement towards Italy, also because the colonial concession appeasement to Germany was incomplete and could not work. This change in policy by the British, led France change its requests for a possible restart of the conversation for the Western Pact, for example including all the French territorial possession under it, in order to prevent their security.<sup>101</sup>

In fact, an appeasement between London and Rome could result in the total dominance of the Mediterranean Sea by the Italian Fleet, limiting French capacity in reaching its colonies in Africa. However, the British appeasement towards Italy was soon stopped when in November, Hitler and Mussolini announced the Rome – Berlin Axis. The United Kingdom and France shared the same optimism also after this announcement, both countries believed that Mussolini's only threat was Germany and Hitler agreed on the Rome – Berlin Axis only to improve its bargaining power for what the Allies considered a future Pact between them and Germany.<sup>102</sup> Another factor that spread optimism among the allies was the factor that the Italian ambassador in Berlin, Attolico, stated that "51% of the Rome – Berlin Axis" was mainly caused by the Spanish Civil War and the Allies were confident that this was an anti-communist agreement.<sup>103</sup>

For the air ministry, even after the Spanish Civil War, a reproach to Italy was possible, thanks to the previous agreement signed between the two countries (both Air forces had a strategy in which they split the German targets), but because of Blum's lack of will in giving other concessions to Mussolini, therefore making the policy of appeasement towards Italy a failure.<sup>104</sup>

The Socialist Léon Blum and the Radical Camille Chautemps. Blum, for example, told the Chamber on 5 December 1936 that: '*Yvon Delbos has given first priority to the close cordiality of our relations with England, and he is right. For our other friends are unanimous in recognizing and declaring that the Franco-English accord affects the whole realm of international affairs.*'<sup>105</sup> So close had the relationship become between the

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<sup>100</sup> Idem. Pag. 77

<sup>101</sup> Idem. Pag. 97

<sup>102</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 98

<sup>103</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 99

<sup>104</sup> Idem. Pag. 10

<sup>105</sup> John Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos and the Quai d'Orsay: French Foreign Policy during the Popular Front, 1936-1938* (Lawrence KS: University Press of Kansas, 1973), p.84.



two foreign ministers that when Eden resigned in February 1938 Delbos was so personally affected that, according to Phipps, he offered his resignation to Chautemps several times.<sup>106</sup>

*“Both Delbos and Eden viewed the appeasement of Germany far more seriously than they did the appeasement of Italy. Chautemps told Eden at Geneva in January 1938 that while the one question mark with regard to the European situation generally was Mussolini, Germany was the real problem and he and Delbos both stressed that no effort ‘should be spared to improve relations with Berlin’.<sup>107</sup> In their respective foreign policy statements on 23 June 1936 Delbos told the Chamber and Blum told the Senate that ‘the Rassemblement populaire have always fought for a Franco-German entente’.<sup>108</sup> Eden had been more than ready to make the concession of recognizing Hitler’s ‘illegal’ rearmament and of permitting the remilitarization of the Rhineland prior to the Führer’s decision to pre-empt the latter on 7 March 1936.<sup>109</sup> From the inception of the Popular Front government, Delbos and Eden worked closely to persuade Germany and Italy to enter a five power pact (to also include Belgium) to replace the Rhineland pact of Locarno; unfortunately with no success.<sup>110</sup> At the same time, Blum and Delbos readily entered talks with the German economics minister, Hjalmar Schacht, in August 1936 and, assured that he was acting with Hitler’s authority, conceded further talks on the subject of colonial restitution to the Third Reich provided colonial concessions were part of a wider European settlement.<sup>111</sup>”<sup>112</sup>*

Even if during the Blum’s government the relationship between the United Kingdom and France had improved, from June 1937 it increased as Camille Chautemps took the lead of the French Cabinet; the main why for this phenomenon was an increased dependence of the French Foreign Policy on Chamberlain’s idea of Appeasement towards Germany. Eventually Leon Blum came back to power on March 1938, but for a short period, at this point, the Radical Party was the leading one, and the second experience for the formal socialist premier came soon back to an end.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid., p.187.

<sup>107</sup> Mr Edmond, Geneva, to the Foreign Office, 26 Jan.1938. DBFP, 2nd series, vol. XIX, no. 473, p.819.

<sup>108</sup> Dreifort, *Yvon Delbos*, pp.159-60.

<sup>109</sup> Anthony Peters, *Anthony Eden and the Foreign Office, 1931-1938* (Aldershot: Gower, 1986), pp.173-7.

<sup>110</sup> See William Norton Medlicott, *Britain and Germany: The Search for Agreement, 1931-1937*, London: Athlone Press, 1969, pp.25-32.

<sup>111</sup> André François-Poncet, French ambassador at Berlin, to Delbos, 24 August 1936. Meeting between Léon Blum and Hjalmar Schacht at the Hotel Matignon, 28 August 1936. DDF, 2nd series, vol. III, nos. 196, 213, pp. 275, 307-11.

<sup>112</sup> Glyn Stone “YVON DELBOS AND ANTHONY EDEN: ANGLO-FRENCH COOPERATION, 1936-38”

<sup>113</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 204

Paraphs, the British diplomats defined France as an obstacle to a Anglo – German Agreement, in fact, Germany and France had different views concerning the Franco – Anglo alliance, for Hitler, the pact mattered only the defence of the Western Europe, for the French government, the alliance was a vital point for the equilibrium of the Eastern Europe too. At the end, Chamberlain agreed with the German interpretation of the Anglo – French agreement, therefore the United Kingdom was ready to give concessions in the Central and Eastern Europe, as we will see later during the Munich Conference.<sup>114</sup> Moreover, the United Kingdom was expecting France to inform Czechoslovakia that Chamberlain was willing to give Sudetenland region to Hitler in order to appease him.<sup>115</sup>

We cannot say that Chautemps' foreign policy totally depended on the British's one; concerning the Spanish Civil War he was a strong supporter of the Valencia Government (which was the Spanish City in which the Republicans had instituted the Provisional Government), and continued the policy of relaxed non-intervention, for example he sent aircrafts to the Republicans in exchange of the transfer of Italian and German military equipment to France for examination. He opposed any British attempt for the Mediterranean Security with Italy in which there was not the involvement of the French Navy.<sup>116</sup>

### **The failure of the Western Pact**

At the end of 1936, United Kingdom and France were optimistic about a reopening of discussion between the European Powers to preserve peace; Hitler's domestic policy was, in the attempt of pursuit autarky, was leading Germany to food shortages and a lack of consent for the German Leader, therefore the two allies considered a new discussion possible taking into account the German's needs.

Paraphs, from the French point of view, even if an agreement with Hitler was still obtainable, it would have been more difficult to split the Rome – Berlin Axis.<sup>117</sup> Moreover, Blum's disagreed on under which conditions Hitler could be considered reliable for preventing war, according to the French Prime Minister, a non-

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<sup>114</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 211

<sup>115</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 212

<sup>116</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 213

<sup>117</sup> Martin Thomas, *Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 177

aggression pact covering German western and eastern frontiers was not enough, Germany should have started a plan of disarmament. On the other hand, however, Blum's pressure on disarmament was perceived by the French Eastern Allies (such as Czechoslovakia, Poland and the Soviet Union) as a sign of weakness, as France would have not been able to intervene in case of conflict, still, the French Prime Minister insisted on the importance of reducing armaments defining the owner of arms industries as “ 'merchants of death' whose business required close regulation”.<sup>118119</sup>

France hoped to use the “Little entente”, an alliance between Czechoslovakia, Romania and Yugoslavia, created to contrast a possible Hungarian revisionism after the end of the First World War and the end of the Augsburg's family, to create a second front against Germany. France hoped that thanks to this alliance that they had supported since its beginning, the role of the Soviet Union in case of war against Germany would have been marginalised, however it lacked the British support.<sup>120</sup> One of the most important critics came from Owen O'Malley, British diplomat who worked in the Foreign Office; on one of his comment he stated “*It is axiomatic that warm relations between France and the Little Entente entail cool relations between France and Italy. The French scheme would be certain to cause Italy to draw closer to Germany; and British support for it would prejudice the chances of improved relations between Italy and the U.K. . . . It is therefore to our interest to limit our interests in Central Europe as severely as possible.*”<sup>121122</sup>

In addition, the British Navy and the Foreign Office persuaded the Cabinet to not follow France in its project of Little Entente and to admit the United Kingdom withdrawal from the Eastern Policy. British agreement would have meant their support to French Strategy to encircle Germany and therefore a collapse of the Policy of Appeasement, a useless exposure of the Empire to not only Germany but Italy and Japan too and leading to a three powers divided Europe: the Western Democracies, the Fascist Central Power and the Communist Soviet Union.<sup>123</sup>

Another problem of the Little Entente was the lack of a proper Army, among the three states, only Czechoslovakia could rely on a trained e modern army, while Yugoslavia and Romania counted only on French

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<sup>118</sup>Sous direction de la société des nations, Lagarde, to Jamet, 9 June 1937; no. 4161, Cot to Daladier, 23 April 1937; Martin S. Alexander, 'A bas les marchands de canons! Efforts to control the private manufacture and trade in arms in France during the 1930s'

<sup>119</sup> Martin Thomas, Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 178

<sup>120</sup> Martin Thomas, Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 184

<sup>121</sup> PRO, FO 371/21136, R501/26/67, O'Malley minute, 25 Jan. 1937

<sup>122</sup> Martin Thomas, Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 188

<sup>123</sup> Martin Thomas, Britain, France and Appeasement: Anglo-French Relations in the Popular Front Era (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 1996), 189

promises of armed vehicles and weapons.<sup>124</sup> In addition, both countries did not enjoy good military relationships with France, their weak economies could not afford to stand the French requirements.<sup>125</sup>

If France increased its commitment to the Little Entente, it would have become a tripartite military alliance for the defence of Prague, however, France by adding a sequence of to the strengthening of this Alliance, confirmed international doubts on its standing to its obligation on the Eastern Front.

In fact, from the point of view of the Eastern Allies, France was declining the acceptance of a greater military commitment, Edvard Benes, the President of the Czech Republic commented: *"if Germany fell on Czechoslovakia and France did not come to her immediate aid, as well as [to] her partners in the Triple [Little] Entente, he [Benes] would have nothing left to do but go to Berlin and cry 'Kamerad.'"*<sup>126</sup>. On the 26<sup>th</sup> of March 1937, Italy and Yugoslavia signed a treaty of friendship, showing the failure of France in its Eastern Europe Policy; *"The pact was composed of an exchange of letters regarding the recognition of Albanian independence, declarations over co-operation in the treatment of political refugees and the Slovene minority, and a commercial agreement."*<sup>127 128</sup>

During one of the conferences of the Little Entente, Victor Antonescu, the Rumanian Foreign Minister admitted to his French counterpart, Adrien Thierry *that Yugoslavia had become so detached from her Little Entente partners that there remained a coalition 'in appearance only'.*<sup>129</sup>

The Yugoslavian foreign policy, which led to the rapprochement of the country towards Italy, was the end of the Little Entente, and probably one of the main why for which France did not support Czechoslovakia in the Munich Conference, as they agreed on the pursuit of the Policy of Appeasement giving the Sudetenland to Hitler.<sup>130</sup>

After a rapprochement between Germany and Romania, the Nazi Cabinet had the occasion of blaming France and Czechoslovakia for their attempt of undermining the policy of appeasement by introducing the Soviet Military strength in any settlement, thanks to this accusation, Berlin never re-joined the League of Nations and did not participate to any conversation of disarmament.<sup>131</sup>

In 1937, the Franco – Soviet Pact was more generally accepted by the United Kingdom, it is important to add that France was more open to this alliance than the British have had ever been towards Italy (remember the

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<sup>124</sup> Faucher, 'Rapport sur la puissance militaire de la tchécoslovaquie', 8 March 1937.

<sup>125</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 187

<sup>126</sup> Léger statement, 17 Jan. 1937; BDFA, II, F, 13, no. 125, Loraine to Eden, 3 Nov. 1937.

<sup>127</sup> Blondel to Delbos, 1 April 1937; Jordan, 'Léon Blum', pp. 60-1

<sup>128</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 189

<sup>129</sup> Papiers Cabinet Delbos/DI, 'Roumanie -- le gouvernement de Tatarescu', 13 April 1937; Regarding Antonescu's friends in France, see MAE, Roumanie 162, no. 128, d'Ormesson to Laval, 22 April 1935; for his comments to Thierry see CADN, Rome 519, no. 222, Thierry to Delbos, 31 March 1937

<sup>130</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 190

<sup>131</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 191

Easter Agreement between the United Kingdom and Italy in April 1938). In addition, the development of a military alliance between France and Poland in 1937 showed how the defensive strategy of France did not uniquely relied on the Soviet Union. More importantly, the agreement between the Poles and the French mainly concerned the Air Force, while France had the privilege of using Polish airfields, it would have sold its airplanes to Poland.<sup>132</sup> During the Spanish Civil War, the French government was not intended to discuss a deeper alliance with the Soviet Union considering the different views the two governments had concerning foreign intervention in the war. Moreover, according to French Diplomat, René Massigli, France would have reluctantly sent military aid to the eastern front, therefore, the agreement with Poland showed how important it was for France, that put it even above the Moscow – Paris Axis.<sup>133</sup> In fact, we can say that the Blum's government did little enough to keep the Franco – Soviet Pact intact, but the were far from a full military staff conversations. As also showed by the research of other Allies in the Eastern Europe.<sup>134</sup>

### **France in the Munich Peace Conference, the final step towards War**

After the fall of the Popular Front, with the end of the short second mandate of Leon Blum on April 1938, Daladier took his place presiding over the French Appeasement. Just before the Munich conference, France was recording several important strikes among engines and aircrafts industries that were slowing down rearmament, as the Popular Front had collapsed and France was governed by a National Government of Unity from the Left to the Right to solve the problem of the imminent war.<sup>135</sup> The new Minister of Foreign Affairs was Georges Bonnet, Daladier chose him for those reasons: *"I chose M. Bonnet as foreign minister.. because in 1932 he had presided over the Stresa conference on reconstruction of Central Europe and because when he had been appointed Ambassador to Washington by Leon Blum's government he had been able to gain the undoubted esteem of President Roosevelt, Sumner Welles, the assistant Secretary of State, and the political circles, as well as a fortunate influence over them."*<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>132</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 192

<sup>133</sup> Note pour le Ministre, 4 Nov. 1936; Nicole Jordan , ' "Maurice Gamelin, Italy and the Eastern Alliances"', JSS, 14, 4, 1991, pp. 435-6. Jordan suggests that the French military feared that reliance upon Czechoslovak and Soviet support might push the Poles into Germany's arms

<sup>134</sup> Martin Thomas. Pag. 196

<sup>135</sup> Butterworth, Susan Bindoff. "Daladier and the Munich Crisis: A Reappraisal." Journal of Contemporary History 9, no. 3 (1974): 191-216.

<sup>136</sup> 3 Letter written by Daladier to the president of the parliamentary commission of inquiry into the events that occurred in France between 1933 and 1945. Cit. Noguères, 45. The letter is dated 21 May 1951 but is annexed to the minutes of the meeting of 18 May 1951.

The choice of Bonnet as Minister of Foreign affairs was fundamental in the Munich Conference and on the road to war, according to his memories, he was so afraid of another conflict leading France to the policy of appeasement and renouncing to the alliance with Czechoslovakia. Like Daladier, they were in contrast of the treaty of Versailles and hoped to modify it. Both of them agreed that any major change had to take place according to international procedure, so that Germany would have been kept under control. As emerged during the Czech crisis, Bonnet was ready to accept any solution that would have not deteriorated the Franco – German relation.<sup>137</sup> For example, on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 1938, therefore even before the Munich Conference, without informing other officials at the French Foreign Minister, he instructed the French ambassador in Berlin, M. Francois-Poncet that he was ready to give up on the Sudetenland region; therefore destroying any bargaining position of the Prime Minister Daladier in the Conference that would have taken place the day after.

From the point of view of the French Right, the appeasement was the only way to prevent war and avoid a new victory of the left, France, at this point, depended on the United Kingdom's foreign policy, therefore any decision of Chamberlain concerning the Sudetenland region had to be accepted. In fact, in a travel in the 1939, Bonnet showed to the US government a series of secret documents sent by the United Kingdom to Paris in which they informed that they would have not supported France, if they went to war to defend Czechoslovakia.

Daladier stated several times that he would have defended the "Friendship between France and Czechoslovakia", and we can say that he was willing to take action, however there were two major doubts in his mind. Firstly, the French Army in 1938 was inferior to the German counterpart, the rearmament started in 1936 would have been ready only in 1940, the same was for the United Kingdom. Secondly, he was not so sure that Hitler was the real enemy against the European Peace, like the fascist states, the Soviet Union had intervened in the Spanish Civil War, and Stalin could be seen as a threat to the stability of the old Continent too.<sup>138</sup>

At the end, the situation of the Munich Conference was the following: United Kingdom needed France to make Czechoslovakia give the regions in which more than 50% of the population was German (which corresponded to the Sudetenland that, at the same time, was the most industrialised region), France needed the United Kingdom in case of war, they needed the support of the Expeditionary Force, the Royal Navy and of course the Royal Air Force. Therefore after the Munich Conference, the geopolitical equilibrium of Europe had changed, Germany was of course victorious, as they had gained new territories without any intervention,

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<sup>137</sup> Butterworth, Susan Bindoff. "Daladier and the Munich Crisis: A Reappraisal." *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 3 (1974): 191-216.

<sup>138</sup> Sbacchi, Alberto. "1938: An Appraisal of the Diplomacy of Appeasement." *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* 46, no. 4 (1979): 569-94

France had lost the support of a strong (probably the only well-armed country, together with the Soviet Union) ally in the Eastern Europe such as the Czechoslovakia but gaining the full support of the United Kingdom.

Germany, at the time was still not ready for a war, as discovered later during the Nuremberg Process thanks to secret documents, the Allies had overestimated Hitler's rearmament.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> Sbacchi, Alberto. "1938: An Appraisal of the Diplomacy of Appeasement." *Rivista Di Studi Politici Internazionali* 46, no. 4 (184) (1979): 569-94

## Conclusions

The Policy of appeasement has been a failing foreign policy adopted by the United Kingdom and applied by France too. France has major role in the failure of the Munich Conference and probably, the statement by Bonnet which erased the bargaining power of France and United Kingdom, has been the conclusion of a series of mistakes in the French Foreign Policy.

Those mistakes have been probably caused by the intention of the Popular Front to keep the United Kingdom as the main ally without understanding the spread of Pacifism among both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. France has had several occasions of new military alliances which would have guaranteed an advantage against Germany; such as the agreement with Italy that could result in a Military alliance. Thanks to this alliance, the two powers would have dominated the Mediterranean sea and encircled Germany since the beginning of Hitler's foreign policy or the Franco – Soviet Pact, a fundamental ally in the east that could guarantee to France the security of its borders considering the re-armament of the Soviet Union.

Those mistakes have probably been caused by mainly economic reasons, as we have seen, the United Kingdom and the United States were investing in France to make it recover from the financial crisis of the first years of the 1930's. Moreover, the political disorders have contributed to a worsening of the financial situation and in public order, such as the several strikes that hit France after the depreciation of the Franc. Even if the victory of the Popular Front was inevitable if we consider the French economic situation in the first years of the 1930's and the inefficiency of the several governments that succeeded until 1936.

Among the main mistakes of the Popular Front in the foreign policy, as previously stated, the most important was their dependency on the United Kingdom. France should have intervened before to prevent the Second World War. The Maginot Line was inadequate to the modern conflict, except from the direct border with Germany, France was not defending in the proper manner its border with Belgium, and the experience of the First World War should have been used as a teacher for it. We have to remember that Germany had attacked France through Belgium in the first conflict and the declaration of neutrality of Belgium should have been used as an excuse to increase protection in that region. While France continued to rely on the British expeditionary forces. Another factor that cannot be misunderstood was the French Secret Service's mistake of overestimating German forces. This factor was determinant during the Rhineland crisis, one of the main occasions in which Hitler could be stopped. Especially, a defeat in that event could have diminished the German consent on the Führer recreating a new equilibrium in Germany and therefore, preventing the Second World War.



## Abstract

La seconda metà degli anni Trenta del 900' fu contraddistinta dalla cosiddetta politica di appeasement, ovvero una politica di "riappacificazione" da parte di Francia e Regno Unito nei confronti di Germania e Italia. In particolare, questa tesi esplorerà la politica estera francese che nel corso di quegli anni fu dominata dal Front Populaire (Fronte Popolare), ovvero una coalizione tra il Partito Comunista, il Partito Socialista e il Partito Radicale Francese che nel Maggio del 1936 vinsero le elezioni cambiando radicalmente lo scacchiere geopolitico europeo.

La tesi, divisa in tre capitoli, analizzerà dapprima gli eventi che portarono alla vittoria del Fronte Popolare e successivamente tratterà dei principali episodi che possono essere ricollegati alla politica di appeasement.

Oggetto del primo capitolo è la crisi economica francese dei primi anni 30' ed il suo ruolo nelle future vicende politiche francesi infatti, mentre la maggioranza delle nazioni europee avevano subito risentito della grande crisi statunitense del 1929, nell'Esagono i suoi effetti arrivarono solamente due anni dopo, ovvero nel 1931 causando in Francia un periodo di svalutazione economica che, come vedremo nei capitoli successivi, ebbe un notevole impatto sulla politica estera francese. A causa di tale ritardo, Stati Uniti e Inghilterra ebbero modo e tempo di investire sul territorio francese, rendendo la Francia un paese dipendente da quello Britannico. La crisi fu, inoltre, uno dei principali motivi che portarono il Fronte Popolare alla vittoria nel 1936, poiché tra il 1931 e il 1935 tutte le politiche attuate dai numerosi governi non avevano portato i risultati sperati. Da ultimo la crisi fece ritardare il riarmo, costringendo la Francia a non intervenire in numerose occasioni nei confronti di una Germania sempre più offensiva.

Il primo capitolo illustra anche l'importanza del patto Franco – Sovietico, un accordo di reciproco aiuto in caso di attacco da parte di una nazione estera. Nel clima di conflittualità del tempo era infatti necessario stringere accordi per evitare le gravi conseguenze che l'assenza di una alleanza militare difensiva avrebbe provocato. Considerata la scarsità di alleati nell'est europeo la Francia, avvicinandosi alla Russia, avrebbe quindi beneficiato dell'aiuto di un forte alleato. Infatti, fino alla firma del Patto Franco-Sovietico poteva contare solamente sul supporto della Cecoslovacchia, l'unica nazione, insieme alla Russia, che nell'est europeo disponeva di un esercito moderno e adeguato per affrontare un conflitto. Il problema principale fu il veto posto dalla Gran Bretagna a un'alleanza Franco – Russa perché gli inglesi temevano una possibile espansione dei russi aiutati dai francesi piuttosto che un'azione dei tedeschi. Nel 1935, infatti, la Gran Bretagna aveva firmato con la Germania un accordo bilaterale sul tonnellaggio delle rispettive forze marine con lo scopo di controllare il riarmo e frenare così le mire espansionistiche tedesche. Tuttavia, nonostante gli accordi, la Germania era sempre più minacciosa. Nello stesso anno Hitler aveva reintrodotta il servizio di leva

e ricostruito l'aviazione, andando contro due dei fondamentali principi del trattato di Versailles, pronto a sfruttare la debolezza delle altre potenze europee. La mancanza di una forte alleanza tra Francia e Unione Sovietica, infatti, fu uno dei principali motivi che nell'agosto del 1939 avvicinò Stalin a Hitler. Russia e Germania firmarono un patto di non-aggressione, portando così di fatto all'inizio della Seconda guerra mondiale.

Il primo capitolo si conclude con l'analisi del Fronte Popolare, della sua vittoria nel maggio del 1936, con l'insediamento del primo Premier Socialista Leon Blum e i risultati economici ottenuti nel corso del suo governo. Come già detto in precedenza, il Fronte Popolare ebbe un notevole impatto sulla politica estera francese: obiettivo primario era un riavvicinamento con la Gran Bretagna, sebbene il partito comunista avrebbe preferito un accordo con l'Unione Sovietica. Le divisioni interne al raggruppamento tra i Comunisti, i Socialisti e i Radicali portarono a un susseguirsi di politiche di non intervento, diminuendo l'efficacia francese nella politica estera. Inoltre, uno dei problemi principali all'interno della coalizione fu una diffusa idea di pacifismo che aveva già colpito il parlamento inglese e che divideva anche la maggioranza del partito socialista francese; il pacifismo fu uno dei principali motivi che portò i paesi alleati a seguire una politica di appeasement.

Il secondo capitolo analizza tre crisi internazionali caratterizzate da una politica di non intervento da parte degli alleati: l'invasione italiana in Etiopia, il riarmo della Renania e la Guerra Civile Spagnola.

Le tre crisi analizzate rappresentano esempi concreti di come la politica di non intervento non sia indice di debolezza ma piuttosto di forza e di equilibrio. La politica di non intervento, infatti, è da considerarsi strettamente collegata alla politica di appeasement con la quale condivide il medesimo fine, ossia prevenire lo scoppio di una guerra a livello mondiale.

Durante la crisi dell'Abissinia, ad esempio, un intervento militare degli alleati avrebbe avuto conseguenze disastrose. La crisi, provocata dalla conquista coloniale fascista, rappresentava una grave provocazione e minaccia. Sia l'Italia che l'Etiopia, infatti, facevano parte della Società delle Nazioni e Mussolini aveva violato i trattati internazionali mettendo a repentaglio la pace e gli equilibri mondiali. Tuttavia, le reazioni furono diverse: l'Inghilterra decise di rispondere imponendo pesanti sanzioni nei confronti dell'Italia aspettandosi che anche la Francia l'avrebbe seguita; al contrario, la Francia si limitò a delle lievi sanzioni nella prospettiva di stringere accordi futuri. La Marina francese sperava di fatto in un'alleanza militare con l'Italia in modo da avere il dominio del Mediterraneo e allo stesso tempo accerchiare la crescente minaccia Nazista. Sebbene i primi colloqui avessero portato dei risultati positivi tra le ambasciate delle due nazioni, il veto inglese e soprattutto la salita al potere

del Fronte Popolare, bloccarono le trattative. Infine l'ipotesi di un accordo tramontò definitivamente quando l'Italia fascista si avvicinò alla Germania nazista e si creò l'Asse Roma – Berlino. La Vittoria del Fronte

Popolare aveva portato dei cambiamenti all'interno dello Stato Maggiore della Marina Francese, si passò da un atteggiamento che favoriva un'alleanza con l'Italia ad un ritorno all'alleanza con la Gran Bretagna.

Più particolare è invece il riarmo della Renania da parte di Adolf Hitler, in quanto la Francia fu coinvolta direttamente. Secondo i trattati della Pace di Versailles, la regione del Reno sarebbe dovuta rimanere disarmata in modo da prevenire un ulteriore conflitto. Tuttavia, sin dalla sua salita al potere, Hitler aveva disatteso le prescrizioni del Trattato, ad esempio nel 1935 aveva reintrodotta il Servizio di leva e l'aeronautica, iniziato il riarmo della Renania attraverso la creazione di corpi di Polizia – Militare e la costruzione di aeroporti nella regione. La Francia ne era a conoscenza, ma per prevenire lo scoppio di un conflitto e non potendo contare sul supporto britannico, aveva preferito non intervenire. Le condizioni difensive francesi, inoltre, a partire dal 1919, erano cambiate. Negli anni 30', lo stato maggiore francese aveva iniziato la costruzione di una linea difensiva lungo tutto il confine con l'Italia e la Germania: la linea Maginot. Grazie ad essa, la Francia poteva contare su una linea difensiva moderna in caso di un attacco diretto da parte della Germania, per questo il disarmo della Renania non era più fondamentale quando, nel marzo del 1936, Hitler rioccupò la regione con l'esercito. Un altro fattore che portò la Francia a un non intervento fu la crisi economica, il paese aveva iniziato a risollevarsi dopo le fallimentari politiche attuate tra il 1931 e il 1935, ma i soldi destinati al programma economico del Fronte Popolare erano stati reperiti tramite importanti tagli al riarmo, ciò indebolì l'esercito. Nel marzo del 36' ad esempio la Francia temeva uno scontro con la Germania, sebbene successivamente si scoprì che i generali nazisti avevano l'ordine di ritirata in caso di scontro con i Francesi, a causa della crisi economica e dei tagli alle spese militari, l'esercito francese non si sentiva pronto per un conflitto.

Più eclatante fu il non intervento da parte degli alleati durante la guerra civile spagnola. In particolare, è importante sottolineare il cambio di strategia da parte del di Leon Blum all'inizio della guerra civile, se inizialmente sembrava dover supportare la resistenza Repubblicana (considerando anche che in Spagna le elezioni erano state recentemente vinte da una coalizione simile a quella Francese), dopo una visita formale al governo inglese, decise di optare per il non intervento e per la creazione di un comitato internazionale insieme a Gran Bretagna, Italia e Germania che aveva come fine evitare lo scoppio di un conflitto che assumesse una dimensione più grande di quella del suolo spagnolo. La decisione del primo ministro francese prese alla sprovvista tutta la coalizione del Fronte Popolare ed ebbe profonde ripercussioni su di essa. Possiamo dire che il non intervento francese fu uno dei principali motivi che portarono allo scioglimento del Fronte Popolare, principalmente a causa dei

continui dibattiti sulla questione spagnola tra Socialisti e Comunisti. Mentre il partito di Blum sembrava essere propenso a un non intervento (poiché l'Inghilterra aveva reso noto che in caso di scoppio di un conflitto a causa dell'intervento francese, essa non sarebbe intervenuta in suo sostegno), il Partito Comunista voleva seguire la politica estera dell'Unione Sovietica che al contrario di Francia e Inghilterra, inviò supporto e mezzi militari ai Repubblicani per evitare la vittoria del Generale Franco sostenuto dalla Germania e dall'Italia.

Quest'ultime, infatti, sebbene facessero parte del comitato internazionale di non intervento, inviarono uomini e mezzi a favore delle truppe nazionaliste del Generale. Dal punto di vista strategico, la Francia sarebbe dovuta intervenire in modo da non ritrovarsi circondata militarmente da nazioni nemiche.

Quello che si evince dal secondo capitolo è l'influenza inglese nei confronti della politica estera francese. La Francia, specialmente sotto la guida del fronte popolare, non riuscì ad avere una politica estera indipendente che potesse rispondere alle esigenze dell'espansione tedesca. La mancanza di ulteriori alleati e la debolezza nei confronti della Germania fu evidente soprattutto nella conferenza di Monaco, ovvero l'ultimo tassello prima dell'inizio della Seconda Guerra mondiale.

Oggetto del terzo capitolo è lo sviluppo dell'intesa, non sempre perfetta, tra Inghilterra e Francia. In diverse occasioni, infatti, le relazioni tra i due paesi sono apparse critiche e i rapporti si sono deteriorati. Ciò accadde ad esempio nel 1935 con la firma del Patto Navale Anglo – Tedesco che deteriorò le relazioni tra i due alleati, anche se probabilmente la causa era imputabile più ad un'antipatia da parte dei ministri Inglesi nei confronti del primo ministro francese Pierre Laval che ad altre questioni. Anche il Patto Franco – Russo aumentò la distanza tra Parigi e Londra così come la crisi dell'Abissinia. Il non intervento francese nella questione Abissina e in particolar modo, il non infliggere delle sanzioni a Mussolini che comunque aveva violato i trattati della Società delle Nazioni, creò un disaccordo tra le due nazioni che ebbe molte ripercussioni, specialmente nella politica marina nel Mediterraneo. La fine del governo Laval e l'insediamento del Fronte Popolare, che aveva come principale obiettivo il ritorno a un'alleanza tra i due paesi, diminuirono il distacco e portarono ad un clima più disteso e collaborativo. Durante il governo di Chamberlain, l'Inghilterra decise di limitare il numero di truppe inglesi stanziato nel territorio francese, tornò a dialogare con la Francia e a rivalutarne la politica estera e in particolar modo intuì la necessità di un suo riarmo, poiché non poteva più contare sul supporto diretto inglese. Francia ed Inghilterra, ritrovata l'intesa, presero decisioni in comune che non sempre rispettavano gli accordi precedentemente presi singolarmente. Infatti, quando la Germania chiese la regione cecoslovacca dei Sudeti, la Francia non poté rispettare la parola data al governo cecoslovacco e in accordo con l'Inghilterra, nella Conferenza di Monaco non si oppose alla richiesta tedesca.

La conferenza di Monaco è l'ultimo passo prima dello scoppio della Seconda guerra mondiale, la Francia sacrificò la propria alleanza con la Cecoslovacchia per preservare l'intesa raggiunta con la Gran Bretagna. Il Gabinetto Inglese, infatti, aveva comunicato alla controparte francese che l'Inghilterra non sarebbe intervenuta in favore della Francia nel caso le trattative di Monaco fossero fallite. La Francia preferì non contraddire l'alleato inglese ed inoltre commise un errore. L'ambasciatore francese a Berlino, il giorno antecedente all'inizio della conferenza, svelò ad Hitler che la Francia non avrebbe mantenuto le proprie promesse fatte alla Cecoslovacchia. Questa azione limitò profondamente il potere decisionale degli alleati a Monaco, obbligandoli a cedere i territori dei Sudeti fondamentali per il riarmo tedesco data l'importante presenza di materie prime e di industrie belliche sul territorio.

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