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LOUIS BARTHOU AND THE GERMAN QUESTION : 1934

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Europe's statesmen, confronted by imminent changes in the balance of power attendant upon the stabilization of the Nazi régime in Germany, were conspicuously peripatetic in 1934. Among the outstanding journeys was the visit to France of King Alexander of Yugoslavia, which began and ended on October 9. It was noteworthy not for what was accomplished but for the fact that within a few minutes of his arrival in Marseille the King was assassinated.¹ Louis Barthou, the French Minister of Foreign Affairs who was with him was wounded at the same moment. The incompetence of the French police which facilitated the assassin's task was illustrated further by their neglect of Barthou who was left to find his way through the crowded streets by taxi to the hospital, where he promptly died from loss of blood.²

This tragic event naturally aroused shudders of apprehension in European diplomatic circles; indeed some feared that this was a repetition of Serajevo.³ To many, however, apart from the loss sustained by Yugoslavia, the most regrettable feature of this affair was the death of Barthou, whose singularly energetic course during the previous eight months had attracted widespread interest.⁴

On October 11, *Le Temps* asserted: "M. Barthou a établi au cours de ces huit derniers mois des bases solides sur lesquelles on peut construire utilement".⁵ Subsequently Arnold Toynbee would write: Barthou "was a man who had acquired the mental rigidity of age without having lost the animal spirits of youth . . . He contrived", during his term, "to make a mark upon international history which seemed likely to endure and likely to prove unfortunate".⁶ Clearly, Barthou, unlike some of his predecessors, had made an impact on French foreign policy but there was doubt about the value of his handiwork, doubt which was the product of differences of opinion over the nature and feasibility of his objectives.

¹ *Le Temps*, 11 October, 1934. For a discussion of the event see R. W. Seton-Watson, "King Alexander's Assassination: Its Background and Effects," *International Affairs*, XIV (1935), 20-41.

² *Le Temps*, 11 October, 1934.

³ The international repercussions of this affair are examined in *Survey of International Affairs*, 1934, 550-577.

⁴ Jean-Louis Barthou was appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs in the Doumergue ministry which was formed after the Paris riots of February 6, 1934. *Le Temps*, 11 February, 1934.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 11 October, 1934.

⁶ *S.I.A.*, 1934, 387.

To his admirers on *Le Temps* "M. Barthou assurait la continuité de la politique extérieure de la France . . . Bien loin d'être une tentative d'encerclement de quelque puissance que ce soit, cette politique tend à rendre acceptable pour tous une féconde collaboration de tous les pays dans l'esprit même de la Société des Nations".⁷ *The Manchester Guardian*, however, contended that Barthou sought to strengthen Europe's security by uniting the countries opposed to war. Germany alone, he believed, was not against war, hence any agreement with that country would be suicidal.⁸ The diplomat-journalist D'Ormesson insisted that his "fundamental desire, on the contrary, was to bring about an understanding with Germany". He "was dominated . . . to the point of obsession by this idea". The cardinal defect of M. Barthou's policy was its excessive optimism . . . The problem set for solution was . . . a veritable squaring of the circle".⁹ To put it bluntly: Was Louis Barthou's policy imbued with the nationalist spirit of Delcassé and Poincaré or did it foreshadow the spirit of appeasement?

Early in 1934 the Third Republic was in a state of great confusion — a condition vividly epitomized by the riots in Paris on February 6.¹⁰ The upshot of these dramatic events was the formation of a ministry of "national union", headed by ex-President Gaston Doumergue, "a vain and complacent antique".¹¹ With the aged prime minister was associated a remarkable collection of elderly figures including André Tardieu, Edouard Herriot, Marshal Henri Pétain, and Louis Barthou — in all no fewer than six former prime ministers.¹² But this presumably talented galaxy had little internal cohesion, a factor which, in conjunction with the conservatism of many of its members, seemed likely to militate against significant new departures in domestic or foreign affairs.¹³

Louis Barthou, who emerged from semi-retirement in the Senate to hold the portfolio of foreign affairs for the first time, was a sprightly politician of seventy-one. He had been a deputy and subsequently a senator without intermission since his election in 1889; in that long period he had served with Briand and Poincaré and had been prime minister in 1913.¹⁴ For him as for many, especially in France, politics

⁷ *Le Temps*, 11 October, 1934.

⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 30 November, 1934.

⁹ W. d'Ormesson, *France* (London, 1939), 120, 126, 127, 128.

¹⁰ On this event see M. Beloff, "The Sixth of February," in J. Joll (ed.), *The Decline of the Third Republic* (London, 1959), 9-35.

¹¹ The phrase is used in Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times* (Chicago, 1960), 476. Doumergue (1863-1937) had had an undistinguished presidency from 1924-1931.

¹² André Tardieu (1876-1945) was a prominent nationalist politician; E. Herriot (1872-1957) was the Radical Socialists' leader; L. Barthou (1862-1934) was the chairman of the centrist Union Démocratique et Radicale; Marshal Pétain (1856-1951) was a national hero, not a politician.

¹³ The internal difficulties of the government have been illuminated by E. Herriot, *Jadis: D'une guerre à l'autre, 1914-1936* (Paris, 1952), 382 ff.

¹⁴ *Le Temps*, 11 February, 1934.

seemingly had been enjoyable and not exhausting, for he retained remarkable physical and mental agility.¹⁵ But, youthful though his movements and his style were, his well-trimmed beard and his pince-nez were reminiscent of the pre-war generation of politicians to which he really belonged.

The crucial question is, however: what kind of man stood behind the amiably precise exterior and what were his real political convictions? Significantly, one of Poincaré's last acts was to compose an obituary for his former colleague. "Il est signalé par une intelligence des plus vives, par des conversations prudentes et habiles, par un sens très éveillé des grands intérêts français . . . par des discours brûlant de patriotisme."¹⁶ Similarly, Edouard Herriot has written: "J'aimais Barthou; on l'a beaucoup calomnié. Parfois son esprit blessait ou du moins piquait; il allumait de vives haines chez ceux qui ne savaient pas lui répondre. Il jouait avec les idées, avec les mots."¹⁷ Joseph Caillaux, once a friend and later an enemy, wrote of Barthou's "intelligence remarquable . . . infiniment déliée". But, Caillaux added, his "obsession mesquine du pouvoir lui interdit la haute politique, elle le condamne à . . . la politique alimentaire".¹⁸ *Le Temps*, in contrast, referred to his "extraordinaire aptitude à tout comprendre, à tout s'assimiler, à deviner tout . . . Il était l'homme des idées claires et distinctes".¹⁹

Here then was a man of more than ordinary ability, one who enjoyed playing with words and ideas, and who was sometimes careless of their effects. If he was not obsessed with power, he belonged evidently to the ranks of the "ministrables", those professional politicians whose complicated rituals made possible the survival of the Republic.

Even so it would be wrong to suppose that Barthou was without firm political principles. Raised in the great days of Gambetta, Ferry and Waldeck-Rousseau he remained "un homme de gauche décidé." "Il représentait à merveille cette petite bourgeoisie qui fait la force de notre pays . . . Il traverse la vie un démocrate imperturbable qui ne fut jamais effleuré d'aucun doute quant à la vertu du libéralisme politique et du suffrage universel." He had never succumbed, *Le Temps* insisted, to "rêveries internationalistes". Along with Poincaré and Doumergue, Barthou was "l'une des grandes forces du régime; il en représentait la sagesse, l'adaptation au réel, l'élément solide et la continuité". And "il fut surtout, avant tout, un patriote", a patriot who deserved to be remembered as

¹⁵ His travels as foreign minister are indicative of the former; his *Promenades autour de ma vie: lettres de la montagne* (1933), illustrate the latter.

¹⁶ Quoted in J. Chastenet, *Raymond Poincaré* (Paris, 1948), 289.

¹⁷ Herriot, *op. cit.*, 259.

¹⁸ J. Caillaux, *Mes mémoires, III: Clairvoyances et force d'âme dans les épreuves, 1912-1930* (Paris, 1947), 54-55.

¹⁹ *Le Temps*, 11 October, 1934.

the author of the three-year service law: "L'un de ceux auxquels, tout compte fait, la France a dû sa victoire".²⁰

Although this editorial verdict of *Le Temps* was doubtless excessively favourable to Barthou there is little reason to believe that he was not a staunch republican. His actions and his associations before 1934 indicated that he was as well a nationalist of the Poincaré school.²¹ Hence it was to be anticipated that he would pursue a firm, vigorous and traditional policy, but at the same time the quality of his mind was such that his approach was likely to be more subtle, and more flexible than that of his mentor, Poincaré.

The situation which the Doumergue ministry faced in 1934 was as critical on the international as on the domestic front. The essential problem dated at least from World War I and the peace settlement. The source of the war, the French believed, was Germany's drive for European hegemony; the war demonstrated that by herself France was no match for Germany.²² Their realization that the war had been won for them and their conviction that the Germans would resume their aggressive course whenever possible had led the French to press for a treaty by which Germany would be inhibited from developing its full diplomatic and military potential. But the French contended that they had not attained their objective at Versailles and thereafter tacitly admitted that it was really impossible of realization. Consequently French policy became a determined and sometimes frantic search for means of avoiding the inevitable, not, as so many believed, one of maintaining French hegemony on the continent for its own sake.

The establishment of the Nazi régime early in 1933 and its subsequent behaviour marked, in the eyes of the French, the reappearance of the German peril in a most dangerous guise. The reality behind the politics of fear so long pursued by France was now vividly apparent. What then was to be done? Should France admit progressively the shift in the balance of power sought by the Nazis, and all that would be entailed in that process; should it attempt to maintain the *status quo*, a course which would require foreign help and might require a preventive war against Germany; should France permit Germany to develop its potential power and rely upon a powerful combination of states to protect her integrity and that of the states dependent upon her?

We have no way of knowing, of course, whether Barthou and his advisers analysed their problem in precisely these terms. In so far,

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ For example, in 1919 Barthou argued that the Treaty of Versailles was a betrayal of the historic foreign policy of France. See E. R. Cameron, *Prologue to Appeasement: A Study in French Foreign Policy* (Washington, 1942), 63.

²² F. Fischer in his *Griffnach der Weltmacht; die Kriegzielpolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland, 1914-18* (Düsseldorf, 1962), has shown the remarkable extent of German aims during World War I.

however, as he groped towards one or other of these lines of policy, Barthou was bound to be influenced not only by his own past predilections and those of the Quai d'Orsay, but also by certain factors in the French situation. Certainly no substantial sector of opinion had accepted the idea of appeasing Germany.²³ The French mood was still peaceful, but systematic efforts were being made to arouse public opinion against negotiation with Germany, in part because informed persons thought the new German government was very unstable.²⁴ On the other hand, France's freedom of action was more circumscribed by its alliances and the Locarno treaties than was generally realized.²⁵ Above all, the French armed forces, so powerful and indeed so dangerous, as many thought, were, in General Weygand's view, "hors d'état de faire face victorieusement à une entreprise hostile à l'Allemagne".²⁶ Moreover, because of the structure of the French population their strength was bound to decline unless drastic policy changes were made.²⁷

Such, briefly, was the general context within which Barthou worked. To lay the foundations for an assessment of his real objectives I propose to examine his actions in two areas: disarmament, and the eastern alliances.

In January 1934, the Disarmament Conference was still in being, but a deadlock had been reached which was overshadowed by Germany's withdrawal from the Conference and the League of Nations. On January 29, in an effort to facilitate serious negotiations, the British government put forward a compromise plan by which Germany would be permitted to attain parity in arms with the European powers. To maintain security, provision was to be made for permanent and automatic supervision of arms levels and for consultation when and if infractions occurred. Moreover, the British note concluded, "the return of Germany to Geneva and to the League of Nations . . . ought to be an essential condition of agreement".²⁸ In effect the British proposal envisaged public recognition of Germany's breach of her treaty obligations, but did not include effective sanctions to keep Germany within the limits which she would attain presently, — limits which were to be reached partly by scaling down French armaments.

At its first cabinets, the Doumergue ministry examined the international situation, which Barthou described as almost as bad as July 1914.²⁹

²³ C. A. Micaud asserts in his *The French Right and Nazi Germany, 1933-1939: A Study of Public Opinion* (Durham, 1943), that the defeatist, pro-German attitude did not emerge until 1935.

²⁴ Great Britain, Foreign Office Library Photostat, *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, E430559-430565. News from Paris, 7 December, 1933.

²⁵ On the Locarno treaties especially see P.S. Wandycz, *France and Her Eastern Allies 1919-1925* (Minneapolis, 1962), 367-368.

²⁶ M. Weygand, *Mémoires: Mirages et réalité* (Paris, 1957), 422. At the time (May 1934) Weygand was head of the French Army.

²⁷ See below, p. 8.

²⁸ *Documents on International Affairs*, 1933, 372.

²⁹ Herriot, *op. cit.*, 384.

Marshal Pétain reported that Germany had 840,000 troops available and General Denain, the Air Minister, asserted that, with three months' preparation, Germany would have as effective an air force as France. Hence, the government agreed to reserve its position in the imminent negotiations concerning the British scheme.³⁰

Mr. Anthony Eden met Doumergue and Barthou for three hours on February 17 to discuss this question. At the outset, Eden claims, Barthou "made a speech at me, and a spiky one at that, but the talk became smoother at the close".³¹ Even so, the latter's first move was to stress the friendship and solidarity of France and Britain. "Liberty, he said, was safe so long as they were in agreement, but would be imperilled if they ceased to agree". Nevertheless the British Memorandum was unsatisfactory. "France would be disarmed in part and Germany rearmed in part" at a time when the latter was not free from the peace treaty. The French did not believe this was the time to reduce their forces in return for a consultation agreement. Yet, he was emphatic that "it was better to have a convention which really satisfied no one, but which created rights and obligations than to suffer failure... Without an understanding between France and Germany peace was precarious. The French Government had not taken up an immutable attitude".³²

Returning to Paris on March 1, Eden outlined to the French ministers the conditions and concessions which Germany proposed. Once again though, it was evident that, while the French had not wholly made up their minds, they were strongly opposed to any significant concessions. Barthou insisted that France "keenly desired" a settlement but stressed the alarming reports of German preparations and Parliament's determination to safeguard French security. Doumergue said bluntly: "In 1914... French effectives amounted to 675,000; ... in 1925 they were 439,000; ... in 1934 they were 300,000... This figure will shortly fall to 200,000 whereas the Germans proposed to have 800,000... Where was consultation to take place if France were suddenly invaded? ... They did not think that Herr Hitler's proposal would amount to equality of rights but to inferiority for France". "The real point was", Barthou concluded, "did the French government accept German rearmament? This was a question of security and national psychology... It was a very grave question upon which the Government as a whole could make a decision".³³ Interestingly, Doumergue then remarked privately to Eden "that while it might be possible to wink at German rearmament it was quite another thing to agree to it".³⁴

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 385-386.

³¹ Lord Avon, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (London, 1962), 58.

³² *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, Second Series, VI, 297, Tyrrell to Simon, 18 February, 1934.

³³ *Ibid.*, 324, Record of a Meeting Held in Paris... March 1, 1934.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 323, Tyrrell to Simon, March 1, 1934.

In any event, the French government was committed to produce a definitive answer to Eden's inquiries. This was presented at last on April 17, 1934. By their memorandum the French terminated the current negotiations and recommended that the Disarmament Conference resume its work.³⁵ Clearly, they were determined not to accept the legalization of German rearmament. But, much more significant and revealing than the note itself were their anguished deliberations on this question.

Initially the French, particularly Doumergue, gave the impression that they would not take up a wholly negative position. The latter stressed their desperate internal situation, his own poor health and the necessity of waiting upon the National Defence Council, in which, so the British believed, there was a division of opinion.³⁶ Privately, Barthou told his colleagues the problem was whether to accept "une convention comportant un contrôle ou refuser la légalisation du réarmement allemand à 300 mille hommes . . . Grave cas de conscience . . . J'ai choisi. Il faut répondre non à la proposition de la Grande Bretagne. Il faut refuser de légaliser le réarmement."³⁷

Nevertheless, the British Ambassador reported on March 21 that the French were divided, one faction believing that any convention would be injurious, the other that a limited agreement would be useful.³⁸ Early in April, Barthou seemingly was moving to the latter position. To Daladier he is alleged to have remarked: "C'est entendu, l'Allemagne aura une armée de 300,000 hommes. Croyez-vous que si nous n'acceptons pas l'accord, nous empêcherons l'Allemagne d'avoir cette armée . . . ? Ne serait-il pas également important que nous maintenions cette solidarité avec les alliés . . . ?"³⁹ To François-Poncet, who urged the merits of an agreement with Germany, he said: "You have finished by persuading me . . . You must say all this up there ! There is the man you must convince," i.e. Doumergue.⁴⁰

In the end, however, as the note indicated, Barthou apparently swung back to the view he had held earlier. What had happened ? What were his actual opinions ? On these points the evidence is somewhat imprecise. The American Ambassador reported that up to the last moment Barthou had fought for a positive reply, but he had then succumbed to pressure

³⁵ The French text is in *B.D.*, 2, VI, 395.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 337, Tyrrell to Simon, 8 March, 1934; 329, same to same, 5 March, 1934.

³⁷ Herriot, *op. cit.*, 398.

³⁸ *B.D.*, 2, VI, 359, Tyrrell to Simon, 21 March, 1934.

³⁹ *Les événements survenus en France de 1933 à 1945: Témoignages et documents recueillis par la commission d'enquête parlementaire* (Paris, 1951), I, 13.

⁴⁰ A. François-Poncet, *The Fateful Years: Memoirs of a French Ambassador in Berlin, 1931-1938* (New York, 1949), 124. See also Jules Laroche, *La Pologne de Pilsudski. Souvenirs d'une Ambassade, 1926-35* (Paris, 1953), 154.

and with Doumergue had drafted the statement of April 17.⁴¹ The fact was, the British Minister concluded, that Barthou "had underestimated . . . those elements in the Government such as M. Tardieu, M. Herriot and General Weygand which had long been opposed to . . . any convention which would bind France to renounce her liberty of action . . . and that M. Barthou, faced with the alternative of resigning or falling into line, had chosen the latter course rather than break up the National Government".⁴² That Tardieu, Herriot and Weygand particularly, took the lead here is clear. On the other hand, Herriot has asserted that Barthou said he had not been so "angoissé" in forty years. He continued: "Je suis étonné que Barthou ait pu paraître à François-Poncet partisan de cette convention . . . J'ai peine à croire que le Ministre . . . ait sacrifié sa propre pensée la veille du Conseil des Ministres décisif."⁴³

Evidently a genuine difference of opinion prevailed within the French ministry and among its advisers on the question of German rearmament.⁴⁴ It is entirely probable that Barthou at least came to sympathize with the partisans of some form of agreement, but at the same time he may well have regarded this simply as a tactical move, one that would constitute admission for a price of the existence of German arms, not approval of them.⁴⁵ In return he may have hoped to strengthen the Anglo-French relationship at no significant cost to France herself. But when he considered the other side of the case: the necessity of maintaining national unity, the acceleration of German rearmament, the accumulating evidence of German bad faith and unreliability, the continuing instability in that country, the probability that Britain would not promise adequate security and that, if promised, British resources were inadequate to provide it, he may not have needed to be pushed into acceptance of a hard line. This episode demonstrated the flexibility of his mind, not a defeatist attitude toward the German question. Barthou was neither a Poincaré nor a Laval; to the German Embassy in Paris at least he was beginning to resemble Delcassé.⁴⁶

Whether or not he wholly approved of it, the April 17 note concluded positively: "France must place in the forefront of her preoccupations the conditions of her own security."⁴⁷ Behind this, as Doumergue explained to the British Minister, was fear: fear of a Germany whose demands grew with each concession. But Germany was

⁴¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1934, I, 308, Straus to Secretary of State, 20 April, 1934. See also *B.D.*, 2, VI 426, Pattenon (Eden) to Simon, 15 May, 1934.

⁴² *B.D.*, 2, VI, 415, Campbell to Simon, 30 April, 1934.

⁴³ Herriot, *op. cit.*, 410.

⁴⁴ This was the verdict not only of British and American diplomats, but also of the German Embassy in Paris. *F.O. Photostat*, E430514-515, Forster to the Foreign Ministry, 11 May, 1934.

⁴⁵ This was Eden's position. See his minute, *B.D.*, 2, VI, 337, 11 March, 1934.

⁴⁶ *F.O. Photostat*, E430516, Forster to the Foreign Ministry, 11 May, 1934.

⁴⁷ *D.I.A.*, 1933, 382.

not yet at the peak of her strength; there was still time for France to look her own defences, a task which could be performed more effectively now that the French had a stronger conviction of their own strength.⁴⁸ Barthou, responding resiliently to this mood, which presumably fitted in with his own predilections and temperament, set about vigorously to repair and enlarge France's alliances.

The remaining months of Barthou's life were taken up almost exclusively with the erection of what appeared to be a grand alliance to guarantee the security of France. Once again, however, a closer inspection indicates that Barthou's plans were somewhat ambiguous in character. Was he seeking to encircle Germany so effectively that it would be deterred from aggression or defeated when it moved, or was it his intention to lay the foundations for the successful stabilization of Franco-German relations?

Barthou's alliance diplomacy breaks neatly into two overlapping phases — his visits to the smaller allies of France between April and June and the negotiations for the so-called Eastern Locarno between May and October. Ostensibly these activities were carefully correlated with each other and the rumours that they were to be followed by efforts to work out additional agreements confirmed the impression that the French government was working to a preconceived plan.⁴⁹ In reality though, the Polish visit had been projected by Barthou's predecessor Paul-Boncour, whereas the subsequent discussions with the Soviet Union were a new phase in a dialogue that had been in progress at least for some months.⁵⁰ Similarly Barthou's talks with the Czechs were in some measure a matter of courtesy, and his spectacular progress in Rumania had much to do with the latter's domestic situation.⁵¹

Naturally this argument must not be pressed too far; Barthou could easily have injected new objectives into diplomatic moves envisaged by others. The intriguing fact is that so little evidence exists to support such an interpretation of his much publicized trips to Warsaw and the Little Entente capitals. En route to the former city Barthou stopped in Berlin where he assured a German diplomat that there was still hope for an agreement between France and Germany and that to that end he had avoided a sharp tone in his communications.⁵² German sources also alleged that he sought from Poland united action on disarmament, Polish approval of the Franco-Soviet *rapprochement* and Polish support for

⁴⁸ *B.D.*, 2, VI, 415, Campbell to Simon, 30 April, 1934.

⁴⁹ The possibility of a Mediterranean pact was mentioned from time to time by the French.

⁵⁰ *Le Temps*, 20 April, 1934.

⁵¹ It was agreed that Barthou went to Prague simply because if he had not the Czechs would have been offended.

⁵² *F.O. Photostat*, HO14527, unsigned, incomplete note, 23 April, 1934. The writer had been asked to greet Barthou on his way through Berlin.

Austrian independence.⁵³ Other accounts of his visit indicate that he resisted Pilsudski's proposal for closer military collaboration, and that he made little progress on other issues.⁵⁴ In fact, France was obliged to admit that Poland was a great power not a satellite. *Le Populaire* thus was not wholly incorrect in its contention that the Franco-Polish pact had lost its positive content.⁵⁵

Leaving Poland, about which he would later remark sarcastically: "There are the great powers . . . and Poland. Poland we all know because we have been told so is a great power . . . a very, very, great power", Barthou proceeded to the more amiable environment of Prague.⁵⁶ Here, he stressed: "Nous avons le même idéal; un pacifique labeur a consacré entre nos peuples une amitié sans arrière-pensée qu'aucune image n'a jamais troublée".⁵⁷ Officially at any rate, the areas of discussion were Austria and disarmament, on which agreement was registered.⁵⁸ If the Czechs were asked to do more, no indication was given, except possibly the comment of the *Prager Press* that it would be unwise to form two hostile blocs in central Europe.⁵⁹ Perhaps indeed no pressure was necessary; perhaps the Czechs were sailing "their little ship so unconditionally in the wake of France" that their collaboration was assured under any circumstances.⁶⁰

Barthou's trips to Bucharest and Belgrade were made after the inception of the Eastern Pact negotiations, but ostensibly were not related to this subject.⁶¹ In each case, he appears to have had a somewhat different objective. The essential problem with Rumania as with Poland was to ensure the continuance of a pro-French bias in its policy. To this end Barthou and his hosts treated each other with effusive courtesy. The former spoke of the Little Entente as "un des facteurs essentiels de l'ordre constructif auquel l'Europe aspire."⁶² France, he said, sought the economic restoration of the Danubian basin; its motto was equality in solidarity. To the Rumanian parliament he affirmed dramatically that "anyone who touches an inch of her [Rumania's] soil will meet not only with the opposition of Roumania but with that of France, who is with your heart and soul . . . We stand together for peace and the well-

⁵³ *Ibid.*, E566392-393. Köster to the Foreign Ministry, 25 April, 1934.

⁵⁴ See Jean Szembek, *Journal, 1933-1939* (Paris, 1952), 3-7; J. Beck, *Dernier Rapport: Politique Polonaise, 1926-1939* (Neuchâtel, 1951), 58-60; Laroche, *op. cit.*, 155-162.

⁵⁵ *Le Populaire*, 26 April, 1934.

⁵⁶ This was said in Beck's presence at a dinner. Avon, *op. cit.*, 95. This visit took place during 26-27 April, 1934.

⁵⁷ *Le Temps*, 28 April, 1934.

⁵⁸ *The Times*, 28 April, 1934.

⁵⁹ Quoted in the *Manchester Guardian*, 30 April, 1934.

⁶⁰ *F.O. Photostat*, E566404-405, Political Report, German Embassy, Prague, 28 April, 1934.

⁶¹ These visits took place from 20 to 26 June, 1934.

⁶² *Le Temps*, 22 June, 1934.

earned rights which it has brought us".⁶³ After this resounding statement of anti-revisionism the Rumanian prime minister could say properly: "Everybody in Rumania knows that France's and Rumania's policies are identical."⁶⁴

In contrast, Barthou's talks in Belgrade took place in a more restrained atmosphere and the results were more ambiguous.⁶⁵ His design here was to secure a working relationship between Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and to improve Italian-Yugoslav relations. On both these specific questions significantly little progress was made.⁶⁶ The Yugoslavs pointedly affirmed their determination to remain friends with all states and their resistance to territorial revision.⁶⁷ It was apparent that they preferred "anschluss" for Austria, rather than the restoration of a Danubian monarchy as a counterpoise to German influence in south-eastern Europe. Not surprisingly, Barthou was said to be unimpressed with the results of his work.⁶⁸

On the whole, the available evidence suggests that Barthou's extensive discussions with France's eastern allies were designed in the first instance to review existing relationships and to eliminate a variety of sources of friction between France and her friends and between these states themselves. In the process, he was trying to clear the ground for the creation of new associations, as was indicated by the Little Entente's expressed willingness to take part in regional mutual assistance pacts.⁶⁹ But, either because he thought it inexpedient, unnecessary or undesirable, Barthou did not seek to foster an anti-German coalition consisting of France and her rather questionable friends in eastern Europe.

As has been noted, however, Barthou's pilgrimages to the lands of the Vistula and the Danube were partly concurrent with the negotiations for the so-called Eastern Locarno. The diplomatic background of this enterprise was singularly tortuous, as was its course. The question at issue here is not why this endeavour failed, but rather what Barthou hoped to achieve. Once again, one can make a plausible case for two distinct but related interpretations.

To some French politicians the political and military potential of the Soviet Union had long been a matter of interest, but for various

⁶³ *Daily Telegraph*, 22 June, 1934.

⁶⁴ *New York Times*, 23 June, 1934. See also *D.G.F.P.*, C, III, 41, Schulenberg to the Foreign Ministry, 27 June, 1934.

⁶⁵ *D.G.F.P.*, C, III, 39, Heeren to the Foreign Ministry, 27 June, 1934. The Embassy in Vienna sent in a detailed commentary on all these visits. *F.O. Photostat*, E566460-465, 27 June, 1934.

⁶⁶ *The Times*, 27 June, 1934.

⁶⁷ *F.O. Photostat*, E566462, 27 June, 1934.

⁶⁸ *New York Times*, 1 July, 1934.

⁶⁹ *The Times*, 25 June, 1934.

reasons, the two countries remained estranged.⁷⁰ In 1932, however, there were indications of a *rapprochement* and in 1933 the Soviet Union offered an alliance with France. This offer was unacceptable, particularly to the Quai d'Orsay.⁷¹ Barthou, who had been intimately concerned with the operation of the pre-war Franco-Russian alliance, did not rush to take up the threads of a new association. "Without appearing hostile", Herriot has said, he "looks around for delays or accepts them".⁷² Nevertheless on May 18 he met with Litvinov in Geneva and put forward a proposal for a mutual assistance pact including Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Germany and the Baltic states, the whole to be guaranteed by France.⁷³ Ten days later, at Geneva, Barthou endorsed Litvinov's emphasis on security: "Ce problème est à la base de toute la question du désarmement"; whilst he attacked the British disarmament policy ironically, insolently and passionately.⁷⁴ To his colleagues he said: "L'impression de mon discours a été forte . . . Pour l'Allemagne j'ai mis les pieds dans le plat." Yet, when he sought authority, which was given, to pursue the pact negotiations, "il demeure très réservé".⁷⁵

Whatever the source of Barthou's private doubts, the question which attracted general attention was the anomalous inclusion of Germany in the proposed eastern pact. Why should France link herself indirectly with a country with whom she had refused to negotiate an arms convention? Was the invitation to Germany merely for the record?

On his way to Moscow, Litvinov conferred with von Neurath and assured him that the design was for a European security pact, not a combination against Germany.⁷⁶ Simultaneously, Barthou was telling the British Ambassador that, if Germany co-operated, a settlement of the arms question might be feasible. The new scheme, the Ambassador gathered, was a part of the French effort to organize security before disarmament began and to do this in a way that would not antagonize Germany.⁷⁷ Apparently Barthou sought to convey the same impression in an animated interview with the German Ambassador in Paris. He emphasized that the plan was only a rough outline and that it had not been his intention to make it unattractive to Germany.⁷⁸

⁷⁰ For example, Herriot claims a France-Soviet alliance had been his "idée fixe depuis 1922". *Op. cit.*, 432.

⁷¹ For a general discussion of this question see W. E. Scott, *Alliance Against Hitler* (Durham, 1962), chapter 5.

⁷² Herriot, *op. cit.*, 401.

⁷³ Herriot, *op. cit.*, 432; *The Times*, 22 May, 1934; *B.D.*, 2, VI, 455, Clerk to Simon, 14 June, 1934.

⁷⁴ Herriot, *op. cit.*; 436. The latter words are a paraphrase of those used in A. C. Temperley, *The Whispering Gallery of Europe* (London, 1938), 265.

⁷⁵ Herriot, *op. cit.*, 438.

⁷⁶ *D.G.F.P.*, C, III, 504, von Neurath's memorandum, 13 June, 1934.

⁷⁷ *B.D.*, 2, VI, 454, Clerk to Simon, 14 June, 1934; 455, same to same, 14 June, 1934.

⁷⁸ *D.G.F.P.*, C, III, 4, Köster to the Foreign Ministry, 15 June, 1934.

Some days later, Secretary-General Léger, clearly speaking for Barthou, urged the British government to use its influence on behalf of the pact in Berlin, Warsaw and Rome. He "went on to assure me [Clerk] once more in the most solemn tones that the French Government was absolutely sincere in desiring the participation of Germany". It had taken France eight months to transform the original Russian scheme "into a plan in which Germany would participate on an equal footing with the other parties, a plan which would operate in her favour in the event of a Russian aggression..." But, if Germany would not join, France would go for a Russian alliance because she could not afford to refuse the use of "Russia's vast industrial resources" or to let them fall into Germany's hands.⁷⁹

While Léger was pressing the pact so fervently upon the British, Barthou had a remarkable interview with Ribbentrop. Once more he argued that he had not intended "to use hostile language" about Germany at Geneva. The eastern pact, he alleged, still existed only in vague outline. Then, "quite spontaneously", as they examined the disarmament issue, Barthou took hold of Ribbentrop's arms and proclaimed dramatically: "I, too, have the most ardent desire to achieve agreement with Germany". Ribbentrop's conclusion, for what it is worth, was that Barthou "is at present to some extent desirous of reaching understanding with Germany".⁸⁰ It is difficult, nonetheless, to reconcile this with Barthou's public statement a few days later that "les paroles du chancelier Hitler sont des paroles de paix et que son activité est une activité de guerre".⁸¹

When he set out on his visit to London, July 9-10, Barthou may have been convinced that recent events in Germany had made these words prophetic.⁸² In any event there was a subtle hardening of his tone in London. His first move was to explain the origins of the proposed eastern pact. "The French Government", he affirmed, "were seeking peace" and in dealing with Russia "considered that they must take guarantees of peace where they could find them". Considering the crucial nature of the problem he hoped that Britain would persuade Germany and Poland to accept the suggested arrangement. If either of these countries failed to agree "no one could say what might yet happen", as for example a Franco-Russian alliance. Moreover, Léger noted, France had had to refuse the Soviet Government six things, one of them being "any agreement which did not include Germany". Sir John Simon then raised two questions: the extent of reciprocity envisaged in the pact between France, Germany and the Soviet Union, and secondly the relationship

⁷⁹ *B.D.*, 2, VI, 465, Clerk to Simon, 21 June, 1934.

⁸⁰ *D.G.F.P.*, C, III, 31, Frohwein to Schonheinz, 23 June, 1934.

⁸¹ *Le Temps*, 26 June, 1934.

⁸² Barthou was invited to London by Ramsay Macdonald. *Manchester Guardian*, 7 July, 1934; *D.G.F.P.*, C, III, 101, Köster to the Foreign Ministry, 20 July, 1934.

between Germany rearmament and the pact. Barthou quickly agreed that "if Germany wanted to participate in the proposed arrangements and asked for a French guarantee against Russia, France would give it". But "he did not think that rearmament of Germany could be made a condition preliminary to the proposed Eastern Locarno... If these regional pacts brought new security to Europe then the question of German rearmament should be re-examined". France "was not aiming at the encirclement of Germany. If the French *desiderata* in this matter were achieved it would be possible to consider with more hope disarmament and also the rearmament of Germany". Hence it was agreed that if the pact were signed with German participation this "would afford the best ground... for the conclusion of a convention" providing "for a reasonable application of the principle of German equality..."⁸³

Outwardly, Barthou still sought Germany's inclusion in the Eastern Locarno, but it could hardly be said that his attitude was enthusiastic. Yet on his return *Le Temps* stressed that French policy excluded the isolation and the encirclement of any power.⁸⁴ Three days later, speaking at Bayonne, Barthou asserted: "Notre politique... consiste essentiellement dans la recherche de la paix". But, disarmament should not precede the conclusion of a regional pact: "Que des négociations puissent s'ouvrir comme une conséquence à la réalisation des pactes régionaux, oui, mais qu'elles puissent s'engager comme une condition à ces pactes régionaux, je dis nettement: non!" He concluded: "Je n'ai donc rien abdiqué, ni des intérêts de la France ni de ceux de la paix."⁸⁵

The harder line which most observers detected in this oration was in evidence when Barthou examined the pact with the German Ambassador. The latter noted at the outset that Germany was astonished at not having received an authentic draft from France, but the Minister made no excuse. Rather he pointed out that "he could not agree to negotiations on the Eastern Pact being conducted parallel with negotiations for the recognition of equality of rights. France could only go into this question when the security she desired had been attained". Moreover, "present conditions in Germany were too uncertain for entering into any undertakings with us regarding disarmament". "It struck me", Köster concluded, "that the Foreign Minister... was much less aggressive and did not show the usual enthusiasm for his ideas."⁸⁶

On August 20, the French finally transmitted the original draft of the pact to the German Foreign Ministry, with the curious apology that "the French Government had particularly avoided a text because it

⁸³ *B.D.*, 2, VI, 488, 489, Record of Anglo-French meetings, 9-10, July, 1934.

⁸⁴ *Le Temps*, 12 July, 1934.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 17 July, 1934.

⁸⁶ *D.G.F.P.*, C, III, 101, Köster to the Foreign Ministry, 20 July, 1934.

hoped that the German Government would come in on an equal footing and collaborate in its preparation".⁸⁷ Even more striking was the fact that the reciprocity clause in this document was not framed in accordance with the Anglo-French understanding. Rather "there would be nothing against extending to the benefit of Germany... the guarantees herein provided, whether for the benefit of France or of Russia".⁸⁸

In reality, by August 1934 Barthou no longer seriously sought or expected German participation in the Eastern Locarno. As *Le Temps* pointed out on August 1: "Since the assassination of Chancellor Dollfuss a great change has taken place... No longer will anyone think of tolerating that she [Germany] carry across her frontiers, by force or by ruse an ideology of which the least one can say is that she is today the only country able to live with it".⁸⁹ To his future biographer, Wilhelm Herzog, Barthou exclaimed: "How can I be blind... to the monstrosities which are taking place before our eyes in Germany? The triumph of organized force, the biologically based brutality, the racial delusion, the persecution of the Jews, the intellectuals, the socialists and democrats".⁹⁰ Later, after Hitler had succeeded Hindenburg, he remarked to Ambassador Straus: "The situation in Germany had grown definitely worse but... was clearer, the assumption of supreme power by Hitler making it certain to the world that no one could count on Germany's peaceful intentions or honest purpose".⁹¹

Although the Eastern Pact lingered long after its virtual rejection by Germany in September 1934, enough has been said to make possible an answer to the question originally posed.⁹² My conclusion is that initially Barthou probably did seek honestly the inclusion of Germany in this scheme. It is improbable, to say the least, that his colleagues and he would have taken so much trouble on this score simply as a form of window-dressing. More importantly, there were good reasons for attempting to secure Germany's acceptance. Confronted as the French were with the constant danger of a Soviet-German understanding it would have made sense to have the two in one grouping under French patronage. Secondly Barthou may have regarded this as a last test of Germany's intentions. Above all, I think he seriously believed that once a series of pacts had been made it would be possible to deal with German rearmament. Action on this score would, after all, have deprived Germany of a valuable propaganda weapon; it would have improved Franco-

⁸⁷ The words are Léger's. *B.D.*, 2, VI, 534, Clerk to Simon, 26 July, 1934. For the draft see, *D.G.F.P.*, C. III, 171, François-Poncet to the State Secretary, 20 August, 1934.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, Treaty of Regional Assistance.

⁸⁹ *Le Temps*, 1 August, 1934.

⁹⁰ Quoted in W. Herzog, *Barthou* (Zurich, 1938), 94-95.

⁹¹ *F.R.U.S.*, 1934, I, 1183, Straus to the Secretary of State, 4 September, 1934.

⁹² See the German memorandum, *D.G.F.P.*, C, III, 200, 8 September, 1934.

British relations; and it would have given France greater freedom of action and possibly greater security.

But, if Barthou was sincere though presumably sceptical in his initial approach to the German government, evidently his views changed in the summer of 1934. The events of these months beginning with the June 30 massacre surely confirmed Barthou's earlier suspicions about the new Germany. This is not to say that he would not have accepted German adherence to the Eastern Locarno, but rather from that point onward the French were mainly going through the motions on this score. Security could now be procured only without Germany, not with her reluctant and dubious participation.

After this close look at Louis Barthou in action one can return properly to the larger question posed at the outset. Any answer to this must be provisional, because of the limitations of the material and the evident deviousness of Barthou's course. One could argue too, that, for such a short period, it is incorrect to speak of Barthou's objectives. Could it not be said that he was merely the façade behind which functioned the military leaders, the ministry, and key figures such as Alexis Léger at the Quai d'Orsay? Obviously this was the case to some degree, but equally clearly Barthou imparted, if only temporarily, a distinctive quality to French foreign policy. The essence of this contribution was, I suspect, more subtle than has been supposed. His approach to the German question, the fundamental issue in French policy, did not partake of Poincaré's inflexible adherence to the *status quo*. On the other hand he did not believe, as Briand seemingly did, that the Germans could be conjured into accepting their post-war status, nor did he conceive that, if some German demands were granted, the two countries could live together harmoniously. Rather, as some German diplomats perceived, his was a realistic frame of mind, one largely unmoved by ideological considerations, and concerned with building up a position of strength and safety for France. He did seek an understanding with Germany, but with little expectation of success and for the express purpose of modifying the *status quo* in such a way that French security would be enhanced. To say that he was obsessed with this problem would be nonetheless inaccurate. It was Barthou's very freedom from obsession which made him a great foreign minister; it was this quality which led him to envisage (as I am sure he must have) the day when a powerful Germany and a weaker France would live together within the context of the fruitful collaboration of the European states. Undoubtedly this was an optimistic view for a man of his generation; the other practicable alternative, as our generation has discovered, is the partition of Germany.