The Rhineland Crisis

The Treaty of Versailles forced Germany to take full blame for the war and to pay huge reparations to the victors that crippled the German economy. The treaty also placed strict limitations on German military power. The German army could have no more than 100,000 troops, its navy was limited to a 36-vessel coastal defense force, and it was not allowed to possess tanks, submarines, battleships, or aircraft. Under the treaty, Germany lost 13 % of its national territory to France and Poland. In addition, the German coalmining region of Saar was put under the control of the League of Nations. Finally, to address French demands for a buffer zone to protect itself from future German aggression, the treaty included a provision demilitarizing the German Rhineland region: No German troops or fortifications were ever to be placed there. The Rhineland contained 18.5% of Germany's land and 24% of its population.

Hitler first defied the treaty in 1935 when he announced German re-armament and introduced a military draft to build up the army. Then, on March 7, 1936, thousands of German troops entered the demilitarized Rhineland zone. On the same day, Hitler stated that he was willing to re-join the League of Nations and wanted to negotiate with France and Belgium over the status of the Rhineland. He also offered non-aggression pacts to France and Belgium. Hitler explained that placing German troops in the Rhineland was a necessary act of self-defense because of the 1935 Franco-Soviet treaty. In this agreement, France agreed to aid the Soviets if they were attacked by the Germans.

As German troops marched into the Rhineland, France was in the midst of elections and without stable leadership. Despite this internal political turmoil, the French immediately sent thousands of troops to the German border. "All over Europe statesmen met to talk over the situation. Telephone and telegraph wires and cables flashed diplomatic dispatches. Diplomatic couriers were started on a race through Europe by train, motor car and airplane (The Cleveland Press, March 7, 1936)."

Decision Point: How should your nation respond to Germany's actions?

Relative Military & Economic Strengths: 1936

	Military	Economic (% Change)			
	Army Divisions (10,000/div.)	1929-32		1932-37	
		GDP	Indus. Prod.	GDP	Indus. Prod.
Britain	2	-5.8	-11.4	25.7	52.9
France	53	-11.0	-25.6	7.9	20.0
Czech.	**na** *	-18.2	-26.5	20.3	51.5
USSR	**na**	6.9	66.7	146.7	59.3
Germany	10-12**	-15.7	-40.8	67.5	122.2
USA	na	-28.0	-44.7	46.6	86.8

* na = Information not available

**Germany was limited to 10 divisions by the Treaty of Versailles but had been rearming and also had paramilitary SS and SA troops.