

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF THE
CHAMBERLAIN WARTIME
ADMINISTRATION,
SEPTEMBER 1939 - MAY 1940

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a detailed analysis of British foreign policy between 3 September 1939 and 10 May 1940. It concentrates on policy towards the Far East, Italy, the Soviet Union, the Balkans, and Scandinavia. These areas represented the biggest challenges to British policy following the outbreak of war with Germany: Japan and Italy, whilst nominal allies of Germany, had opted to stay out of the war, the Soviet Union appeared to be acting in collaboration with Germany but was not at war with Britain, and the Balkans and Scandinavia were the most likely theatres of war if the conflict were to spread. Lack of resources dictated that British efforts be directed towards minimising military activity and containing the conflict, whilst putting economic pressure on Germany's ability to fight. Potential allies of Germany had to be dissuaded from entering the war and prevented from helping Germany economically. Potential theatres of war had to be kept neutral unless or until an extension of hostilities would be in Britain's interests. The contradictions and conflicts of interest created by these policies posed serious problems, and it is the British attempts to solve these problems which form the focus of this study.

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1. INTRODUCTION
THE CHAMBERLAIN WARTIME ADMINISTRATION
AND THE PHONEY WAR

Karl von Clausewitz famously described war as ‘nothing but the continuation of politics with the admixture of other means’.¹ With this in mind, it might be argued that the so-called ‘Phoney War’ (3 September 1939 to 10 May 1940) was simply the continuation of politics *without* the ‘admixture of other means’. Also known as the ‘Bore War’, the ‘Twilight War’ and the ‘Sitzkrieg’, the period suffers from something of an image problem, especially when contrasted with the dramatic events of the months and years that followed it. This condescension seems unfair. By any standards, it contains much that is of interest to the historian, and it is largely hindsight - the knowledge of what happened next - which has consigned the ‘Phoney War’ to the margins of history. Conventionally it is either tacked on to the end of studies of the 1930s and ‘appeasement’,² or else it is treated as an aperitif - a preliminary to the ‘real’ conflict, which is usually seen as beginning with the German Western offensive of May 1940 (or even, for some U.S. historians, with the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941). Rarely is it treated as a separate and distinct period of history - and yet, as will be shown, it certainly merits such scrutiny.³ The biggest challenge of writing this study was not deciding what could be put in, but rather choosing what to leave out.

¹ Quoted in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* Second Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981) p. 73. The quotation comes from *Vom Kriege* (On War).

² See, for example, M. Cowling *The Impact of Hitler* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) and W. Murray *The Change in the European Balance of Power, 1936 - 1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

³ The only exceptions to this, at least as far as full-length studies are concerned, are T. Munch-Peterson *The Strategy of Phoney War* (Stockholm: Militärhistoriska Förlaget, 1981); the rather whimsical E. S. Turner *The Phoney War on the Home Front* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1961), and, to a certain extent, R. Douglas *The Advent of War 1939 - 1940* (London: Macmillan, 1978). Sir Llewellyn Woodward *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War Volume 1* (London: H.M.S.O., 1970) is the standard account of British foreign policy in this period, based on the Foreign Office archives, but it can be rather heavy going.

The focus of the work is the impact which the war against Germany had upon British foreign policy. Lest it appear that in the chapters that follow that Germany was anything other than central in this period, it is worth stating here that winning the war against Germany was the number one priority of the British Government during the Phoney War. However, the pursuit of this aim had inevitable and significant consequences on British policy towards nations as yet uninvolved in the war, and it is these which this study seeks to identify and explain. At the heart of the study is an analysis of British policy in five key areas: the Far East, Italy, the Soviet Union, the Balkans, and Scandinavia. This might appear at first glance to be a slightly arbitrary selection, but on closer examination it should become clear why these areas were chosen. They represent the main arenas in which British foreign policy was challenged during the early months of the Second World War. It might be objected that, in addition to Germany, two crucial countries are missing from this list: the United States and France. This is partly the product of limited space - there are interesting observations to be made about both - and partly the result of the existence of reasonably full accounts of British policy towards these countries during this period.⁴ However, neither will be ignored or overlooked. The United States played a central role in the formulation of British policy in the Far East, and this is reflected in that section. France, as Britain's ally, inevitably made her presence felt in most of the key policy decisions taken by the British, and the centrality of French opinion to British policy will also quickly become apparent. Indeed, the French influence on British policy in Europe is closely analogous to that of the United States on

⁴ For Anglo-French relations see E. M. Gates *The End of the Affair* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981) and M. Dockrill 'The Foreign Office and France during the Phoney War, September 1939 - May 1940' in M. Dockrill and B. McKercher (eds.) *Diplomacy and World Power - Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890 - 1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For Anglo-American relations see W. R. Rock *Chamberlain and Roosevelt. British Foreign Policy and the United States 1937-40* (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1988), D. Reynolds *The Creation of the Anglo-American Alliance 1937-1941* (London: Europa Publications, 1981), N. J. Cull *Selling War: the British Propaganda campaign against American 'neutrality' in World War II* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) and D. Reynolds 'Lord Lothian and Anglo-American Relations, 1939 - 1940' *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* Volume 73, Part 2, 1983.

British policy in the Far East. This serves to illustrate one of the central contentions of this thesis - that foreign policy does not, and cannot, operate in a vacuum, and that countries both influence, and are influenced by, the foreign policies of their fellow states. British foreign policy, therefore, was not played out with a free hand, and it is as much the restrictions on the policy as the policy itself which this study sets out to examine.

Japan and Italy provide a fascinating insight into these restrictions. Pre-war, it was fully expected that both countries would line up as opponents to Britain and France in any future conflict. Indeed, during the 1920s, Japan had been regarded as the number one potential enemy of the British Empire, and British defence policy in the decade following the end of the First World War had largely been geared towards meeting the dangers posed by a hostile and expansionist Japan. We know, with hindsight, and that both Italy and Japan threw in their lot with Germany as the Second World War progressed. This knowledge tends, consciously or unconsciously, to taint historical accounts of their role during the 'Phoney War', when neither country was active as a belligerent. Their intervention on the German side is often regarded as inevitable, and they are treated accordingly. British policy towards them is routinely condemned on the same basis. As will be shown, however, the participation of Japan and Italy in the war on the side of Germany was not, and could not be regarded as, a foregone conclusion in the period September 1939 to May 1940. It was by no means certain that either would enter the war, or indeed, if they did so, which side they would enter on. Fantastic though it may seem now, both Italy and Japan were seriously regarded as potential future allies of Britain and France during the early months of the Second World War. British policy towards them needs to be seen in this context.

The Soviet Union was almost exactly the reverse of Italy and Japan: at the outset of hostilities, and increasingly as events progressed, she was regarded as a potential enemy of

Britain, and serious consideration was given to taking action which would almost inevitably result in a state of war between Britain and Russia. The Nazi-Soviet Pact of August 1939, and subsequent developments in Poland and Finland, served to create the impression that the Soviet Union, for its own reasons, had decided to act in concert with Germany. The idea of Britain and the Soviet Union becoming allies in the fight against Germany would have seemed as preposterous then as the idea of Italy and Japan siding with Britain and France appears now. This shows the importance of putting aside our knowledge of what happened next, for without doing so it is impossible properly to understand the situation which existed during the first eight months of the Second World War.

The Balkans and Scandinavia are of interest because of their part in the strategy of the Phoney War. The Balkans were fully expected to become a major theatre of war: Germany, Italy, and the Soviet Union all had designs upon this notoriously unstable corner of Europe, and British diplomacy therefore worked hard to keep the area neutral as long as possible, whilst simultaneously preparing the ground for possible future operations in the area. The cornerstone of British strategy here was the conclusion of an agreement with Turkey, and the drawing together of the main Balkan powers into a defensive bloc which would offer some prospect of resisting any attempted penetration into the area. Scandinavia, lying at the opposite corner of Europe, seemed much less likely to play a significant part in the conflict, and yet was destined to become the key battleground of the Phoney War period. Her importance was not so much geographical as economic, but economic factors assumed a dominant role in war strategy when, following the rapid fall of Poland, military activity came to a virtual stand-still. The Russian invasion of Finland, and the British determination to starve Germany of Swedish iron ore, led to an increasing preoccupation with Scandinavia

which ended in humiliation for the Allies, and ultimately brought down the government of Neville Chamberlain.

What is really interesting, however, is how the events in different parts of the world affected each other. It is this interlinkage which really draws the study together. Rather than presenting a series of self-contained accounts of British policy in each area, it will be shown that foreign policy, in order to be understood fully, needs to be seen in its entirety. In fighting a war against Germany, Britain needed to pay serious attention to Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union. Anglo-Italian relations affected, and were affected by, the situation in the Balkans, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, and North Africa. Anglo-Japanese relations impacted upon British policy in East Asia and the Pacific - which was also an area in which the United States had more than a passing interest. Anglo-Russian relations brought into play Scandinavia, the Balkans, Central Europe, the Middle East, India, and parts of East Asia. These concerns were in addition to the need to counter actual or potential German action throughout Europe and in the Atlantic. A large part of the globe was thus drawn into British calculations of how to fight the war. But there was more to it than that. Britain's military and economic resources in 1939 severely circumscribed the range of action available to her in the prosecution of the war. On the one hand, this meant that she was heavily reliant upon the willingness of other nations, in particular the United States, to provide her with essential supplies. This meant that the war had to be conducted with one eye always on the world, and especially the American, reaction to any measure which might be taken. On the other hand, the limited resources imposed severe restrictions on Britain's ability to wage war in several different parts of the world at the same time. This dilemma is best illustrated by the cases of Italy and Japan: Britain's naval strength in September 1939 was such that it was only possible to fight one country or the other - not both. A fleet could be massed in the Mediterranean, or sent to Singapore, but

resources did not allow for the adequate provision of ships in both theatres. If Britain were to go to war with Italy, therefore, it was essential not to go to war with Japan at the same time, and vice versa. In view of this fact, it made sense to stay on friendly terms with both, ideally, or failing that with at least one of them. The only way round this problem was to increase the available resources by bringing another country into the war on the Allied side. If Japan became hostile, for example, the United States would make a valuable ally. This was yet another contingency for which British diplomacy might attempt to smooth the way.

It cannot be stressed too heavily that during the early months of the Second World War the future course of the conflict was impossible to predict. The fall of France, the entry of Italy, the German attack on the Soviet Union, the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor - all of these defining events remained unforeseen. Judging Britain's Phoney War policy in the light of these future developments therefore seems absurd, and yet it is precisely this approach which many historians have taken. To understand the Phoney War, it is vital to see it in its own context, not through the filter of what happened afterwards. Had Chamberlain and his colleagues been able to see into the future, they might well have acted differently, but to condemn them for their lack of clairvoyance seems a little harsh. The myth of *Guilty Men*, a work fuelled largely by hindsight and personal animosity, has been a long time dying, but in the interests of historical accuracy it should now be laid to rest.

Because of the way this study is laid out, it is necessary to provide, by way of introduction, some background information on the events of the Phoney War. Let us, therefore, go back to the fateful days of early September 1939. After a long struggle to keep Britain safe from the threat of another disastrous European war, Neville Chamberlain, the British Prime Minister, bowed to the inevitable. The German invasion of Poland, launched at dawn on 1 September, set in train the events which led to the British and French declarations

of war on Germany, issued on 3 September. Once it had become clear that neither threats or persuasion would induce Hitler to withdraw his troops, there was really nothing else that Chamberlain could do. Haggles with the French over the timing of an ultimatum to Germany gave the appearance of indecision amongst the British leadership; this was unfortunate, because it seems clear that Chamberlain had made up his mind that war could not be avoided, and had already begun to take steps towards setting up the machinery for running it. At 3.45 p.m. on 23 August he had spoken with Lord Hankey, who had first hand experience of wartime command structures, having held the post of War Cabinet Secretary during the First World War, and had even written a book on the subject. What Chamberlain sought specifically was guidance on the creation of an executive body of ministers responsible for the running of the war. Hankey, who noted that Chamberlain seemed ‘a good deal worried at the situation’, proceeded to deliver ‘a pretty full description of Lloyd George’s War Cabinet’. They also discussed personnel for such a body, Chamberlain asking specifically for Hankey’s views on the inclusion of Winston Churchill and even Lloyd George himself (with whom Chamberlain shared a mutual resentment bordering on hatred). ‘He hinted’, Hankey recorded soon afterwards, ‘that he would like to keep Sam Hoare out’.⁵ The day after their talk, Hankey set down on paper the main points which he had made to the Prime Minister, and sent them to Sir Horace Wilson, Chamberlain’s much-maligned *eminence grise*, at 10 Downing Street. ‘The object’, he wrote, ‘is to ensure that there is a body of Cabinet Ministers free to give their whole time and energy to the Central Problems of the war’. In the covering letter, he added ‘I attach more importance to the human element, teamwork, goodwill etc. than to the actual machinery, and realise that the machine must be adaptable to the personnel working it’.⁶

⁵ Hankey Papers HNKY 1/7 (Diary 1939) Entry for 23/8/39.

⁶ PREM 1/384 Hankey to Sir Horace Wilson, 24/8/39, enclosing a paper entitled ‘A War Cabinet’.

Chamberlain seems to have taken Hankey's advice to heart. In the days immediately preceding the outbreak of hostilities, he proceeded to sound out potential members of a War Cabinet. His thinking on the composition of this body is now revealed by a document, not previously remarked upon by historians, in Chamberlain's private papers. This slip of paper, undated but clearly from the days before the outbreak of war, lists Chamberlain's choice not only of War Cabinet members, but of all the ministers in his administration. His known desire to get the Labour Party to participate in the government, albeit as a very junior partner, is shown more fully than before by a list of 'Possible Places for Labour': one seat in the War Cabinet, for which Chamberlain had earmarked Arthur Greenwood, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Economic Warfare or the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Transport, for which Herbert Morrison was pencilled in, and the Ministry of Food, for which Chamberlain favoured A. V. Alexander. At the top of this list, Chamberlain had noted: 'Try for 3'. The Labour Party's unwillingness to join a coalition government under Chamberlain, which has been well documented, put paid to this scheme, although it must be said that the posts which Chamberlain was prepared to offer them were scarcely calculated to win them over. All of the great offices of state remained in the hands of the existing, Conservative-dominated, administration, and the concession of one seat in the War Cabinet would be unlikely to outweigh this. The Liberal Party got a similarly raw deal in Chamberlain's plans: their leader, Sir Archibald Sinclair, was pencilled in only as Secretary of State for Scotland. Like the Labour Party, he too refused to participate in the government before a formal offer of a post could be made. His colleague, the former Liberal leader Viscount Samuel, might have fared slightly better. According to this document, Chamberlain was prepared to offer him a place in the War Cabinet itself - although Samuel's name was eventually crossed out from the list of possible candidates, as were those of Greenwood, Attlee, Sir John Anderson, and Sir

Samuel Hoare. Hoare, however, was subsequently reinstated at the bottom of the list, which ties in with Hankey's remarks about Chamberlain not initially wanting him in the War Cabinet. Leslie Hore-Belisha and Sir Kingsley Wood also appear to be late additions to the list.⁷

Outside the War Cabinet, the only significant addition to the existing administration was Anthony Eden, pencilled in to replace Sir Thomas Inskip at the Dominions Office. Like Churchill, Eden represented a focal point for potentially damaging political criticism if left out of the government. As a former Foreign Secretary, the Dominions Office post might have seemed a little beneath Eden, but Chamberlain sweetened the offer by promising him regular attendance at the War Cabinet, even though he would not formally be a member of that body. This was one offer which was accepted. With Churchill also on board and in the War Cabinet (tied to a department as First Lord of the Admiralty, although Chamberlain had initially offered him a post without portfolio⁸), Chamberlain can be considered to have been partially successful in the reconstruction of his administration. On the one hand, the most dangerous Conservative critics (Churchill and Eden) had been incorporated into the government. On the other hand, the opposition parties remained detached from the running of the war, and free to criticise and cajole the government both inside and outside the House of Commons. It should be pointed out, however, that some of the most stinging criticism of Chamberlain during his wartime administration (especially at its end) was to come from those who were, nominally at least, on his own side.

⁷ Chamberlain Papers NC 2/29/37 Undated slip of paper.

⁸ Churchill Papers CHAR 2/367 Churchill to Lord Stanhope, 4/9/39. In this letter to his predecessor at the Admiralty, Churchill stresses that he had played no part in Stanhope's removal: 'Indeed I had already accepted a deal in the War Cabinet 'without portfolio' when a change of plan brought me into this office'. It seems likely that Chamberlain did not relish the prospect of an unrestrained Churchill, and therefore sought to anchor him to departmental responsibilities.

The War Cabinet which Chamberlain eventually created was nine strong - larger than Lloyd George's First World War model - and comprised: Chamberlain himself, as Prime Minister; Lord Halifax, the Foreign Secretary; Sir John Simon, the Chancellor of the Exchequer; Lord Chatfield, the Minister for Co-ordination of Defence; Winston Churchill, the new First Lord of the Admiralty; Lord Hankey, who became a Minister without Portfolio; Leslie Hore-Belisha, the Secretary of State for War; Sir (Howard) Kingsley Wood, Secretary of State for Air; and, last but not least, Sir Samuel Hoare, who exchanged the Home Office with Sir John Anderson to become Lord Privy Seal. Since this body was responsible for taking decisions which would determine British foreign policy in the months that followed, it is worth taking a closer look at it. The first point to note is that, on paper at least, it was well equipped to deal with foreign policy questions. In addition to the current Foreign Secretary and a Prime Minister who had always taken a leading role in foreign policy, it contained two former foreign secretaries, Simon (holder of that office from 1931 until 1935) and Hoare (whose term was rather shorter, lasting only from June to December 1935). On top of that, Eden (Foreign Secretary from 1935 to 1938) was, as we have seen, permitted to sit in on most War Cabinet discussions. It must be said, however, that neither Simon nor Hoare had been especially successful as foreign secretary. Sir Alexander Cadogan later noted that Simon's biggest handicap in that position had been his 'strong streak of cynicism . . . he was, I think generally, ill at ease'.⁹ Hoare's tenure had, of course, been cut short by criticism over his role in the infamous 'Hoare-Laval Pact', which had controversially proposed sweeping concessions to Italy in Abyssinia. Both seemed happier in other positions, and neither made much contribution to debates on foreign policy issues in the months that followed.

⁹ Cadogan Papers ACAD 7/1 Draft chapters for an unfinished autobiography. Cadogan noted on 8/8/67 that he had written them '3 or 4 years ago'.

Simon, who spent the Phoney War at the Treasury, had a reputation for being rather cold and aloof.¹⁰ ‘He did not suffer fools gladly’, according to Cadogan, who nevertheless recalled Simon and himself once being reduced to helpless laughter in a car after Simon had referred to Arthur Henderson, rather uncharitably, as ‘Old Owl’.¹¹ Halifax thought him friendly but ‘odd . . . with a curious incapacity for exciting affection’, and recorded that ‘he is constantly trying to secure the friendship of other people on terms more favourable to himself than to them’.¹² During War Cabinet debates, he kept a sharp look-out for any proposal which might cause the Treasury unnecessary expense. He unknowingly escaped an attempt by Chamberlain to replace him with Lord Stamp in January 1940, but when Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940, Simon was shunted into the post of Lord Chancellor. Hoare, whose political career by September 1939 was unmistakably on the skids, was even less popular than Simon.¹³ As we have seen, even Chamberlain, to whom he owed his continued political influence, was dubious about having him in the War Cabinet. John Colville recalled that Hoare ‘invariably replied “m,yes, m,yes, m,yes,” when one ventured to address him’, and felt it ‘not without justification that he was called “Slippery Sam” . . . his intelligence was matched, or even surpassed, by his natural bent for intrigue’.¹⁴ Cadogan viewed with horror the idea that Hoare might one day succeed Chamberlain as Prime Minister, and wrote in the aftermath of the Norway debate: ‘If only it means the disappearance of Sam Hoare, all this will not have been in vain!’¹⁵ He did not have an easy ride as Lord Privy Seal, having to answer questions in the House of Commons on a range of home policy questions about which

¹⁰ For Simon, see D. Dutton, *Simon. A Political Biography of Sir John Simon* (London: Arum Press, 1992). Simon’s memoirs, *Retrospect* (London: Hutchinson, 1952) are not particularly enlightening - the Phoney War period is not even mentioned.

¹¹ Cadogan Papers ACAD 7/1 Draft chapters for an unfinished autobiography.

¹² Halifax Papers A7.8.3 (Diary 1940) Entry for 2/2/40.

¹³ For Hoare see J. A. Cross *Sir Samuel Hoare. A Political Biography* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977). Hoare’s memoirs are more enlightening than Simon’s: Lord Templewood *Nine Troubled Years* (London: Collins, 1954).

¹⁴ John Colville *The Fringes of Power. Downing Street Diaries 1939 - 1955* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985) p.36, p.770.

he knew little or nothing. In April 1940 he became Secretary of State for Air, and the following month was shipped off to the Madrid Embassy by Churchill. Simon and Hoare were archetypal ‘men of Munich’, closely tied to Chamberlain. It would be unfair to label them ‘yes-men’, but as far as prosecuting the war was concerned, they showed little in the way of initiative.

Lords Chatfield and Hankey had been included in the War Cabinet largely for their expert advice on matters of warfare. Unfortunately for them, there was little in the way of warfare during the opening months of the conflict on which they could advise. Chatfield, a First World War naval commander who had risen to the very top of his profession, found himself becoming increasingly redundant, especially with the dynamic Churchill on board.¹⁶ He was finally relieved of his responsibilities on 4 April 1940, when the post of Minister for Co-ordination of Defence was abolished. In return for his years of service, he was offered, but turned down, the Governorship of New Zealand.¹⁷ Hankey proved more valuable, keeping an eye on the strategic position as the war progressed, and chairing a number of important Cabinet sub-committees.¹⁸ Shortly before the war had broken out, Hankey had expressed reservations about joining the War Cabinet, claiming ‘I don’t much like the policy nor our prospects’.¹⁹ He also suspected, as he told his wife, that ‘my main job is to keep an eye on Winston!’.²⁰ Perhaps as a result, he was not retained when Churchill became Prime Minister in May 1940, but this was no reflection on his abilities or his performance during the difficult months of the Phoney War.

¹⁵ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entries for 8/5/40, 9/5/40.

¹⁶ There is no published biography of Chatfield. His private papers are to be found in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich.

¹⁷ NC 7/11/33/40 Chatfield to Chamberlain, 29/3/40.

¹⁸ For Hankey see S. Roskill *Hankey. Man of Secrets* 3 volumes. For this period see Volume 3 1931 - 1963 (London: Collins, 1974).

¹⁹ HNKY 1/7 (Diary 1939) Entry for 25/8/39.

²⁰ HNKY 3/43 Hankey to Lady Hankey, 3/9/39.

Of the three service ministers, Churchill was the only one to retain his post for the duration of the Phoney War. Hore-Belisha, who had worked strenuously to reorganise the British Army in the years leading up to the war, was the first to go.²¹ For the first four months of the war, he was a vocal proponent in Cabinet of a more vigorous war effort. His sacking by Chamberlain at the very beginning of 1940 has aroused much controversy, but in reality seems more straightforward than some historians have tried to suggest. Chamberlain regarded personal relationships as one of the most important tools of government, and when it became clear that a rift had opened between Hore-Belisha and the Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force, Lord Gort, the Secretary of State's days were already numbered. Despite an assurance by Gort that things were improving,²² Chamberlain resolved to move Hore-Belisha, and the need to re-organise the struggling Ministry of Information seemed to offer the perfect opportunity for this. Whether Hore-Belisha would have accepted a new job as Minister of Information, a position which did not hold War Cabinet rank and might therefore be considered a demotion, is open to question. That the offer was never made was due to pressure from Lord Halifax. 'I do a little doubt', the Foreign Secretary had written to Chamberlain, 'whether L.H.B. is quite big enough for it'.²³ The fact that he was Jewish also entered the equation (Cadogan noted that 'Jew control of our propaganda would be [a] major disaster').²⁴ Instead, Hore-Belisha was offered the Board of Trade, and, despite the advice of friends and colleagues to accept, refused it. He did not take his removal with good grace, and became a bitter critic of his former colleagues, eventually voting against the Government in the famous 'Norway debate', which led to Chamberlain's fall. Chamberlain described him as

²¹ A biography of sorts, quoting heavily from Hore-Belisha's private papers, is R. J. Minney *The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha* (London: 1960).

²² NC 7/11/32/83 Lord Gort to Chamberlain, 27/12/39.

²³ NC 7/11/32/117 Halifax to Chamberlain, 23/12/39.

²⁴ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 1/1/40.

a 'stormy petrel'.²⁵ Others were less flattering. He was succeeded at the War Office by Oliver Stanley, a scion of the famous Derby clan, who held the post unremarkably until Churchill took it from him to give to Eden.

Sir Kingsley Wood made an unlikely Secretary of State for Air, having proved himself in rather more bureaucratic positions such as Postmaster General.²⁶ Churchill later appointed him Chancellor of the Exchequer in succession to Simon. During the Phoney War, he did little to make his presence felt in the War Cabinet, and had the misfortune to preside over a rather unimpressive period in the history of the Royal Air Force's wartime operations (bombing Esbjerg in Denmark thinking it to be Brunsbüttel, 110 miles to the south in Germany, was not one of its finest hours). In April 1940 he changed places with Hoare to become Lord Privy Seal. John Colville described him as 'amiable to all and easily accessible . . . a good manipulator'.²⁷ He was close to Chamberlain, who often sought his advice, but subsequently, to the surprise of many, abandoned him to play a notable part in the succession of Churchill in May 1940.

Winston Churchill, of course, needs no introduction.²⁸ His addition to Chamberlain's wartime administration as First Lord of the Admiralty on the outbreak of war ended his years in the wilderness, and returned him to the post which he had held between 1911 and 1915.

²⁵ NC 18/1/1137 Chamberlain to Ida, 7/1/40.

²⁶ Wood remains the least accessible member of the Chamberlain War Cabinet: neither biography nor memoirs exist (Wood died in 1943 and was therefore unable to cash in, as so many of his colleagues did, by publishing his recollections of events in this period). There is not even a collection of private papers - only a box of press cuttings is to be found in Kent University Library.

²⁷ John Colville *The Fringes of Power. Downing Street Diaries 1939 - 1955* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1985) p. 773.

²⁸ There are, of course, hundreds of published works on Churchill. Norman Rose *Churchill. An Unruly Life* (London: Simon & Schuster, 1994) and John Charmley *Churchill - The End of Glory. A Political Biography* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993) are recent, single volume biographies. For the Phoney War period, Martin Gilbert *Finest Hour. Winston S. Churchill 1939 - 1941* (London: Heinemann, 1983) is the relevant volume of the official biography. Martin Gilbert (ed.) *The Churchill War Papers Volume 1: At the Admiralty September 1939 - May 1940* (London: Heinemann, 1993) is by far the most comprehensive and useful volume of published documents for the Phoney War period, and saves much trawling through the Churchill Papers at Churchill College, Cambridge. However, there are still some documents in the Churchill Papers which did not make it into the published work.

Churchill's gratitude to Chamberlain for returning him to a position of power helped to smooth relations between the two during the first months of the war, and although it is probably fair to say that Chamberlain regarded Churchill's presence in the government as the lesser of two evils, the two got on surprisingly well. Past disputes were put aside in the interests of winning the war - a subject on which, initially at least, their views largely coincided. Once he had established himself in the government, however, Churchill began to seek increased authority, particularly over defence policy, where he succeeded in squeezing Lord Chatfield out of the frame. Chamberlain, who had limited interest in the more technical side of things, was probably happy to let Churchill occupy himself in this way. Obsessed as he was with devices like fluvial mines and trench-digging machines, Churchill did not interfere as much as he might have done in foreign policy. He was always free with his opinions in War Cabinet discussions, and was not above writing to Chamberlain or Halifax to put across his point of view on matters which he considered to be important, but did not advance a vision of how British foreign policy as a whole should be conducted. Berating neutral nations for cowardice in a radio broadcast earned him a sharp rebuke from the Foreign Secretary,²⁹ and his grasp of the delicate international situation was, at best, simplistic (he paid scant attention, for instance, to the Japanese threat). Whilst his views certainly mattered, they were not instrumental in the framing of foreign policy during the Phoney War.

A man who certainly was instrumental in foreign policy decisions was the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax.³⁰ In many ways a quintessential English aristocrat (he was an avid

²⁹ The speech, and the correspondence between Halifax and Churchill, can be found in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* pp. 667-675, 689, & 690-692. In his defence, Churchill claimed to have shown a draft of the speech to Sir Orme Sargent of the Foreign Office. Sargent's response, which Gilbert does not reproduce, specifically asks Churchill to change the emphasis of his reference to the neutrals, 'and instead to stress the fact that what we are asking of them is not that they should depart from their neutrality, but that their neutrality should be impartial and courageous'. FO 800/275 Ge/40/1 Sargent to Churchill, 20/1/40.

³⁰ For Halifax see Andrew Roberts *The 'Holy Fox' - A Biography of Lord Halifax* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991) and Lord Birkenhead *Halifax. The Life of Lord Halifax* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1965). Halifax's memoirs, *Fulness of Days* (London: Collins, 1957) are not particularly helpful.

huntsman, and liked to spend as much time as possible at Garrowby, his Yorkshire estate), he had served as Viceroy of India and in a number of senior government posts before succeeding Anthony Eden at the Foreign Office in February 1938. A loyal servant to Chamberlain, he showed none of his predecessor's resentment at the Prime Minister's leading role in foreign policy. In the late 1950s, he defended Chamberlain from charges of 'interference' in foreign policy levelled by Lord Strang, who had held senior positions within the Foreign Office during the 1930s. 'He certainly never interfered with me', Halifax told his fellow peer, 'and I fancy that what Anthony [Eden] thought was interference with him was in part well-intentioned stupidity'.³¹ Rab Butler, who was Parliamentary Under-Secretary for Foreign Affairs, noted in 1939 that 'any difference of opinion between the Foreign Office and No. 10 has been so considerably reduced as to be imperceptible.'³² As a staunch Chamberlain supporter, Butler is perhaps not the most reliable witness, and the archives paint a rather different picture of Foreign Office opinion, but if he meant that relations between the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary were unblemished by dispute, he was certainly right. A deeply religious man, Halifax was not given to confrontation. Instead, he used logic, reason and an under-stated persistence to get his point of view across. A measure of his effectiveness at the Foreign Office, and his political standing in general, is the fact that he was one of the few senior ministers to retain his post when Churchill came to power. Indeed, as is well known, but for his own determined resistance to the proposal, Halifax himself might easily have become Prime Minister instead of Churchill in May 1940. His flexible approach to foreign affairs won him many admirers within the Foreign Office, and although always willing to listen to a diverse range of opinions, he was a man who knew his own mind.

³¹ Strang Papers STRN 4/1 Halifax to Strang, 7/1/57.

³² Butler Papers G10 26, undated 'character study' of Chamberlain, Halifax and Sir Horace Wilson. Butler later dated this document 'about June 1939'.

Halifax's authority in foreign affairs was second only to that of the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain. So much has been written about Chamberlain over the years that, like Churchill, he scarcely seems to need an introduction.³³ The Chamberlain who emerges from this study might, however, come as a surprise to many of those who have sought to pass judgement on the man for what he did or did not do in the run-up to the outbreak of war. Contrary to the common view of a sick, elderly and dispirited Prime Minister, serving out his time before mercifully being kicked out of office only six months before he died, the documents reveal an energetic, hard-working, determined, efficient, and occasionally ruthless leader, with clear-sighted aims and objectives. This is not to say that he was a good war leader, or that he was always correct in his judgements. Nor is it to claim that he was, in the circumstances, the right man to be leading the country. But it is important to establish at the outset that the head of the British Government was very much in control.

On the subject of Chamberlain's health, the records show that he missed only one meeting of the War Cabinet, on 9 November, owing to a recurrence of the gout which had plagued him for a number of years. This troublesome complaint, which manifested itself in his feet, flared up several times during the Phoney War, but never with enough severity to render him unable to work (he did, however, have to wear a snow shoe on one foot as a penance). As for the stomach cancer which was to kill him in November 1940, Chamberlain himself was unaware of any serious problem until after his resignation as Prime Minister. Indeed, there are numerous accounts of his health being remarkably good for a man of 71 years. Nancy Astor told Lord Lothian, the British Ambassador in Washington, that

³³ There are three completed biographies of Chamberlain: Keith Feiling *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London: Macmillan, 1946); Iain Macleod *Neville Chamberlain* (London: Frederick Muller, 1961); and H. Montgomery Hyde *Neville Chamberlain* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1976). In addition there is David Dilks *Neville Chamberlain Volume 1: Pioneering and Reform, 1869 - 1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). Volume II shows no sign of appearing. R..A. C. Parker *Chamberlain and Appeasement. British*

Chamberlain had looked ‘extraordinarily well’ when he gave a speech at the Junior Carlton Club on 22 November 1939.³⁴ Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, Britain’s Ambassador to Turkey, sat next to Chamberlain at dinner on 10 April 1940, and noted that the Prime Minister ‘looked at least 10 years younger than when I last saw him’.³⁵ Rather than being worn down by the ravages of war, Chamberlain seems to have been invigorated by them. There were, of course, times when he felt the strain. His frequently-quoted weekly letters to his sisters, Ida and Hilda, provide examples of tiredness and sometimes despair, but it should be borne in mind that it was Chamberlain’s custom to write these letters at the weekend, often when he was at Chequers. They therefore show him in a more reflective, ‘off-duty’ frame of mind. On the job, it was a different story. Sir Horace Wilson recorded how ‘mental concentration seemed to come easily to him’, even during his final illness. ‘He had a positive dislike of drift’, Wilson went on, ‘and an equally positive liking to tackle a job as soon as he saw what had to be done’.³⁶ Wilson, like Rab Butler, was not the most unbiased of judges, but even General Ironside, the Chief of the General Staff, who had a certain contempt for civilians in general and politicians in particular, described Chamberlain as ‘the strongest character’ in the War Cabinet, and the only one not ‘afflicted’ by an over-sensitivity towards press criticism.³⁷ The War Cabinet minutes show that Chamberlain always got his way when major decisions were taken, often by the technique of summing up the main points of a discussion, outlining the action to be taken, and moving on to the next item on the agenda. To that extent, he was undoubtedly a strong leader. If he had a weakness, it was his tendency to refer important

Policy and the Coming of the Second World War (London: Macmillan, 1993) contains an excellent first chapter on Chamberlain’s personality and politics.

³⁴ Lothian Papers GD 40/17/407/4 Nancy Astor to Lothian, 23/11/39. She was less complimentary about the content of the speech.

³⁵ Knatchbull-Hugessen Papers KNAT 1/13 (Diary) Entry for 10/4/40.

³⁶ Cabinet Papers CAB 127/158 Notes by Sir Horace Wilson on Chamberlain’s ‘character and temperament’, written in October 1941.

³⁷ Roderick Macleod & Denis Kelly (eds.) *The Ironside Diaries 1937-1940* (London: Constable, 1962) Entry for 5/11/39, p. 145.

matters to committees and sub-committees, resulting in a rather cautious and bureaucratic approach to prosecuting the war. Ironside was moved to complain that 'you cannot make war with all these Committees. It simply doesn't lead to any decision or constancy'.³⁸ In the opening months of the war, however, caution was perhaps no bad thing.

The War Cabinet met most days: up to Christmas 1939 there was a full meeting every day except Sunday, when a 'skeleton' War Cabinet of only three or four ministers met. In 1940, the skeleton meeting was switched to Saturday, and Sunday was left free (unless circumstances dictated the calling of a meeting). It was here that major policy matters were discussed and decided upon. In addition to the political representatives, the Chiefs of Staff (or their deputies) were required to attend for at least the first part of each meeting, when military affairs were discussed. Other ministers were frequently present, too - Eden, as has been mentioned, was a regular attender, as was Sir John Anderson, the Home Secretary. When matters relating to the work of a specific department arose (shipping, or economic warfare, for example), the minister responsible for that department was usually summoned to the Cabinet table. The War Cabinet could set up Cabinet sub-committees to look into specific matters, and request reports and advice from these and existing committees, such as the Chiefs of Staff Committee. The peacetime Committee of Imperial Defence, however, ceased to exist following the outbreak of war, its functions (and many of its personnel) being taken over by the War Cabinet itself. A high proportion of the War Cabinet's time was given over to the discussion of papers submitted to it by these committees, or by individual ministers, often on behalf of their departments (Lord Halifax, for example, would submit papers which contained the views of the Foreign Office, and were written by his officials, under his own name). The number of subjects discussed at a meeting could vary from one to a dozen or more. Minutes

³⁸ Macleod & Kelly (eds.) *The Ironside Diaries* Entry for 30/4/40, p. 290.

were taken, published, and given a relatively wide circulation in the upper levels of government. Matters of extreme secrecy were therefore omitted from the published minutes and recorded only in what was known as the ‘Secretary’s Standard File of War Cabinet Conclusions’. Some discussions were not recorded at all - although, with typical civil service bureaucracy, the fact that these discussions had not been recorded was still recorded. Whilst it would not be true to say that all of the key decisions taken during the Phoney War were discussed in the War Cabinet and recorded in the War Cabinet Minutes, the bulk of these discussions and decisions can be found here, and the Minutes therefore represent a valuable historical source.

There was, however, one body which took precedence over the War Cabinet. The First World War had emphasised the need for effective co-operation between allies, and with this in mind the British and French Governments agreed at the outset of the Second World War to the creation of a Supreme War Council, to meet periodically for the purpose of hammering out a joint Allied policy for the prosecution of the war. The first of these meetings was held at Abbeville in France on 12 September, and during the Phoney War period a total of nine full meetings of the Supreme War Council took place, both in France and Britain.³⁹ Aside from the British and French Prime Ministers, who were ever-present, the Council had no set members, so attendance was governed by where the meeting was being held, and what topics were up for discussion. Foreign policy questions figured prominently in the Council’s deliberations, and, as we shall see, the impetus for a number of diplomatic initiatives came directly from resolutions passed during these meetings.

In foreign policy matters, as with most of the subjects it dealt with, the War Cabinet discussions (and indeed those of the Supreme War Council) merely represent the tip of the

³⁹ CAB 99/3 Minutes of the Supreme War Council. (SWC). See Appendix C for a full list of these meetings.

iceberg. Only matters of the highest importance were referred to the War Cabinet for a decision - everything else was dealt with at the departmental level. It is here, in the Foreign Office archives, that a more comprehensive story is to be found. Occupying a dominant position between Downing Street and King Charles Street, overlooking St James's Park, the Foreign Office gathered information on events throughout the world via the huge network of British Embassies and Missions. In return, it sent instructions and advice to the British Representatives overseas whose job it was to act on behalf of the British Government and in pursuance of British interests. An official volume describing the work of the Foreign Office, prepared in the 1950s under the guidance of the afore-mentioned Lord Strang, sums up the department's main function as being 'to achieve as many of our national desiderata as can be made acceptable to other sovereign governments'.⁴⁰ The fact that Britain was at war did not alter this function, but it did raise the stakes. Britain's 'national desiderata' were reduced to a single, central aim: winning the war against Germany. From September 1939, all decisions had to be weighed in terms of their contribution towards achieving this goal.

The Foreign Office was headed by Sir Alexander Cadogan, the Permanent Under-Secretary. Cadogan achieved a kind of posthumous fame after the publication of an edited version of his diaries in 1971.⁴¹ The strength of feeling exhibited in the diaries came as something of a surprise to those who had known him - he was, in person, a rather more stoical character. His appreciation of foreign policy leaned unmistakably towards the pragmatic rather than the idealistic, and in this respect he was the ideal man for the job at this particular time. Initially, Cadogan's life had been made difficult by the continuing presence in the Foreign Office of his predecessor, the occasionally volatile Sir Robert Vansittart, as 'Chief

⁴⁰ Lord Strang and other Members of the Foreign Service *The Foreign Office* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1955) p. 10.

Diplomatic Advisor' - a post with no real responsibilities or power, created by Chamberlain and Eden in 1938 solely in order to effect Vansittart's removal from the day-to-day running of foreign policy. By September 1939, however, Vansittart had become a marginal figure. Although he retained some residual respect, as well as a large and impressive office, the forthright and sometimes bizarre minutes which he periodically addressed to the Secretary of State rarely had any impact at all.⁴² More influential was Sir (Harold) Orme Sargent, Deputy Under-Secretary in charge of several important Foreign Office departments. No one who researches into the Foreign Office archives for this period can fail to be impressed by the industry of 'Moley' Sargent, whose considered and well-informed views are to be found on every imaginable aspect of foreign policy. What is equally striking is how often events would demonstrate the wisdom of these views. His understanding of foreign affairs was surpassed by no one, but his manner could be infuriating. Although Sargent was less prone to diatribes and rants than Vansittart, Cadogan once dubbed him 'old croaker', and in the stressful days at the end of April 1940 noted how he was 'in one of his frozen, pessimistic, useless, 'I told you so' moods. Think I shall have to fire him'.⁴³ Needless to say, he did not. Sargent went on to succeed Cadogan as Permanent Under-Secretary in 1946 (and was himself succeeded by Strang in 1949).

Just as important as the officials within the Foreign Office itself were the diplomats who served abroad. As the men on the spot, their views could and did influence the policies which were pursued by the British Government towards foreign states. The reports which they sent back to the Foreign Office were often widely circulated, sometimes even reaching the

⁴¹ David Dilks (ed.) *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan O.M. 1938 - 1945* (London: Cassell, 1971). Because of the rather selective editing of this volume, I have used the manuscript Cadogan diaries (Cadogan Papers ACAD 1/8 and 1/9) throughout this study.

⁴² For Vansittart see Norman Rose *Vansittart, Study of a Diplomat* (London: Heinemann, 1978). Vansittart's rather opaque memoirs, *The Mist Procession* (London: 1958), do not cover the war years - he was a slow writer and died before he had made it that far.

War Cabinet. It was a brave Foreign Secretary who would take action against the advice of his overseas officials, and this gave the holders of the more critical posts tremendous importance. Generally speaking, these men were ‘career diplomats’ who had spent their working lives moving between diplomatic postings. Sir Eric Phipps, for example, who was the British Ambassador to France at the outbreak of war, had previously served four stints in a junior capacity at the Paris Embassy, as well as postings at Constantinople, Rome, St. Petersburg, Madrid, Brussels, Vienna (as British Minister) and Berlin (as Ambassador). He had also, like most of his colleagues, spent periods of time between foreign postings working in the Foreign Office in London. The only notable exception was Lord Lothian, the British Ambassador to the United States. Lothian’s background was political (he was Lloyd George’s private secretary from 1916 to 1921, and briefly served as Chancellor of the Duchy Of Lancaster in 1931), but he knew America well, and was a friend of Lord Halifax, who secured his appointment, and who unexpectedly succeeded him in Washington following Lothian’s death at the end of 1940.⁴⁴ The other holders of key posts, such as Sir Percy Loraine (Italy), Sir Robert Craigie (Japan), Sir William Seeds (the Soviet Union), and Sir Ronald Campbell (Phipps’s successor in Paris) had more traditional diplomatic backgrounds. As we shall see, their achievements (and shortcomings) in these positions form a central part of the story of the Phoney War.

Although this study is concerned primarily with foreign policy, it is necessary to say something about the general policy followed by the Chamberlain Wartime Administration. It is a story which has been told in more detail by others, but which still tends to get

⁴³ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 14/9/39; ACAD 1/9 (Diary, 1940) entry for 27/4/40.

⁴⁴ On Lothian, see David Reynolds ‘Lord Lothian and Anglo-American Relations, 1939 - 1940’ *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* Volume 73, Part 2, 1983, and J.R.M Butler *Lord Lothian 1882 - 1940* (London: Macmillan 1960).

overlooked.⁴⁵ Having embarked upon a war which they had tried so hard to avoid, Chamberlain and his colleagues were faced with a problem: how to win it. What follows is a brief account of their attempts to solve this problem.

The opening days of the Second World War exploded many of the long-held assumptions about how a future conflict would unfold. In May 1939 Chamberlain had announced to a meeting of Conservative Women at the Royal Albert Hall:

War to-day is no longer preceded by the preliminary stages which in past times gave ample warnings of its approach. In these days it is the carefully prepared surprise and the lightning blow that gives the first notification.⁴⁶

The air raid sirens which famously sounded immediately after Chamberlain had announced, on 3 September 1939, that a state of war existed between Britain and Germany, seemed to confirm these fears. Like so much else in the Phoney War, however, this proved to be a false alarm (the blame was subsequently laid at the feet of a confused French airman). The feared annihilation of London by German bombers failed to materialise, and as things began to settle into some kind of routine, Chamberlain and his colleagues began to consider what to do next. Lord Hankey wrote a paper on this very subject on 12 September, having discussed the matter with Chamberlain and discovered that the Prime Minister, Halifax, Chatfield and Hoare all shared broadly similar views to his own. Weighing up the current situation, he judged that the non-intervention of Italy and Japan was in the Allies' favour. 'This advantage, however, is still precarious,' he observed, 'for it cannot be said with any certainty that either Italy or Japan will not join Germany, especially if things go wrong for us as they so often do in the early stages of our wars'. Another advantage was the overwhelming support of world (and

⁴⁵ The best general account is probably Roy Douglas *The Advent of War 1939 - 40* (London: Macmillan, 1978). Of the histories of the Second World War, Gerhard Weinberg's *A World at Arms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994) devotes more space than most to this period.

⁴⁶ NC 4/5/47 Text of a speech given on 11/5/39.

especially United States) opinion for the British and French cause. Poland was in the final stages of collapse, it was true, but this had always been anticipated; in the meantime, Britain still had control of the seas, and the French Army, with British support, seemed quite strong enough to resist a German attack in the west. Only the air situation gave Hankey real cause for concern. German financial and economic problems were more severe than those faced by Britain, and German public opinion might exercise a decisive influence as Allied economic warfare began to bite. Nevertheless, he added, 'no-one can venture to prophesy with confidence the results of a major war'. As for the future, one thing that Hankey ruled out (and which his colleagues, for all their reputation as appeasers, were agreed upon) was that there could be no accepting any humiliating offer of peace which the Germans might see fit to propose once the conquest of Poland (the ostensible reason why the countries were at war) was complete. 'To do so,' he noted, '. . . would reduce British prestige to a vanquishing point, lose us the confidence of all peace-loving nations and place our future in the gravest jeopardy'. The Allies, then, must fight on. But how? Merely sitting tight and taking no action at all against Germany was 'unthinkable. We should become a laughing stock'. Hankey's solution was 'to pursue a "war of nerves" . . . It would consist of economic pressure combined with anti-Hitler propaganda'. He was clear, however, that this in itself was unlikely to bring the conflict to an end. 'Victory can only be secured by concentrating decisive force at the decisive point at the decisive moment', he argued. 'As yet, strong as we are, we and the French have not the decisive force. The decisive point is still uncertain . . . The decisive time is certainly not yet'.⁴⁷ Hankey's appreciation puts the cautious British policy of the opening months of the war into perspective. It becomes clear that this policy was followed primarily because there was no real alternative. Of course, it suited men like Chamberlain to

⁴⁷ HNKY 11/1 Paper on War Policy by Hankey, 12/9/39.

postpone (if not to avoid altogether) the outbreak of serious fighting, but even Churchill was in agreement with the policy as it stood. 'It is in our own interest', he wrote to Chamberlain, 'that the war should be conducted in accordance with the more humane conceptions, and that we should follow and not precede the Germans in the process, no doubt inevitable, of deepening severity and violence'.⁴⁸

To Chamberlain, the inevitability of an escalation in the war was less apparent. As is well known from the letters he wrote to his sisters, he hankered after an internal collapse in Germany which would topple Hitler and bring to power a more moderate German leadership, with whom an escape from the madness of total war might be negotiated. As he himself put it, 'the only chance of peace is the disappearance of Hitler and that is what we are working for'.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, by the beginning of December 1939 even Chamberlain had come to accept that German morale needed 'a real hard punch in the stomach' before the people would move against Hitler.⁵⁰ British propaganda, in the form of leaflets dropped on Germany from the air, was not, on its own, sufficient to bring this about. Economic warfare, on the other hand, might have the desired effect. Contraband Control was introduced as soon as war broke out. It sought to cripple Germany's economy, and her ability to wage war, by preventing the importation of certain types of goods into Germany by sea. In practice, the range of goods defined as 'contraband' was so large that it amounted to a virtual economic blockade of Germany. A pre-war list of 'contraband' goods runs to eleven pages, and seems to include every imaginable product (and some unimaginable ones too). The list of banned metals, for instance, runs through 46 different types, from aluminium to zirconium, before ending, rather

⁴⁸ NC 7/9/47 Churchill to Chamberlain, 10/9/39. Churchill was referring specifically to the question of air attacks on German civilians.

⁴⁹ NC 18/1/1124 Chamberlain to Ida, 8/10/39.

⁵⁰ NC 18/1/1133A Chamberlain to Ida, 3/12/39.

unnecessarily, with a 47th category: 'All other metals'.⁵¹ Food and clothing came under the category of 'conditional contraband', providing the government with a defence against any accusation of inhumanity towards ordinary Germans. There can be no doubt, however, that the aim was to make conditions within Germany so unbearable that she would eventually be unable to fight a war, even if she wanted to. Germany had, of course, embarked on an ambitious plan to achieve autarky, and this, on top of the resources she gained by conquest, and the assistance of Italy and the Soviet Union in evading the Contraband Control restrictions, helped to offset the impact of the Allied blockade. A further economic measure against Germany was passed by the rather archaic procedure of an Order in Council, issued by the King on 27 November, authorizing the seizure of all goods on ships sailing from German ports, and all goods on ships sailing from neutral ports 'which are of enemy origin or are enemy property'.⁵² Strictly speaking, this measure was passed as a reprisal for German attacks on Allied and neutral merchant shipping. As we shall see, the Contraband Control and Seizure of Enemy Exports legislation brought Britain into dispute with a number of neutral countries whom she had no wish to antagonise, and led to widespread exceptions and concessions which, although clearly necessary, served to reduce the effectiveness of the Allied blockade.

If the war were to be ended by peaceful means rather than by the military defeat of one side or the other, some form of negotiation was clearly necessary. There was no shortage of individuals, both public and private, who were willing to do their bit to initiate informal talks with German sources with a view to ending the war. A considerable number of these were members of the House of Lords, which makes that ancient institution look like the last bastion

⁵¹ Malkin Papers FO 800/905 ATB (CL) 14 Report of the Advisory Committee on Trade Questions in time of War, Sub-Committee on Absolute and Conditional Contraband Lists, September 1938.

⁵² FO 800/911 'Order in Council framing Reprisals for restricting further the Commerce of Germany' Statutory Rules and Orders 1939 No. 1709, 27/11/39.

of pacifism in a country otherwise resigned to the necessity of war. The members of the War Cabinet, however, remained resolute in their attitude towards so-called 'peace feelers'. Hitler's Reichstag speech of 6 October, in which (as expected) he urged the Allies to abandon the fight now that Poland was lost, was the subject of prolonged Cabinet discussion over a number of days. The question at issue, however, was not whether to accept this offer of peace, but how best to word Britain's rejection of it. Chamberlain, who had been deceived by Hitler at Munich, was not about to repeat the mistake. 'I pray the struggle may be short', he told the Archbishop of Canterbury at the outset of the war, 'but it can't end as long as Hitler remains in power'.⁵³ Some months later, in response to a letter from a small number of peers suggesting that the time had come to negotiate with the present German Government, Chamberlain wrote 'I do not believe that until Germany gives proof of a change of heart a negotiated peace would be a lasting peace'.⁵⁴ Halifax, too, felt that 'any peace proposals would have to depend not only on the actual proposals that might be made, but, not less important, upon the confidence which they might inspire as to the good faith of the German Government'.⁵⁵ Apart from Hitler's half-hearted peace offer, the only other 'peace feeler' seriously to interest the British Government during the Phoney War was a series of communications, beginning in the Netherlands in mid-October, with sources purporting to represent a group of German generals opposed to Hitler. This contact led to the notorious 'Venlo incident' on 9 November, when two British intelligence agents awaiting a rendezvous with representatives of the German generals were kidnapped by the Gestapo in the Dutch border town of Venlo and taken back to Germany.⁵⁶ The consequence of this unfortunate

⁵³ NC 7/11/32/149 Chamberlain to Archbishop Lang, 5/9/39.

⁵⁴ NC 7/11/33/6 Chamberlain to Lord Arnold, 10/1/40.

⁵⁵ FO 800/328 Hal/39/45 Halifax to Gort, 31/10/39.

⁵⁶ FO 371/23107 C19335/19335/18 contains details of the incident, including material which has only recently been declassified.

incident was a much greater degree of suspicion in future towards any ‘peace feelers’ emanating from Germany.

The first four months of the conflict passed off without any real military engagements. The sinking by a German submarine of the Royal Sovereign Class battleship *Royal Oak* at Scapa Flow in the early hours of 14 October, at a cost of over 800 lives, was the only major disaster with which Britain had to contend. The war at sea, with merchant shipping being mercilessly targeted by German submarines and mines, was intense but not decisive. The beginning of 1940, however, coincided with a more resolute British approach to prosecuting the economic war against Germany. This was at least partly the result of German inactivity, which the British Government interpreted as evidence of German weakness and division. Had they known that a major German offensive in the west had been planned for the autumn of 1939 but postponed, and that another was scheduled for January 1940, they might have been rather more concerned about the military situation on the Western Front. In the event, the January attack was also postponed following the crash-landing in Belgium of a German plane carrying plans for the invasion. The Belgian Government passed on the plans to the British and French, neither of whom were convinced that they represented a genuine threat of a German invasion. Hitler took no chances, however, and called off the attack, which allowed the Allies to perceive the affair as yet another example of an ‘invasion scare’ which came to nothing. Each such scare had the effect of strengthening the conviction of those, such as Chamberlain and Halifax, who believed that the Germans would not attack in the west.

The chain of events which led up to British involvement in Scandinavia, culminating in the dispatch of troops to counter the German invasion of Norway in April 1940, will be considered at length in the final chapters of this study. The question of Scandinavia, and in particular the iron ore which Germany imported from Sweden, came to dominate War Cabinet

discussions in the early months of 1940. In that sense, it can be said that it was an extension of the economic war which led to the first serious clash of arms between the Allies and Germany. The campaign in Norway during April 1940, although only involving a small number of Allied troops, proved to be of great significance in that it led directly to the fall of Chamberlain's wartime administration. At a stormy debate in the House of Commons on 7 and 8 May, the pent-up frustrations resulting from eight months of inactivity followed by an embarrassing military reverse came to the surface. Opposition MPs and government supporters alike weighed in with criticisms of the Norwegian campaign, the conduct of the war generally, and Chamberlain's leadership in particular. The Labour Party forced a vote at the end of the debate, which saw the government's majority fall from over 200 to just 81. Chamberlain tried to cling onto power by restructuring his government, offering to jettison Simon and Hoare (hardly, it might be noted, the action of a man anxious to be relieved of the burdens of office), but the Labour Party's continued refusal to serve under him forced him to tender his resignation.

By a strange coincidence, the day on which Chamberlain had decided to announce his resignation, 10 May, was the day that Hitler at last launched his western offensive. Chamberlain's first instinct on hearing the news was to stay on for a little longer in the interests of the country, but he was persuaded that he should go as planned. Churchill, having the previous day won the succession by default following Halifax's determined show of reluctance, took office as head of a national coalition government later that day. It is a measure of Chamberlain's stature that he not only remained as leader of the Conservative Party, but continued to serve in Churchill's War Cabinet as Lord President of the Council, chairing a number of Cabinet sub-committees. His political career was ended only by his final illness. Even after undergoing a serious operation he tried to return to work, but found London

in the Blitz not conducive to recovery, and reluctantly bowed out of the political scene just weeks before his death in November 1940.

Because of their heavy reliance on the Foreign Office archives, the chapters which follow may seem to play down or belittle the contribution of Chamberlain and the War Cabinet to the formation of foreign policy. In many cases, it is true, there was very little direct guidance from above unless specific problems or incidents arose - by which time it was often a case of damage limitation. This was largely the result of the volume of work with which the War Cabinet had to contend. Foreign policy had to take its place alongside the other pressing issues of the time. Nevertheless, it was the War Cabinet, along with the Supreme War Council, which was responsible for setting the tone of the policy which the Foreign Office put into practice. Major policy decisions were never taken without reference to the War Cabinet, and the day-to-day running of policy was carried out within the parameters which the higher authorities set. The views of members of the Foreign Office and British Representatives abroad, which are revealed by the archives, do not always correspond with official government policy. They are included here to demonstrate the range of opinions on foreign policy matters at the time, and the alternative policies which might have been available to the government. The practice of government requires choices to be made from a range of possibilities. It is only by showing what these possibilities were that policies can fairly be assessed. The Chamberlain wartime administration was all too often faced by a lack of serious alternatives to the policies which they adopted, and it would be unfair to criticize it for policies which were often, in the circumstances, the only realistic choice. Politics is, after all, the 'art of the possible'. When the alternative to acting in an undesirable or humiliating way was risking armed conflict, the choice was not a particularly difficult one to make, especially in view of Britain's over-stretched global responsibilities and limited military resources.

Contributors to the long-standing debate on the merits of otherwise of policies of ‘appeasement’ towards other countries should bear this point in mind. As will be shown, Britain continued to pursue policies which can accurately be termed ‘appeasement’ towards a number of countries after the Second World War had broken out. These policies, however, were largely dictated by the circumstances of the time, and it is difficult to imagine any other government, under any other Prime Minister, pursuing a significantly different policy without courting disaster.

In considering the foreign policy of the Chamberlain wartime administration, it is necessary to put to one side any views one might have on the pre-war policies of Chamberlain’s government. Whatever might have been the rights and wrongs of British policy during the 1930s, the advent of war unquestionably created a new situation. In that sense, the slate was wiped clean: having failed to prevent the war from breaking out, the government now had to address itself to the task of winning it. The conditions during the first eight months of the conflict were different from the pre-war conditions, and also, it must be stressed, different from the conditions which were to arise following the German attack in the west and the fall of France in the early summer of 1940. Judging the Phoney War period by the criteria of the pre-war period, or in the light of the situation following the fall of France, would clearly be misleading. What is needed instead is an examination of the period on its own merits, taking into account the situation which existed at the time, and the assumptions and perceptions which this situation gave rise to. That is what this study sets out to achieve.

2. AVOIDING GLOBAL CONFLICT: BRITISH POLICY IN THE FAR EAST

Russia and Japan are bound to remain enemies, and with our position in India and the East it would pay us to make a return to the Anglo-Japanese alliance possible.

R. A. Butler, 22 September 1939.¹

When the Second World War broke out in September 1939, the Far East was, from the British point of view, the least favourable of the potential theatres of war. British commitments in the area - the Chinese concessions, Hong Kong, Singapore, Burma, Malaya, and the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand - were highly vulnerable to a southwards sweep by an expansionist Japan already established in northern China, and the lack of a sizeable British Pacific fleet would have compounded the problems of engaging in a conflict literally on the other side of the world. The only card in Britain's favour was the potential support which might be offered by a United States already committed to the restoration of the 'open door' in China and resistance to the Japanese 'New Order' in Eastern Asia. Even this prospect was slight: hamstrung by the isolationist element in his own country, President Roosevelt was unlikely now to offer the effective co-operation in the region which Britain had long sought in vain during the inter-war years. It therefore came as no small mercy that, although the country was fired with anti-British sentiment following a confrontation in the British concession at Tientsin earlier in the year,² the present, moderate Japanese Government was not prepared to become involved in further

¹ FO 371/23556 F10710/176/23 Minute by Butler, 22/9/39.

² See P. Lowe *Great Britain and the Origins of the Pacific War- A Study of British Policy in East Asia 1937-1941* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) Chapter III for a full account of this episode. Briefly, a Japanese official had been murdered in the British concession, and the Japanese authorities demanded the handing over of four men suspected of the killing. When the British refused, a Japanese blockade was placed around the concession, restrictions on food supplies were imposed, and British subjects entering or leaving

conflicts whilst the Sino-Japanese war remained unresolved. In addition, many Japanese were more than a little affronted by Germany's conclusion of a pact with Japan's arch-rival the Soviet Union in August. Domestic political instability also mitigated against any decisive steps in the autumn of 1939: Japan, like Italy, stood to gain by a policy of 'wait and see', the more decisively to strike if and when it was decided to take a hand in the German-led assault on the western democracies.

From the perspective of the Cabinet Room in 10 Downing St, Japan's attitude appeared less puzzling than that of either Italy or the Soviet Union. Her unwillingness to go to war in present circumstances was clearly recognised. This is not to say, however, that Japan did not present serious problems. Anglo-Japanese relations were not so secure that there was room for them to be allowed to slide - any deterioration was potentially dangerous, and when the possible outcome was war, precious few risks could be run. Keeping Japan neutral would certainly be no easy task. In addition to being at war with Japan's German ally, Britain was a prominent supporter of Chiang Kai-shek's Chinese Government and its resistance to Japanese penetration into China (the Chinese government even offered to declare war on Germany at the outset of European hostilities - an offer which the British and French firmly declined³). Bitterness over the still unresolved Tientsin incident added to the obstacles in the way of closer Anglo-Japanese understanding. By September 1939, the lapsed Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 was a distant memory.

If Anglo-Japanese relations had functioned in a vacuum, the task of improving them would have been rather easier. In addition, however, to the danger of events in the European conflict triggering repercussions in the Far East, there was the further complication of the United States' role in Far Eastern affairs. Unencumbered by the

the concession were subject to humiliating strip searches. Talks aimed at resolving the crisis broke down in August 1939.

distractions of having to fight a war, the American government, fast losing patience with Japanese imperialism, was moving in the direction of a much firmer line towards Japan over the 'China incident'. Any Anglo-Japanese rapprochement, especially if it involved British concessions towards Japan, would therefore run contrary to the trend of American policy, diluting the impact of any measures the United States might impose, and compromising the western democracies' united front against Japanese expansionism. By moving towards Japan (and consequently away from China), Britain would arouse American disapproval, which might in turn influence the level of support which the United States was willing to give to Britain in her fight against Germany. As Halifax pointed out to the French Government:

'If we were tempted to abandon China, we should run the risk that the latter might throw herself into the arms of Russia and even of Germany. We should also forfeit American goodwill, which is at least as necessary to us in the Far East as it is in Europe'.⁴

Securing both Japanese neutrality and American benevolent neutrality was central to Britain's war effort, but such a policy almost represented a contradiction in terms. Lord Lothian, the British Ambassador in Washington, warned Halifax in November 1939 that in the Far East, Britain's 'only practical policy . . . seems to be to influence United States Government to our policy as far as possible, but to make it clear that in the last resort we will stand with her'.⁵ A careful balancing act had to be attempted, in which Japan was to be appeased enough to prevent the risk of war breaking out, but not so much as to anger the Americans by contradicting their own policy. It was a manoeuvre which, helped by the prevailing circumstances, Chamberlain's government was able to accomplish without ever coming too close to disaster.

³FO 436/5 Clark Kerr to Halifax No. 1010, 11/9/39; Halifax to Clark Kerr No. 930, 21/9/39.

⁴FO 436/5 Halifax to Phipps No. 540 Saving, 5/9/39.

Anglo-Japanese relations in the period up to and including the outbreak of the Pacific War are well covered by the existing literature. Two works particularly stand out: a recent book by Antony Best, and a slighter older one by Peter Lowe, both dealing with broadly the same subject matter.⁶ These provide excellent accounts of the trends in Anglo-Japanese relations, and both contain substantial passages on the Phoney War period. However, whilst these works seek to place this period within the wider story of Anglo-Japanese relations, it is the aim of this chapter to place Anglo-Japanese relations in the context of British policy as a whole during the Phoney War. This means paying greater attention to external factors. One of the biggest of these was the policy of the United States. In many ways the Far East provides a more interesting insight into Anglo-American relations than Europe in this period. This does not seem to have been fully appreciated by most historians of the trans-Atlantic relationship, and will therefore form a central part of this chapter. The other major external factor was China, which again merits close attention as it impacted significantly on British, Japanese, and American policy. Again, the historiography is rather patchy on this particular issue. Before turning attention to these questions, however, it is necessary to look at another important factor influencing Britain's Far Eastern policy: the Pacific Dominions.

The British Dominions of Australia and New Zealand gave the Far East immense importance in British thinking. Strategically, they were a burden which the over-stretched mother country could well have done without, and their vulnerability raised the stakes as far as keeping out of war with Japan was concerned. Their potential contribution to the British war effort was circumscribed by their need to retain sufficient troops for defensive purposes, and the threat of Japanese invasion, however slight, made the Australian and

⁵ FO 436/5 Lothian to Halifax No. 801, 22/11/39.

⁶ Antony Best *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor - Avoiding War in East Asia, 1936-41* (London: LSE/Routledge, 1995); Peter Lowe *Great Britain and the Origins of the Pacific War*. See also Christopher

New Zealand governments reluctant to despatch expeditionary forces overseas. The subsequent British attempts to pass off responsibility for Pacific defence onto the United States illustrate well the British Government's policy of concentrating its limited war resources in those parts of the world where they were needed most: Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic. Australians and New Zealanders, however, saw the war in Europe as far removed from their own concerns. As the British High Commissioner in New Zealand pointed out in March 1940:

Before the actual outbreak of war with Germany, with Japan remaining neutral, it would have been extremely difficult to convince New Zealanders that the threat from Japan was not at least equal to that from Germany. Most of them assessed it, so far as New Zealand was concerned, considerably higher. Not only is Japan geographically nearer, but despite the close ties of blood and sentiment with the British Isles, New Zealanders feel that they have little in common with the continent of Europe.⁷

Such comments provide clear testimony to the problems faced by the British Government in mobilising an empire to fight a war which many of its constituent parts saw as far removed from their own concerns.

The rise of Japan since the turn of the century and the collapse of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in 1921 had necessitated the creation of a plan for the defence of British interests in the Far East. The 'Singapore strategy', as it became known, was formulated soon after the end of the First World War, and centred on the construction of a heavily-defended naval base at Singapore, to which a substantial fleet could be sent in times of danger. There was only one problem with this plan: it relied upon the Royal Navy being

Thorne *Allies of a Kind: the United States, Britain and the War Against Japan, 1941 - 1945* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978).

⁷FO 371/25222 W7846/140/68 H. F. Batterbee (U.K. High Commissioner, New Zealand) to Eden No. 72, 16/3/40.

free from obligations elsewhere in the world. In other words, if Britain was at war in Europe, the resources for Imperial defence in Asia and the Pacific were unlikely to be available.⁸ Much soul-searching had taken place on this question in the Committee for Imperial Defence in the months leading up to the outbreak of the European war. The problem was essentially one of allocation: should the Far East be given priority over the Mediterranean when deciding on the deployment of capital ships? In 1939 the position was not helped by the fact that the Royal Navy was below strength pending the completion of the new King George V class ships, which had been commissioned in 1937, and were due to enter service between 1940 and 1941.⁹ This meant that, for the moment at least, a significant fleet could be stationed either in the Mediterranean or in the Far East, but not in both. A hostage to fortune had been delivered at the Imperial Conference in 1937, where the Dominions had been assured that, in the event of war with Germany, Italy and Japan, a British fleet would be despatched to Singapore, with three objectives:

- i) The prevention of any major operation against Australia, New Zealand or India;
- ii) To keep open our sea communications
- iii) To prevent the fall of Singapore¹⁰

The size of this fleet and the speed with which it was to be despatched would nevertheless be dependent upon the resources available at the time and the state of the European war.¹¹

In reality, the growing likelihood of a three-front war led to the fragmentation and eventual disintegration of the ‘Singapore strategy’. Successive meetings of the CID confronted the unpalatable truth: that Britain could not fight a simultaneous war against

⁸For more detailed accounts of the ‘Singapore strategy’ see J. Neidpath *The Singapore Naval Base and the Defence of Britain’s Eastern Empire* (Oxford, 1981), I. Hamill *The Strategic Illusion: The Singapore Strategy and the Defence of Australia and New Zealand, 1919 - 1942* (Singapore, 1981), and W. David McIntyre *The Rise and Fall of the Singapore Naval Base, 1919-1942* (London, 1979).

⁹For details of Britain’s capital ship strength, see J. Neidpath *The Singapore Naval Base* p. ix.

¹⁰CAB 2/8 CID Meeting 355 Appendix: Personal Most Secret telegram, Chamberlain to Lyons 20/3/39.

Germany, Italy and Japan. The Chiefs of Staff warned that Britain's naval strength 'was insufficient, and indeed was not designed, to engage three naval Powers simultaneously without grave risks'. The only way out of this predicament, as Lord Chatfield rather optimistically explained, was 'to knock out one of them before the others could cause us serious injury'.¹² Chamberlain candidly informed Dominion representatives in June 1939 that 'hostilities with Japan would place us in such an awkward dilemma that they should be avoided, if it was in any way possible to do so'.¹³

Realistically, the only hope for Australia and New Zealand, if threatened militarily or economically by Japan, lay in the United States. Unfortunately for the Pacific Dominions, Lord Lothian reported that Americans did not have 'any particularly strong feeling . . . for Australia and New Zealand, though they are popular as young democracies'.¹⁴ However, the Ambassador felt that 'long before Japanese action threatened Australia or New Zealand, America would be at war' - a combination of United States interest in the Central Pacific, the legacy of the Monroe doctrine, and the argument that war with Japan would not require the despatch of large armies of conscripts would, he thought, produce this favourable outcome. In return for British protection of the Atlantic, Lothian went on, 'the United States must themselves underwrite the security of the British Empire in the Pacific, because they cannot afford the weakening of Great Britain itself, which would follow from the collapse of her dominion in the Pacific'.¹⁵ Whether the State Department would have agreed with Lothian's assessment is, however, open to question.

The Australian Prime Minister, Robert Menzies, reiterated the necessity of keeping Japan out of the war in a telegram to the British Government after three months of war. Further worried by the possibility of a Japanese agreement with Russia, particularly now

¹¹CAB 2/8 CID Meeting 348, 24/2/39.

¹²CAB 2/8 CID Meeting 355, 2/5/39.

¹³CAB 2/9 CID Meeting 362 Secret annex, 28/6/39.

¹⁴FO 436/5 Lothian to Halifax No. 747, 10/11/39.

that active Russo-German co-operation seemed on the cards, he urged that 'every effort should be made to offer Japan some way out of her Chinese position'. Continued frustration there might, he feared, lead to a political collapse in Japan which would bring the extremists to power, 'with extremely dangerous consequences . . . Under the circumstances I attach the greatest importance to [the] co-operation of Britain and America in order to persuade Japan to terminate the Chinese affair and win her away from Russia'.¹⁶ Lothian raised Menzies' fears with Cordell Hull, the US Secretary of State, who, whilst professing to understand Australian anxiety, brushed aside the prospect of a serious Russo-Japanese rapprochement: the combination of their differences and the vagaries of the Far Eastern situation in general 'was much too profound a difficulty to be settled by a right about turn of this kind'.¹⁷ When Lothian went on to warn of the position which would confront both Australia and Great Britain if American action against Japan pushed the latter into striking southwards, Hull played down the chances of any such outcome arising from present United States policy. Here, perhaps, he was guilty of some complacency, although it must be remembered that the eventual Japanese offensive, which in any case did not extend to a direct challenge to Australia and New Zealand, came about only when European influence in the Far East had been severely weakened - a development which, in December 1939, still lay some months away.

The advice of the Australian and New Zealand Governments was usually sought on matters of policy relating directly to them. For example, when the Chiefs of Staff recommended the transfer of two squadrons of bombers from Singapore to India, Eden urged, and the War Cabinet agreed, that the action should only be carried out with the concurrence of the two Pacific Dominions.¹⁸ Likewise, when it eventually came to

¹⁵CAB 65/1 WM 81 (39) 13/11/39. The War Cabinet's reaction to this telegram is not recorded.

¹⁶FO 371/23551 F12708/4027/61 Menzies to Bruce, 7/12/39.

¹⁷FO 436/5 Lothian to Halifax No. 911, 15/12/39.

¹⁸CAB 65/6 WM 73 (40) 20/3/40.

adopting a firmer line with Japan, the Australia and New Zealand Governments were naturally consulted, if not necessarily heeded. The Supreme War Council decision of 28 March 1940 to impose stricter contraband control on Japan was a case in point. Whilst this was preferably to be arrived at by negotiation with the Japanese, it was agreed that such negotiations would only take place once Dominion 'concurrence' had been secured - a time-consuming process which Sir Robert Craigie (the British Ambassador to Japan), clearly less seized of the necessity for such formalities, recommended dispensing with.¹⁹ Consultation nevertheless duly took place. As Eden pointed out to the War Cabinet, 'we should need the co-operation of the Australian Government in our negotiations with the Japanese since the former were large exporters to Japan.'²⁰ The upshot of this was a decision not to intercept ships of *any* nationality in the Pacific for contraband control purposes without prior notification to both the Foreign Office and the Dominions Office - a considerable watering down of the Supreme War Council's proposal.²¹

Clearly, then, the Dominions of Australia and New Zealand had an impact on British Far Eastern policy. This influence was related largely to the simple facts of their status and their geographical position. Pester the British though they might with their fears of Japanese attack, the Australian and New Zealand Governments largely did what they were told during the 'Phoney War' period, due perhaps to the lack of any imminent Japanese threat. Nevertheless, as a valuable manpower and material resource, New Zealand and Australia could not be neglected, alienated or taken for granted. Consultation was usually offered by the British on questions of policy affecting the Far East in general, and the views of the two Dominions were at least taken on board, if not always acted upon. At the same time, the British Government was certainly guilty of duping Australia and New

¹⁹FO 436/6 Halifax to Craigie No. 296, 14/4/40; Craigie to Halifax No. 605, 16/4/40. For this decision by the Supreme War Council see CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 6th Meeting, 28/3/40.

²⁰CAB 65/6 WM 97 (40) 19/4/40.

²¹CAB 65/6 WM 100 (40) 22/4/40.

Zealand with regard to the amount of British support which they would be given if the Japanese were to turn hostile. Thus it made sense for the British to play down the danger of Japanese belligerency, the better to exploit the resources of Australia and New Zealand. So long as Italy posed a threat in the Mediterranean, the ‘Singapore strategy’ of Imperial defence simply could not be implemented. Only the Americans could offer effective protection from Japan, and despite Lothian’s optimistic views on this matter such protection could certainly not be taken for granted. It was clear, then, that by far the best way to ensure the safety of New Zealand and Australia, as well as other British possessions in the Far East, was to avoid war with Japan.

British relief at the Japanese decision not to enter the war at its outset was all the greater because, only a few months previously, at the height of the Tientsin crisis, the Committee of Imperial Defence had considered a world war starting in the Far East, rather than Europe, to be ‘the most likely contingency’.²² There was, however, no room for complacency: the Japanese decision was widely (and accurately) held to be no more than a stay of execution, the length of the reprieve being heavily dependent upon developments in the European conflict. Seen from the perspective of British global policy during the Phoney War, Japan was never anything less than a thorn in the side of Britain’s war strategy. Would she join in the war on the German side? If so, when? If not, what would her attitude be? What, if anything, could Britain do to moderate Japanese policy? The American angle, as has already been shown, further complicated matters. Although these problems could to some extent be put on the back-burner so long as the area remained relatively stable, they could never be allowed to slip too far below the surface.²³ The potential ramifications of any realignment in the area were simply too great to be forgotten.

²²CAB 2/9 CID Meeting 362, 26/6/39. Comment by Chatfield.

²³As an indication of the British attitude, Cadogan noted, after a discussion on Far Eastern problems such as Tientsin and the withdrawal of British garrisons from China, that ‘one can endure these things slowly in the F[ar] E[ast]’ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) entry for 20/9/39.

Even as war was breaking out in Europe, moves were afoot in London to take action in China which would, it was hoped, ease Anglo-Japanese tension. At stake were the British forces in the Chinese concessions. These included the garrisons at Tientsin and Peking, and the gunboats on the Yangtse, all of which had long been recognised as having little more than symbolic importance. Withdrawing them now would lessen the risk of any embarrassing clash with Japanese forces in China (which might spark off more serious trouble with Japan) and, it was hoped, produce a favourable reaction in Tokyo. The forces themselves could be more gainfully employed almost anywhere else.²⁴ However, this relatively painless sop to the Japanese almost immediately ran into trouble. On 5 September the Japanese Government passed an aide-mémoire to the British Embassy in Tokyo. In addition to affirming that Japan would not become involved in the conflict which had broken out in Europe, this note requested that the British Government ‘refrain from taking any such measures as may prejudice Japan’s position in regard to the China affair’. It went on to offer the ‘friendly advice to belligerent powers concerned that they should voluntarily withdraw their troops and warships’ from the areas of China under Japanese occupation.²⁵ This created a new situation. As Sir Robert Craigie noted at the time, however much sense it might make to withdraw the troops, ‘it is one thing to do this voluntarily and quite another at the invitation of the Japanese Government. Whole proceedings appear to me to be highly rejectable and clumsy and . . . should firmly be rejected’.²⁶ Withdrawal in the face of such a request would look suspiciously like British accession to Japanese pressure, and even if this humiliation could be stomached in London, such action would be guaranteed to produce criticism from Washington.

²⁴FO 371/23521 F9282/3918/10 Minute by Vansittart 21/8/39; F9286/3918/10 Craigie to Halifax No. 1083, 22/8/39; F9304/3918/10 Clark Kerr to Halifax No. 926, 22/8/39; F9315/3918/10 Minute by Cadogan 24/8/39.

²⁵ FO 371/23460 F9844/87/10 Craigie to Halifax No. 1170 (R), 5/9/39.

²⁶ FO 371/23460 F9846/87/10 Craigie to Halifax No. 1171, 5/9/39.

After musing on the matter for a day, Craigie suggested that the Japanese move was either a ‘try on’ or a prelude to Japanese use of force against British interests (particularly Tientsin) in China. In the latter case, he argued that the British forces should be withdrawn to avoid ‘playing [the] German game by involving Japan as a belligerent in [the] present war’. In any event, he urged consultation with the United States before deciding how to react.²⁷ Halifax stressed the importance of such consultation to the American Ambassador, Joseph Kennedy, on 14 September. He made clear his dislike of the Japanese offer of ‘friendly advice’ to withdraw from China. However, the British response would, he claimed, depend to a large extent on the American attitude:

‘if they felt able to assure us of full support in the event of our taking a stiff attitude with the Japanese Government, that would necessarily have a very great effect on our policy. If, on the other hand, they did not feel able to do this, . . . we should have to move much more cautiously’.²⁸

Of course, this may simply have been an attempt on Halifax’s part to safeguard American goodwill in case of a withdrawal. The extent to which Britain was prepared to adopt a ‘stiff attitude’ with Japan on this (or indeed any) question is, after all, extremely debatable, given the general policy of striving to improve Anglo-Japanese relations. There were signs that the Americans were not so keen on this line. Dr Hornbeck, the State Department’s leading authority on the Far East, told Lothian that he hoped Britain ‘would resist Japanese proposals and that in that event United States Government would probably take same line’. R. A. Butler, whilst deprecating the American attempt to influence British policy, observed that ‘Listening to America is a drag if overdone; equally to underdo it is unwise’.²⁹ Cadogan, who had earlier expressed his reluctance to advocate withdrawal except ‘as a choice of the lesser evil’, now argued that the forces were merely ‘a relic of the “gunboat”

²⁷FO 371/23521 F9879/3918/10 Craigie to Halifax No. 1179, 6/9/39.

²⁸FO 414/276 Halifax to Lothian No. 1060, 14/9/39.

days' and were in any case no protection against Japan.³⁰ Keeping them in place, and thereby risking antagonising the Japanese, made very little sense. Added weight was given to the argument for withdrawal by an emphatic assurance from the Japanese Prime Minister, General Abe Nobuyuki, that the 'friendly advice' was not an attempt by the Japanese Government to take 'unfair advantage of our difficulties elsewhere'. The suggestion, he told Craigie, had simply 'been put forward as one way of avoiding incidents which might lead to complications'.³¹

On 15 September, after consultations with the French Government on the matter, Halifax informed Craigie that, as far as withdrawal was concerned, the American attitude was paramount. It was, he added, 'advisable not to give an America which is ready to come to their aid the impression that the British and French Governments wish to commit suicide'.³² Great care was needed in explaining the situation: Lothian was instructed to inform the American Government that Britain and France, 'do not feel themselves able . . . to offer any resistance which could be counted on to defeat persistent Japanese pressure', and that 'unless [a] definite assurance of United States support is forthcoming, the two Governments consider that it may well be better to withdraw without sacrifice of principle'.³³ Without a pledge of American support, as Cadogan noted on 19 September, a withdrawal would have to be carefully stage-managed in order to avoid the Americans 'throwing bricks at us'.³⁴

In order to quell Japanese impatience whilst trans-Atlantic consultations took place, Craigie was instructed, following a War Cabinet discussion of the issue, to drop hints in Tokyo that withdrawal was a distinct possibility, and that the Japanese government should

²⁹ FO 371/23460 F9922/87/10 Lothian to Halifax No. 448, 7/9/39.

³⁰ FO 371/23521 F9282/3918/10 Minute by Cadogan 24/8/39; F10077/3918/10 Minute by Cadogan 8/9/39.

³¹ FO 371/23460 F9941/87/10 Craigie to Halifax No. 1188 (R), 8/9/39.

³² FO 436/5 Halifax to Craigie No. 605, 15/9/39.

³³ FO 436/5 Halifax to Lothian No. 541, 16/9/39.

³⁴ FO 371/23551 F10253/4027/61 Minute by Cadogan 19/9/39.

not put further obstacles in the way of such action. What the Cabinet had in mind, he was informed, was a more general settlement of the Tientsin incident, of which the withdrawal of the garrison there might form a part. Still the most important factor, however, was the attitude of the United States.³⁵ Craigie now responded by arguing that after all the Japanese request had ‘all the appearance of being a “try on” . . . the Japanese Government do not intend to press [the] question of withdrawal . . . We should, in my opinion, play for time’.³⁶ In Washington, Hornbeck told Lothian that British withdrawal would force a reassessment of United States policy.³⁷ Lothian even warned that withdrawal of the Tientsin garrison might affect Roosevelt’s attempts to repeal the American embargo on arms sales to belligerents, and ‘strengthen isolationists in their demand for strict limitation of American overseas commitments’.³⁸ The State Department’s reluctance to withdraw drew stinging criticism from R. G. Howe, of the Foreign Office Far Eastern Department, who bemoaned the ‘hopeless, vague idealism of American thinking’.³⁹ Even so, withdrawal still seemed desirable from a British point of view, and the War Cabinet continued to think in terms of when, rather than if, it could be carried out.

By mid-October, the desire to withdraw British troops from Tientsin and Peking as soon as possible seems to have coalesced into a policy decision - however, it still remained to convince the United States of its wisdom, and final execution of the decision was held in abeyance until this important proviso had been met.⁴⁰ Halifax urged Lord Lothian on 18 October to press the British case with the Americans, pointing out that but for the Japanese ‘friendly advice’ withdrawal would already have taken place as a matter of course, and that enough time had now passed since the Japanese suggestion to make withdrawal possible

³⁵FO 436/5 Halifax to Craigie No. 637, 23/9/39; CAB 65/1 WM 24 (39) 23/9/39.

³⁶FO 371/23522 F10490/3918/10 Craigie to Halifax No. 1295, 27/9/39.

³⁷FO 436/5 Lothian to Halifax No. 548, 28/9/39.

³⁸FO 371/23461 F10549/87/10 Lothian to Halifax No. 552, 28/9/39.

³⁹FO 371/23461 F10530/87/10 Minute by Howe, 29/9/39, on Lothian to Halifax No. 549, 27/9/39.

⁴⁰CAB 65/1 WM 46 (39) 13/10/39; WM 50 (39) 17/10/39.

‘without loss of prestige on that score’. Such a move, he was to stress, did not foreshadow any withdrawal from Shanghai, where American interests were greatest.⁴¹ Lothian put this argument to Hull and to Hornbeck: both seemed to understand the British predicament but wanted at least a token British presence to remain in the outposts.⁴² This proposal was reported back to London, and was conceded immediately by the War Cabinet. The withdrawal of the main body of the British garrisons at Tientsin and Peking was at last ordered on 27 October.⁴³ Two of the Yangtse gunboats were subsequently laid up ‘for the sake of consistency’.⁴⁴ British prestige was not dented, Japan was appeased, and the Americans, if not completely happy, were at least not enraged by the British action. A difficult situation had been successfully defused.

There can be little doubt that, in one important respect, British and Japanese views accorded perfectly in September 1939: neither wanted to fight the other in the immediate future. Expressions of a mutual desire for closer Anglo-Japanese relations and the settlement of outstanding problems were traded in Tokyo and London.⁴⁵ Whilst undoubtedly representing a genuine wish on both sides to avoid conflict, these soothing words were, in reality, largely cosmetic: the fundamental divisions between Britain and Japan remained as insurmountable as ever. It was recognised by most of those whose views mattered that relations could only be improved up to a point, the stumbling block coming in the shape of China (and, by extension, the United States). Skirting round this obstacle, or pretending that it did not exist, could only effect a limited improvement in relations; nevertheless small steps to improve matters were felt, in Britain at least, to be worth the candle. For some, however, the apparent calm in Anglo-Japanese relations

⁴¹FO 436/5 Halifax to Lothian No. 645, 18/10/39.

⁴²FO 436/5 Lothian to Halifax No. 647, 20/10/39.

⁴³CAB 65/1 WM 57 (39) 23/10/39; WM 62 (39) 27/10/39.

⁴⁴FO 371/23523 F12933/3918/10 Halifax to Campbell No. 1074 Saving, Halifax to Lothian No. 941, 22/12/39.

seemed to represent a much greater set of possibilities, and it is worth considering the extent to which such optimism was justifiable.

The most vocal exponent of the pro-Japanese school of thought was R. A. Butler, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, whose recently-acquired responsibility for Far Eastern affairs gave him more than a passing acquaintance with the difficulties of the British position. In a memorandum (to which historians have rightly drawn attention) for Lord Halifax, dated 22 September 1939, he set out the arguments for, and the ways of achieving, the restoration of friendlier Anglo-Japanese relations.⁴⁶ In view of Butler's reputation as a super-appeaser,⁴⁷ it is tempting to regard this paper as merely another example of his unrealistic appreciation of foreign affairs. Butler's impetus for writing the paper, however, arose from his highly pragmatic realisation that it was unwise for Britain to be on 'indifferent' terms with both the Soviet Union and Japan, and that therefore an attempt should be made to move closer to one or the other. Moreover, since the Soviet Union and Japan seemed likely to remain at odds with each other, siding with one would secure an additional ally against the other. Such thinking appears sound, as indeed does Butler's contention that '[i]f things go badly [in Europe] Japan may take the opportunity to tear our flanks'. Likewise, as Antony Best has recognised, Butler's plans for the improvement of relations aimed at slow progress by negotiation on the outstanding points of conflict, principally Tientsin and trade, rather than sweeping concessions to the Japanese.⁴⁸ Moreover, the memorandum was supported by the Government's occasionally volatile Chief Diplomatic Advisor, Sir Robert Vansittart, whose reputation was built

⁴⁵See, for example, Halifax's account of his interview with the Japanese Ambassador in FO 436/5 Halifax to Craigie No. 736, 11/9/39.

⁴⁶FO 371/23556 F10710/176/23 Memorandum by Butler for the Secretary of State, 22/9/39.

⁴⁷See, for example, ACAD 1/9 (Cadogan diary 1940) entries for 23/2/40: (on British rejection of a Russian approach to Finland) 'R.A.B. very disgusted - I am sure he saw here another chance of 'appeasement'', and 30/4/40: (on Italy and Yugoslavia) 'R.A.B. of course, 'appeasing''.

⁴⁸A. Best, *Britain, Japan and Pearl Harbor* (LSE/Routledge, 1995) p. 89.

largely on his opposition to appeasement - at least as far as Germany was concerned.⁴⁹ Finally, as Butler stated at the outset, the paper did not signify ‘that I personally have “plumped” for Japan’. On the face of it, then, the memorandum would appear worthy of serious consideration.

Where Butler’s argument let him down was in his grasp of the realities of Britain’s position vis-à-vis Japan - especially in view of the situation in China and the attitude of the United States.

It does not appear [he argued] there are the makings of a war between America and Japan . . . I do not believe that it will in the end pay us to keep Japan at arm’s length and distrust everything she does for the sake of American opinion. . . . I believe it is still possible to obtain American interest on our side in fighting the dictators in the West, while improving our relations with Japan.

Nevertheless, Butler went on to advocate the line most calculated to drive the Americans to paroxysms of anger: in effect, the ‘throwing over’ by Britain of Chiang Kai-shek’s regime in China, in order to avoid the risk of being on the opposing side to Japan in a Chinese civil war. British policy should, he asserted, be modified from one of support for Chiang Kai-shek to one of support for a negotiated peace in the Sino-Japanese conflict. The probable American reaction to such a policy, the slim prospects of an acceptable Sino-Japanese peace agreement actually being reached, and the threat posed to British interests by a Japan free of its entanglement in China, all militate against the wisdom of Butler’s proposals. The thinking behind his ideas was sound, but his rather idealistic suggestions needed to be tempered by a large dose of the pragmatism which drove him to write this paper in the first place.

⁴⁹FO 371/23556 F10710/176/23 Minute by Vansittart, 22/9/39.

Another fundamental question which the War Cabinet had to confront was whether or not it was in British interests for the Sino-Japanese conflict to continue. Butler's view that Britain should work towards a negotiated peace, although contentious, was followed up at the end of September, when Craigie was authorised to sound out the Japanese Government about the possibility of using British good offices to bring the conflict to an end. Plans for such a move, involving a meeting between the protagonists at Hong Kong, had been mooted in April 1939, but the Tientsin affair had put them on hold. The War Cabinet now saw two main objections to this plan: the effect on world opinion of involvement in 'an arrangement whereby China's interests were sacrificed to Japan', and the danger of Japan, freed from involvement in China, intervening against Britain in Europe or the Pacific.⁵⁰ In the Foreign Office, Howe warned that British mediation in the dispute was 'not likely to be received enthusiastically by the United States Government and we should have to be extremely careful in our handling of the question'.⁵¹ The Chiefs of Staff were consulted on the matter: they concluded that from a military point of view, 'so long as Japan has this commitment in China, she is unable to concentrate on us, and the continued drain on her economic resources must react on her capacity to wage war in the future . . . the prolongation of the war is to our advantage'.⁵² Churchill was convinced by these arguments, and urged that Craigie, who seemed determined to end the conflict single-handed, should be restrained in his peacemaking endeavours. Chamberlain was non-committal, stressing the wisdom of Britain taking 'a middle course'. In an echo of his policy towards Germany and Italy, he emphasised the need 'to encourage those elements in Japan which were friendly to us. At the same time we must be careful not to prejudice General Chiang Kai-shek's position in any way'.⁵³ The War Cabinet decided that there

⁵⁰CAB 65/1 WM 26 (39) 25/9/39.

⁵¹ FO 371/23461 F10530/87/10 Minute by Howe, 29/9/39

⁵²CAB 66/2 WP 56 (39) 28/9/39.

⁵³CAB 65/1 WM 30 (39) 28/9/39.

was no need to come to any conclusion until Chiang Kai-shek had been consulted.⁵⁴ In the event this did not happen: doubts were raised about the intermediary used by Craigie in his dealings with the Japanese Government, the matter was not raised with Chiang Kai-shek, and the possibility of Britain helping to bring an end to the Sino-Japanese conflict by mediation seems to have been dropped.⁵⁵

The question of whether the balance of advantage for Britain lay in the resolution or the continuation of the conflict is still a difficult matter to judge. A crushing Japanese victory followed by the subjugation of the entire Chinese nation would clearly have been a disaster for Britain, but this was unlikely in the circumstances - not least because the Japanese themselves would surely have shrunk from the inevitable confrontation with Russia which this would have occasioned. If on the other hand China were suddenly to turn the Japanese out in a spectacular counter-offensive, this would certainly be in Britain's interests, for a defeated Japan would be more than a little wary of any further adventures. This too, however, was not really on the cards. Butler had rightly drawn attention to 'the continued lack of fighting skill, and indeed fighting at all, shown by the Chinese'.⁵⁶ However, a negotiated peace would have been difficult to arrive at, since the Japanese would have been determined to preserve some measure of control in Northern China, and the Chinese would be equally adamant that no such control should exist. So long as Chiang Kai-shek's regime continued to be recognised by the international community as the legitimate Chinese government, any Japanese consolidation in the north would remain precarious. The continuation of the struggle until one or other of the sides (or indeed both) was exhausted seemed inevitable unless considerable outside pressure could be brought to bear one way or the other. If Britain could press China into agreeing a settlement favourable to Japan, this would almost certainly elevate Anglo-Japanese relations, but at no

⁵⁴CAB 65/1 WM 32 (39) 30/9/39.

⁵⁵CAB 65/1 WM 42 (39) 9/10/39.

little cost to Anglo-American (not to mention Anglo-Chinese) relations. Since the maxim of British Far Eastern policy at this time was to keep 'in step' with American policy (or at any rate to be seen to be keeping in step with it) such a move was, again, unlikely. Perhaps, then, in the circumstances, Chamberlain's 'middle course' was the only realistic option, aiming as it did at giving as little offence as possible to any of the sides involved.

Japan had its own ideas about solving the deadlock currently besetting its 'China incident'. These involved establishing a pro-Japanese government at Nanking under the leadership of Chiang Kai-shek's former Kuomintang colleague Wang Ching-wei. It was hoped that the Chinese people themselves, as well as overseas powers, would come to recognise this as the legitimate Chinese Government, in preference to the regime of Chiang Kai-shek. There was ample warning of this development, so that although, due to disagreements between Wang Ching-wei and the Japanese, the regime was not proclaimed until March 1940, the scheme was common knowledge in London shortly after the outbreak of the European war.⁵⁷ The question which had to be faced was how to react to it. Granting the regime official recognition would certainly appease the Japanese, if only because it would imply an end to support for Chiang Kai-shek. Realistically, however, such a move by the British was nigh on impossible. The international community as a whole, and the United States in particular, regarded Chiang Kai-shek's regime as the rightful government of China. Only a Chinese civil war which saw the defeat of Chiang Kai-shek could have changed this. Craigie seems to have favoured some sort of contact with Wang Ching-wei as a stepping stone towards improved Anglo-Japanese relations.⁵⁸ By the time the regime was actually established, however, there was no longer any urgency about making a response. Even the Japanese Ambassador, Shigemitsu Mamoru, recognised

⁵⁶FO 371/23556 F10710/176/23 Memorandum by Butler, 22/9/39.

⁵⁷See P. Lowe *Great Britain and the Origins of the Pacific War* pp. 121-7 for a detailed consideration of this question.

⁵⁸See Lowe *op cit* pp. 123-5.

that Britain could hardly be expected to grant recognition immediately, and it quickly became apparent that the best policy was simply to wait on events.⁵⁹ The danger of parting company with the Americans on the issue outweighed the potential improvement in Anglo-Japanese relations that might be secured by recognition, and the new regime (which ultimately failed to secure any significant Chinese support) was simply kept under observation. Another potential danger to Anglo-Japanese relations was thus kept neatly under control.

The Japanese lost few opportunities of pressing for an end to British support for Chiang Kai-shek. At the end of October 1939, Craigie reported the slightly fantastic view of the Japanese Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs that a return to the Anglo-Japanese alliance might prove possible, and should not, therefore, be jeopardised by British actions. The truth of the matter was concisely summed up by Ashley Clarke of the Foreign Office Far Eastern Department:

The plain fact is that there can be no return to the alliance conditions in Anglo-Japanese relations without our throwing over China. This seems only conceivable if either (1) the Japse [sic] + Chinese compose their differences, or (2) the Chinese throw us over and conclude a close alliance with a Russia actively hostile to us.⁶⁰

The question of 'throwing over China' - or at any rate Chiang Kai-shek's government - in favour of Japan was precisely what Butler had already advocated, but it seems that his views on this matter were somewhat extreme. Concessions such as the withdrawal of the British garrisons cannot be regarded as a step in this direction, and the question of complete withdrawal of support for Chiang Kai-shek was never raised at Cabinet level. To this extent the policy of improving relations with Japan only so far as this was consistent

⁵⁹FO 371/24660 F2073/27/10 Minute by Butler on talk with Shigemitsu, 21/3/40.

with the maintenance of Anglo-Chinese relations was adhered to - although a realistic chance of trading Chinese goodwill for Japanese never really emerged. Nevertheless, the Chinese themselves continued to harbour suspicions about the British attitude. In November, Halifax had to reassure the Chinese Ambassador, Dr Quo Tai-chi, and the President of the Chinese Legislature, Dr Fo, that British policy towards China 'would remain as it had been stated on many occasions, namely, to endeavour to improve relations with Japan, but not to do a deal with her at China's expense, and at the same time to keep in close touch and step with the United States of America'.⁶¹ Again, the contradictions implicit in such a policy were glossed over. In any case, the Chinese can scarcely have been satisfied by the attitude shown towards them by the British Government. Seeking closer Anglo-Chinese relations was also considered to be just as hazardous as moving away from the Chinese: for example, Ashley Clarke warned Major Cornwall-Jones at the Cabinet Office in November 1939 that holding staff conversations with China would 'play into the hands of the pro-German element in Japan'. Cornwall Jones agreed that such a move 'would at present be dangerous'.⁶² Chamberlain's 'middle course' was not to be compromised.

The extension of Allied contraband control at the end of November 1939, following the decision to seize German exports, heralded the start of a difficult period for the British Government. Although aimed at reducing the belligerent capacity of Germany, the new measures initially served chiefly to incite resentment amongst neutral countries, aggrieved that they were being dragged into a conflict in which most wanted no part, and angered that they stood to lose out economically in the process. Even the overwhelmingly

⁶⁰FO 371/23556 F11335/176/23 Minute by Ashley Clarke 31/10/39 re. Craigie to Halifax No. 1429, 28/10/39.

⁶¹FO 436/5 Halifax to Clark Kerr No. 957, 8/11/39. A similar message was sent to Chiang Kai-shek, via Clark Kerr, at the end of 1939: see *ibid* Halifax to Clark Kerr No. 1266, 28/12/39.

⁶²FO 371/23551 F9731/4027/61 Clarke to Cornwall Jones 30/11/39; F12466/4027/61 Cornwall Jones to Ashley Clarke, 6/12/39.

sympathetic Americans balked at their high-handed treatment by the British. It is no surprise, then, that the issue quickly became a source of tension between Britain and Japan. As soon as the Orders in Council announcing the seizure of exports were issued, the Japanese Government informed the Japanese press that they would take 'strong counter-measures' if their interests were threatened by the British action.⁶³ Shigemitsu informed Halifax that the Japanese Government were unlikely to regard the controls as legitimate.⁶⁴ Events soon came to a head. On 10 December, reports reached London that the Japanese ship *Sanyo Maru*, due to sail from Rotterdam, was carrying 'secret naval goods' from Germany - possibly bound for German agents overseas. Cadogan ordered the ship to be brought in for examination, but 'as a sop to the Japs (of whom we are frightened) said she wouldn't be kept long'.⁶⁵ The matter was felt to be important enough to bring to the attention of the Cabinet, and discussions about how best to handle it stretched over the next few days. The Japanese demanded exemption from examination for the ship; this only increased British suspicions. Lord Chatfield warned that the Japanese would be 'very unpleasant to us' if the cargo were seized - a consequence which would far outweigh any benefits derived from seizure. Churchill, however, was more concerned with the necessity of upholding contraband control. The War Cabinet, torn between antagonising the Japanese and compromising the effectiveness of the blockade, played for time. The *Sanyo Maru* remained in dock. Eventually a compromise was reached: the Japanese Ambassador gave an assurance that all goods on board (which were fully set out in the ship's manifest) were destined for Japan and would not be trans-shipped, in return for which the British agreed to let the ship through contraband control with only a cursory examination. The same procedure would be followed for all ships carrying German goods to Japan until the

⁶³FO 436/5 Craigie to Halifax No. 1547, 25/11/39.

⁶⁴FO 436/5 Halifax to Craigie No. 826, 27/11/39.

⁶⁵ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 10/12/39.

end of the year, after which contraband control would be strictly enforced.⁶⁶ The eventual British response, then, was clearly a ‘sop’ to the Japanese. Would the same line have been followed if a different neutral had been involved? Only, one suspects, if the country in question had been either Italy (whom it was similarly dangerous to annoy) or the United States (whose good opinion was perhaps the most valuable British weapon in the war). With Japan, the feeling seems to have been, nothing could be taken for granted and no risks run: the potential consequences of doing so were considered simply too great.

One of the reasons for this trepidation regarding Japan was the appearance towards the end of November of rumours that Japan and the Soviet Union were about to come to some kind of agreement. These seem to have originated in a report by Sir William Seeds, the British Ambassador in Moscow, stating that the Germans had used their good offices at Tokyo in an attempt to promote a Russo-Japanese rapprochement, involving a temporary definition of spheres of interest in the Far East - to the exclusion of the Western powers.⁶⁷ If true, this was an unsettling prospect in the extreme: Russo-Japanese hostility in the area was long established, and the fear of a serious clash between the two had certainly had a calming effect upon the policy of both. If an accommodation was now on the cards, it was vital that Britain do everything possible to avert it. Initially, at least, the threat was not rated too highly - it was felt that the Soviet invasion of Finland would cause sufficient indignation in Japan to put off any such possibility, and the Americans, as we have seen, scoffed at the very idea.⁶⁸ Craigie, however, was not inclined to take the danger so lightly. He warned that any Russo-Japanese agreement which lasted for the duration of the European war might influence the outcome of that conflict, and urged the initiation of American-Japanese commercial negotiations, as well as the continuation of the Tientsin

⁶⁶CAB 65/2 WM 110 (39) 10/12/39; WM 111(39) 11/12/39; WM 112 (39) 12/12/39; WM 113 (39) 13/12/39; WM 114 (39) 14/12/39; WM 115 (39) 14/12/39; WM 117 (39) 16/12/39.

⁶⁷FO 436/5 Seeds to Halifax No. 471, 25/11/39.

⁶⁸CAB 65/2 WM 103 (39) 4/12/39; WM 104 (39) 5/12/39; WM 113 (39) 13/12/39.

talks. This, he hoped, would generate an 'improved atmosphere' which would enable the settlement of further disputes and keep the Japanese away from the Soviets.⁶⁹ Even Butler, who had previously asserted that 'Russia and Japan are bound to remain enemies', now conceded that such a combination would leave the Soviet Union 'all the more released for adventures elsewhere' - although he too thought it unlikely to happen 'unless we are very stupid'.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, the danger was perceived to be significant enough to require remedial action. Indeed, the impetus for such action came from the Prime Minister himself.

At the beginning of 1940, Craigie suggested that Japan ought to be offered 'some concrete evidence that her basic problems, such as lack of raw materials, dependence on overseas markets, population etc. will be considered,' adding that such a move 'would contribute to the early conclusion of the war in Europe by eliminating potential dangers to our position in the Far East'. These comments were passed to Chamberlain, who clearly saw some advantage in the suggestion, noting: 'This ought to be considered, though the prospect is not attractive at first sight'. The Foreign Office were asked to look into the matter.⁷¹ Their response, however, was unenthusiastic: nothing was considered possible until the war was over, and as the conditions at that point could not be predicted, it was deemed inadvisable to give undertakings to Japan which could not subsequently be kept. All that they were prepared to offer at this stage was a promise to the Japanese 'as part of a general peace settlement' of 'a readjustment of [the] world economy which will give Japan, amongst other nations, freer access to the markets and raw materials which are essential to her welfare'.⁷² Japan would thus have an interest in an Allied victory - although realistically such terms were hardly likely to win unconditional Japanese support for the Allies. The idea of bribing Japan out of any anti-British involvement in the war,

⁶⁹FO 436/5 Craigie to Halifax No. 1645, 18/12/39.

⁷⁰FO 371/23556 F10710/176/23 22/9/39; FO 371/23551 F12708/4027/61 Minute by Butler, 21/12/39.

⁷¹FO 371/24708 F420/193/61 Syers to Mallet 15/1/40 re. Craigie to Halifax No. 2 Saving, 1/1/40.

⁷²FO 371/24708 F420/193/61 Memorandum by Dening, 25/1/40.

however attractive it might have appeared to those charged with running the war, was clearly held by the Foreign Office to be unrealisable - a judgement which, with the benefit of hindsight, seems a sound one.

Rather more progress was made on the long-standing dispute between Britain and Japan over Tientsin. Talks aimed at reaching a settlement had been terminated in August 1939, but the outbreak of the war in Europe and the threat of Japanese belligerence had convinced the British that attempts to remove this sticking point in Anglo-Japanese relations should be intensified. Peter Lowe gives a fuller account of the negotiations on this matter,⁷³ which now centred on the use of Chinese currency in the concession, and the question of Chinese silver reserves held in British and French banks there. Things moved slowly, but gradually compromises began to be made by both sides (although more so by the British than the Japanese). The matter was not finally resolved until 12 June 1940, but the progress made by Craigie in talks during the Phoney War period was instrumental in bringing about the final settlement of the Tientsin incident, and represents a concrete example of the British desire to smooth things over with the Japanese - as well as demonstrating that the Japanese themselves were not, at this time, averse to negotiation as an alternative to confrontation.

The most striking example of the threat of Japanese belligerence intruding into British concerns came with the *Asama Maru* affair in late January 1940. This incident marked the high point of Anglo-Japanese animosity during the Phoney War, and its successful resolution gave way to a period of more tranquil relations. For a few brief days, however, tensions ran high, and the danger of Anglo-Japanese conflict was seriously raised for the first time since the outbreak of the European war. Again, the problem arose from the British policy of contraband control: on 21 January a Japanese ship, the *Asama Maru*,

⁷³ Lowe *Great Britain and the Origins of the Pacific War* pp. 128-135.

was intercepted off the Japanese coast and twenty-one Germans (naval officers and ratings returning to Germany) were removed from it. The incident caused a storm of protest in Japan, probably related as much to the proximity of the action to the Japanese mainland as to the legality or otherwise of the case. On the British side, Cadogan, clearly worried, noted that the incident ‘looks ugly’.⁷⁴ The Japanese Government stated in an official note of protest that they regarded the British move as ‘a serious unfriendly act against Japan and therefore they attach the greatest importance to the affair,’ and advised the British Government to give ‘serious consideration to the matter’.⁷⁵ Even Craigie was taken aback by the strength of the protest, and strongly urged against the planned interception of another ship, the *La Plata Maru*, ‘unless His Majesty’s Government are definitely prepared to face the consequences, which may in the present super-excited state of Japanese opinion involve a breach of relations and Japanese counter-measures, possibly leading in turn to war’.⁷⁶ This was perhaps an exaggeration: the Japanese Government seems to have been more concerned with saving face in the eyes of the Japanese public than with making a serious challenge to Britain. Indeed, they proved surprisingly amenable to reaching a negotiated settlement of the case, even to the extent of tacitly accepting the principle behind the British action in exchange for the return of some of the detained Germans.

The War Cabinet devoted much time to discussing the matter; however, concerted diplomatic action in the immediate aftermath of the event (an indication of the seriousness with which the Cabinet regarded the danger of a breach with Japan) quickly extinguished fears of a Far Eastern crisis developing at a moment when German activity in Europe seemed to be on the cards.⁷⁷ Cadogan noted on 25 January that it was ‘tiresome that at

⁷⁴ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 23/1/40.

⁷⁵FO 436/6 Craigie to Halifax No. 97, 22/1/40.

⁷⁶FO 436/6 Craigie to Halifax No. 110, 23/1/40.

⁷⁷CAB 65/5 WM 21 (40) 23/1/40; WM 22 (40) 24/1/40; WM 23 (40) 25/1/40; WM 24 (40) 26/1/40; WM 26 (40) 29/1/40; WM 27 (40) 30/1/40; WM 28 (40) 31/1/40; WM 29 (40) 1/2/40; WM 30 (40) 2/2/40; WM 32 (40) 3/2/40; WM 33 (40) 5/2/40; WM 34 (40) 6/2/40.

critical moments we always get let down in the Far East', adding however that 'tempers have cooled a bit'.⁷⁸ Halifax, who had initially taken fright and wanted to return all 21 Germans to the Japanese, was persuaded by the Cabinet and his Foreign Office advisers that this would be 'too far removed from the Oriental predilection for bargaining', and modified his position accordingly.⁷⁹ As a sweetener to the Japanese (and, perhaps, an indication of British fears), it was agreed that Chamberlain should throw a conciliatory reference to Japan into his next public speech.⁸⁰ However, once it became clear - as it quickly did - that the Japanese were just as anxious to negotiate as the British, it became simply a matter of haggling over the numbers of Germans to be returned. As there were 21, Halifax mused that '[i]n true Oriental fashion we ought to halve the odd German . . . and split the difference'.⁸¹ A 29 year-old third officer named Gottke, who had been ranked eleventh in importance of the captured Germans in view of his limited 'technical value', should have counted himself lucky that this idea was not taken further!⁸² It is difficult to escape the conclusion that the eventual settlement was distinctly more favourable to Britain than to Japan: in exchange for the return of nine of the detainees, the Japanese undertook to order their shipping lines not to carry any more Germans of military age without prior consultation. Halifax, forgetting his earlier desire to capitulate to the Japanese, seemed well pleased: 'tiresome as the whole business has been,' he wrote, 'I doubt if we should have got as much out of them if we had not begun by stopping the ship'. Nevertheless, he resolved that, in future, British contraband control must be applied to the Japanese 'without blowing them through the roof'.⁸³ Craigie had undoubtedly used his negotiating skills to good effect in reaching such a settlement, but it must be noted that had the Japanese

⁷⁸ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry 25/1/40.

⁷⁹Halifax Papers A7.8.3 (Halifax Diary) Entry for 31/1/40.

⁸⁰CAB 65/5 WM 27 (40) 30/1/40.

⁸¹Halifax Papers A7.8.3 (Halifax Diary) Entry for 1/2/40.

⁸²Churchill Papers CHAR 19/8 Commander-in-Chief, China, to Admiralty, 3/2/40.

⁸³Halifax Papers A7.8.3 (Halifax Diary) Entries for 6/2/40 & 9/2/40.

wished to make a stand on the issue they would certainly have done so. That they chose instead to settle with minimum loss of face goes a long way towards explaining the relatively stable Anglo-Japanese relations in this period. The British attitude may have been one of appeasement (within the limits imposed by the Chinese and American factors), but in order for it to work the Japanese had to be willing to be appeased. It seems clear that, for the time being at least, they were.

What of the American attitude towards the Far East? On 14 December 1939, Lord Lothian had paid Roosevelt a visit to discuss, amongst other things, the situation in that part of the world. The President was reassuring: although he would continue to put pressure on Japan, he did not foresee any crisis emerging with that country, nor did he anticipate Japanese expansion southwards. Japan would not, he thought, run the risk of an American fleet being sent to the Philippines, and, according to Lothian's account of the meeting, 'evidently thought that the United States could take action, short of war, which would deter Japan from embarking on any such adventure'.⁸⁴ Hull told Lothian shortly afterwards that the United States was prepared to resist Japanese attempts to dominate China 'if necessary for twenty-five years', and also played down the threat of Japan moving south 'so long as the United States pursued its present lines'.⁸⁵ These soothing words from the two men who between them decided American foreign policy (heavily influenced as they were by public opinion) may have struck their British audience as rather complacent; nevertheless they reveal a more realistic appreciation of Japanese intentions than those sometimes advanced on the other side of the Atlantic. Unencumbered by involvement in a war, free from the nervous proddings of the Pacific Dominions, and closer to the area in question, the Americans were undoubtedly in a better position than the British to assess the prospects of Japanese belligerence. Nevertheless, it was sensible for

⁸⁴FO 800/397 US/39/14 Lothian to Halifax 14/12/39.

⁸⁵FO 436/5 Lothian to Halifax No. 911, 15/12/39.

the British to remain alive to the dangers in the area, and to do whatever could safely be done to minimise these. This policy was to place strains on Anglo-American relations in 1940.

British concerns over America's more resolute policy towards Japan were set out at the end of December by Maberly Dening of the Foreign Office's Far Eastern Department. Speculating prophetically (if somewhat prematurely) on the danger of the United States and Japan being 'drawn into a situation from which there is no escape', Dening asserted that whilst British policy could have no significant effect on American-Japanese relations, British concessions to Japan might well 'irritate America without helping, or thereby earning the gratitude of, Japan'. In view of the importance of American goodwill, the best line for Britain to take was 'that of an interested spectator'.⁸⁶ However, he went on to suggest a cunning solution to the problem of encouraging American intervention on behalf of British interests in the Far East. The Americans, whilst they had been made aware of the potential dangers to Britain of their policy, should not be discouraged from taking a firm line with Japan because 'if American action results in an attack upon our own interests, we shall have some moral claim to her assistance, which she may be disposed to afford, provided we have succeeded in retaining her goodwill'.

Whilst displaying the familiar (and understandable) British tendency to play up the danger of Japanese belligerence, Dening nevertheless demonstrates a realistic appreciation of the problems of encouraging American intervention on Britain's behalf. Formal agreements or guarantees were, in view of the domestic constraints on American foreign policy, out of the question; a 'moral claim' to assistance was the best that could be hoped for. Since such a claim was dependent upon American goodwill in general, the implications went beyond Far Eastern affairs. The tangled web of global interconnections

⁸⁶FO 436/5 Memorandum by Dening 29/12/39.

is clearly illustrated here: upsetting the Americans by doing something rash in Europe might endanger the security of Britain's Pacific Dominions, should they be threatened by Japan; by the same token, jeopardising American goodwill by making concessions to Japan in the Far East might compromise the British war effort in Europe, which was dependent upon supplies from the United States. Not for the first time, Chamberlain's administration had occasion to practice its technique for walking on eggshells.

Reflecting on the Japanese position as 1940 dawned, Craigie too expressed concern over American policy. It was, he thought, 'too drastic for the present delicately balanced situation': whilst it might have been appropriate a year earlier, the risks were now too great.⁸⁷ It also conflicted with the policy which he wanted Britain to follow. There was, he thought, 'no reason why Japan should not be won over to a benevolent neutrality favouring the Allies'. This could be achieved in two ways. Firstly, moderate economic pressure (in co-operation with the United States) would make life difficult for any Japanese government which harboured aggressive tendencies, especially since, according to Craigie, the 'vast majority' of the population were inclined to favour the Allies. More adventurous was his second suggestion of offering compensation to Japan outside China (Craigie did not specify where this might be), which he asserted would actually complement American policy, founded as it was on the need to prevent Japanese domination of China. The Ambassador, by stressing both the danger of Japanese intervention in the European war, and the possibility of Japanese friendship, seemed to be suggesting that Japanese policy in early 1940 rested on a knife edge. With the benefit of hindsight, this assessment is open to serious question. Events would demonstrate that a far tougher American attitude was required to push Japan into war, despite the vastly improved (from the Japanese point of view) European situation after May 1940. Similarly, the possibility of Japan shifting to an

⁸⁷FO 436/6 Craigie to Halifax No. 1 Saving, 1/1/40.

attitude of benevolence towards the Allies was surely remote. Despite Japanese political instability which made the emergence of a more pro-Allied administration a theoretical possibility, Japanese interests were so fundamentally at odds with British and American policy in the Far East that only a complete reversal of this policy could affect the Japanese attitude. America certainly had no intention of throwing over Chiang Kai-shek in China; since Britain needed to keep in step with American policy, and since the British policy was not to pursue closer Anglo-Japanese relations if this meant compromising China, no change to either British or American Far Eastern policy was realistically on the cards. Yet without just such a change, there would always be friction with Japan over the question of China, whatever other concessions might be made. On an objective assessment of the situation, therefore, Japanese benevolent neutrality would appear to have been effectively unattainable.

Craigie's comments elicited a spirited defence from Butler, whose views on the likelihood of an Anglo-Japanese rapprochement were similarly rose-tinted. 'We are in danger,' he warned, 'of counting on the Americans and being let down' - a not untypical Foreign Office viewpoint, but one which neatly accords with Butler's known predispositions. In a rather touching display of loyalty, he continued: 'I think we must be very careful to consider with the respect which they deserve our Ambassador's views. He has had a very difficult time'.⁸⁸ The fear of American unreliability was, however, countered in early February by Lord Lothian. The Washington Ambassador claimed to perceive that the Americans, who were once content merely to follow the British lead in the Far East, had 'come to recognise that the main initiative and responsibility there now rests squarely upon their own shoulders'. He therefore anticipated an American policy of financial support for Chiang Kai-shek combined with strong economic pressure upon

⁸⁸FO 371/24708 F297/193/61Minute by Butler, 1/2/40.

Japan, in order to convince the latter of the dangers of militarism.⁸⁹ Although the prospect of strong American pressure on Japan can scarcely have been welcome in London, the recognition of American responsibility in the area, if true, would have come as a welcome advance in American opinion. Another fan of the newly resolute American policy was the Foreign Office diplomat and Japanese expert Sir George Sansom, who thought that American pressure ‘should, if judiciously exercised, restrain Japan from further excesses, moderate her plans of economic and political dominance, and preserve a greater proportion of our interests in China than we can otherwise secure’. These ends would be facilitated ‘if *all* the interested powers show firmness in the greatest measure allowed by their respective situations’.⁹⁰ In other words, Britain should stick as closely to the Americans as possible in order to give American pressure the added strength derived from a united front. However, such a strategy would require implicit trust being placed in the Americans not to pursue a policy detrimental to British interests in the area. It seems clear that this level of trust did not exist in Chamberlain’s administration at any time during the Phoney War.

Trans-Atlantic irritation over Far Eastern policy could operate in both directions, however. On 28 March, Craigie made a speech to the Japanese-British Society in Tokyo which raised American hackles by appearing to advocate the sacrifice of China in favour of closer Anglo-Japanese relations. The State Department warned Lothian that if the speech signalled an end to the Anglo-American united front in the Far East, it ‘would be considered as a matter of first importance’.⁹¹ Clearly, however, the united front was regarded with equal importance by the British, for Halifax was quick to counter suggestions that the speech foreshadowed a change in British policy.⁹² The affair was given added impetus by an American statement on 30 March denying recognition to the

⁸⁹FO 414/277 Lothian to Halifax No. 119, 1/2/40.

⁹⁰FO 371/24708 F924/193/61 Memorandum by Sansom, 6/2/40.

⁹¹FO 436/6 Lothian to Halifax No. 442, 30/3/40.

⁹²FO 436/6 Halifax to Lothian No. 497, 30/3/40 (this telegram crossed with No. 442 above).

Japanese puppet regime of Wang Ching-wei in China: Lothian urged that a British statement along the same lines, but making no reference to the Ambassador's speech, be issued forthwith, as the Americans were in 'much doubt as to what Sir R. Craigie's speech may portend'.⁹³ Despite having caused considerable embarrassment and irritation, Craigie himself was unrepentant. The speech, he argued, was aimed at promoting conciliation with Japan, which was currently being swamped by anti-British propaganda - a fact which the Americans did not seem to appreciate. 'If American susceptibilities are such that the British representatives here cannot without misrepresentation deliver a speech which holds out the prospect of good relations,' he protested, '. . . I fear that our whole publicity work here will fail of its effect'.⁹⁴ In his defence it should be said that no serious or lasting harm was done to Anglo-American relations by the speech (according to Lothian, 'considerable indignation' would have been too dramatic a description of the American reaction).⁹⁵ Indeed, it perhaps helped to remind all concerned of the extent to which the two countries were reliant upon each other in their respective Far Eastern policies: the need to present a united front against Japan was still seen as vital by both sides. How to preserve this united front in view of their increasingly divergent aims and intentions in the area was, however, a dilemma that was not satisfactorily resolved.

On the evidence available to British officials, it must have been apparent during March 1940 that, for whatever reason, the Japanese were making a concerted effort to improve their relations with Britain. Tani Masayuki, the Japanese Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs, assured Craigie that this was indeed their intention, and hinted at 'the beginning of a swing of public opinion away from [the] U.S.S.R. and towards Britain' - if this were to be upset by 'some untoward incident' arising out of British contraband control,

⁹³FO 436/7 Lothian to Halifax No. 444, 31/3/40.

⁹⁴FO 436/7 Craigie to Halifax No. 520, 1/4/40.

⁹⁵FO 436/7 Lothian to Halifax No. 444, 31/3/40.

it would, Tani continued, be ‘a thousand pities’.⁹⁶ Craigie later noted ‘a strong trend here in favour of better relations with Great Britain’ which he attributed (perhaps not altogether convincingly) to the Japanese realisation that only Britain could act as a future mediator in the improvement of Sino-Japanese relations.⁹⁷ British policy was only slightly modified to take account of this apparent change: a Foreign Office memorandum advocated sticking to the main lines of Britain’s existing Far Eastern policy (keeping in step with the United States and not compromising China), but advanced a case for using the deterioration of Anglo-Soviet relations to advance Anglo-Japanese friendship, so long as this did not come at the expense of China or provoke American opposition.⁹⁸ As this evidence indicates, the bitter truth was that, even when an improvement in relations seemed possible, little could actually be done in terms of altering British policy to bring it about: there was simply no room for manoeuvre. The Japanese nevertheless pushed further: Arita Hachiro, the Foreign Minister, warned Craigie of the adverse effect on relations of British aid to Chiang Kai-shek, and made reproachful noises about the extent of British contraband control.⁹⁹ Halifax, however, seemed actually to desire a cooling of the Japanese ardour: citing the possibility that they were merely seeking British acceptance of the ‘New Order’ in China, he advised Craigie to leave the Japanese to make the running. ‘For your information,’ he went on, clearly rather piqued, ‘we are inclined to think that [the] Japanese Government is too apt to blackmail us with their own difficulties, and much as we appreciate their efforts to avoid friction with ourselves, we do not think that harmony should always be preserved at our expense’.¹⁰⁰ Clearly, in view of recent developments, the danger of a confrontation in the Far East was now rated much lower in London. Consequently - as Halifax’s comments indicate - the improvement of Anglo-Japanese relations, even to the limited

⁹⁶FO 436/6 Craigie to Halifax No. 386, 4/3/40.

⁹⁷FO 436/6 Craigie to Halifax No. 461, 19/3/40.

⁹⁸FO 436/6 ‘Review of the Far Eastern Situation’ 6/3/40.

⁹⁹FO 436/6 Craigie to Halifax No. 468, 20/3/40.

extent that this was possible, was seen as less of a priority than it had been at the outset of the conflict.

What seems to have been happening is an acceptance by the British of the impossibility of achieving anything other than cosmetic improvements to Anglo-Japanese relations. Given that the Japanese had clearly shown that they did not want to go to war with Britain, it was questionable to what extent such improvements were even necessary. Rather, it was now possible to take a stronger line with Japan over contraband control without fear of provoking a situation which could prove fatal for British interests in the area. When Craigie raised fears of another incident on the lines of the *Asama Maru* affair, Halifax replied that Japanese susceptibilities could not be considered ‘as paramount in such cases’ (admitting, however, that ‘it is not intended to embark at once upon anything like full contraband control of Japanese vessels’).¹⁰¹ The War Cabinet agreed at the end of March on the need to restrict Japanese exports to Soviet Russia (which might subsequently reach Germany), preferably by agreement with Japan. Halifax expressed some concern over the need to ‘keep out of trouble with Japan’, but the matter was regarded as worthy of consideration by the Supreme War Council.¹⁰² The latter body were convinced of the merits of the scheme, and urged the initiation of talks with Japan on the matter. In order to bring the Japanese to the negotiating table, it was decided to place temporary restrictions on the export of key commodities to Japan, passing this off as the result of military and domestic needs. As a carrot to accompany this stick, the prospect of access to raw materials or other commodities from the British Empire was to be dangled before the Japanese.¹⁰³ This rather ingenious plan, which even the cautious Craigie described as

¹⁰⁰FO 436/6 Halifax to Craigie No. 214, 21/3/40; Halifax to Craigie No. 215, 21/3/40.

¹⁰¹FO 436/6 Halifax to Craigie No. 237, 29/3/40.

¹⁰²CAB 65/6 WM 76 (40) 27/3/40.

¹⁰³FO 436/6 Halifax to Craigie No. 296, 14/4/40. For this decision, see CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 6th Meeting, 28/3/40.

‘excellent’,¹⁰⁴ represents a move away from the more overtly appeasing policy of earlier months, and offers further evidence of British confidence in the Japanese willingness to co-operate with rather than to antagonise Britain. This view was confirmed by Shigemitsu, who, when the possibility of such an agreement was raised by Butler, posited what Halifax described as a ‘rather dangerous’ (and, of course, unacceptable) quid pro quo involving the cessation of British trade with China in return for Japanese co-operation in British contraband control.¹⁰⁵ This state of affairs meant that Britain’s Far East policy could now be conducted primarily with the European angle in mind (contraband control was, after all, directed against the German war effort) without fear of complication arising in the form of a hostile Japan. Of course, a certain caution still had to be exercised: when, for example, the War Cabinet decided to seize all Danish ships following the German invasion of Denmark, an exception was made in the case of those under charter to the United States, Italy and Japan - a revealing indication of those countries which Britain thought it prudent not to rub up the wrong way.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, on the whole, the indications seemed to be promising.

Unfortunately, just when the Far Eastern situation seemed to be improving, German action in Europe effectively reversed the trend of events in Anglo-Japanese relations and forced Britain once more onto the back foot in the Far East. The first sign of danger came in mid-April with speculation (originating in the United States) over Japanese designs on the Netherland East Indies. More seriously, events in Norway severely weakened Britain’s global position by presenting a picture of Allied military weakness in the face of German aggression which can scarcely have failed to make an impression in Tokyo. Subsequently, the impact of the German western offensive of May 1940 led to the enforced closure by Britain of the Burma Road (the main supply route for Chiang Kai-shek) in response to

¹⁰⁴FO 436/7 Craigie to Halifax No. 605, 16/4/40.

¹⁰⁵FO 436/7 Halifax to Craigie No. 241, 1/6/40 (this conversation took place on 7/5/40).

Japanese pressure, prompting Chamberlain to write from his sickbed to Churchill: ‘Damn those Japs! I do wish we could give them a kick in the pants’.¹⁰⁷ During the Phoney War, circumstances both in Europe and the Far East perhaps served to lull the British into a false sense of security with regard to Japan: the threat posed by that country, although never forgotten, was understandably pushed to the margins of British thought by the overwhelming necessity of defeating a hostile Germany. The final reckoning, of course, remained some distance away. Denning assured officials at the War Cabinet Office on 2 May that, even if Italy were to enter the war on the side of Germany (as then seemed a distinct possibility) ‘it is unlikely that there will be any immediate change in Japan’s present policy of non-involvement in the European war . . . it is the winning or the losing of the war in Europe which will influence Japan’s ultimate policy’.¹⁰⁸ Even so, Britain could never, in the months between Germany’s western offensive and the attack on Pearl Harbor, view Japanese policy quite so calmly as she had been able to do during the majority of the Phoney War.

¹⁰⁶CAB 65/6 WM 87 (40) 10/4/40.

¹⁰⁷ Churchill Papers CHAR 2/393 Chamberlain to Churchill 6/8/40.

¹⁰⁸ CAB 21/1010 Denning to Major William Stirling, War Cabinet Offices, 2/5/40.

3. THE SEARCH FOR ANGLO-ITALIAN CO-OPERATION

SEPTEMBER - DECEMBER 1939

There is a legitimate hope of detaching Italy from Germany.

Sir Percy Loraine, 13 October 1939.¹

Italian ties with Germany, culminating in the signature of the 'Pact of Steel' on 22 May 1939, meant that it had long been assumed in British circles that any future war against Germany would also entail war against Italy. Pre-war strategic planning had proceeded to work from this premise, giving rise to radical schemes for a 'knock - out blow' against Italy which would take her out of the war in its early stages, neutralising the Mediterranean as a theatre of war, putting added pressure (both economic and military) on Germany, and freeing up naval forces for possible use in Far Eastern waters. History records, however, that Italy did not enter the Second World War at its beginning, but bided her time until German pressure and a desire to get in on the act before it was over led to her intervention on 10 June 1940. This chapter and the one that follows will consider the impact of Italian neutrality, and how Britain reacted to this new and unexpected situation.

The historiography of Anglo-Italian relations in - and beyond - this period is somewhat thin. The most useful published work on the subject remains a primary one - Malcolm Muggeridge's rather antiquated edition of Ciano's Diaries.² A recent work by Richard Lamb traces the relationship between Britain and Italy during Mussolini's years in power, but it includes little that is new, and, for the Phoney War period at least, is so prejudiced against Chamberlain and British policy that it fails to provide a satisfactory

¹ FO 371/23821 R8932/399/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 334 Saving 13/10/39.

account.³ By far the best account of Italian policy, which also pays more than passing attention to Britain's role, is by Macgregor Knox.⁴ For Knox, the Phoney War was a period borne with precious little patience by an increasingly belligerent Mussolini, often at odds with even his closest advisors on how and when to enter the war. Most views of Italian policy take a similarly deterministic line. However, whilst it can be argued with hindsight that Italian intervention on behalf of Germany was the most likely outcome, it will not do simply to assume that this outcome was inevitable: as far as those involved in Anglo-Italian relations at the time were concerned, it most certainly was not, and we need to view the diplomatic relations of this period in the light of this uncertainty. As we shall see, serious consideration was given to the possibility not just of securing Italian neutrality for the duration of the conflict, but of bringing Italy in as a belligerent on the Allied side.

The months immediately prior to the outbreak of war saw a sudden change in the British attitude towards a future conflict with Italy. It started with a challenge to the notion that Italy would automatically become involved in a German-inspired war would be automatic. At a meeting of the Committee of Imperial Defence in June 1939, Hoare suggested that 'early offensive action against Italy' following a German invasion of Poland would be beneficial to the Allied war effort, since it would require German reinforcements to be sent to Italy, 'and the pressure on Poland might be somewhat relieved'.⁵ This view was challenged by Chamberlain, of all people, who raised the possibility that Italy might not, after all, enter the war at the outset - particularly if Germany acted without the consultation stipulated in the 'Pact of Steel'. 'The Italians', he shrewdly observed, 'would be on the look-out for any excuse to keep out of the war.' This gave rise to a discussion on the pros and cons of Italian

² Muggeridge, M. *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943* (London: Heinemann, 1947). A more up-to-date version is available in Italian, but as yet there is no English translation.

³ Lamb, R. *Mussolini and the British* (London: John Murray, 1997).

⁴ Knox, M. *Mussolini Unleashed 1939-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

neutrality. When Hore-Belisha and Sir Thomas Inskip stressed that, especially with regard to economic warfare, a neutral Italy would be ‘to our disadvantage’, Chatfield went so far as to suggest taking unspecified action ‘to ensure that Italy did not remain neutral’. Surprisingly, Chamberlain agreed, and directed the Chiefs of Staff to look again at the question of taking action against Italy in the early stages of a war. Halifax very wisely suggested that the Far Eastern situation also be taken into consideration, clearly recognising that early action against Italy would require the diversion of sizeable naval forces to the Mediterranean, and thus render British territories on the Pacific Rim (including the dominions of Australia and New Zealand) virtually defenceless in the face of a Japanese attack. Clearly, planning for war against Italy was not quite as straightforward as it had appeared.

More assumptions were swept away the following month. Colonel Hollis, drafting the introduction to the Chiefs of Staff appreciation which Chamberlain had requested, addressed the question of the ‘knock-out blow’ against Italy. He considered the whole idea to be:

founded on a misconception. . . . The Chiefs of Staff have always favoured taking offensive action against Italy when and where the opportunity arises, but they have never argued that in the circumstances with which we shall be faced we could, in fact, deliver a “knock-out” blow at the outset.

The French reluctance to commit sizeable forces to attacking Italy, he went on, merely underlined this fact.⁶ In the light of this (although many continued to cling to the comforting notion that Italy could be ‘knocked out’) Italian belligerency, previously regarded with apparent equanimity, seemed a much more dangerous prospect, and Italian neutrality began to look more and more attractive.

⁵ CAB 2/8 CID 360th Meeting 22/6/39.

⁶ CAB 21/1426 Hollis to Newall 20/7/39.

Following the stormy Salzburg conference between Hitler and Mussolini between 11 and 13 August, and the Russo-German non-aggression pact of 24 August, the possibility of Italy entering any conflict which Germany might instigate seemed to recede almost by the day. Indeed, even as Mussolini vacillated, moves were afoot in London to take advantage of the situation and push him firmly in the direction of neutrality. Halifax, disturbed by reports that the French might want to force Italy 'to declare herself', urged the Chargé d'Affaires at the Paris Embassy on 22 August to ensure that no such steps were taken 'without full consultation with us'.⁷ Bonnet, the French foreign minister, responded by assuring Ronald Campbell⁸ that the French Government, too, had now concluded 'that it would be preferable for us that Italy should maintain a durable neutrality', and that in any case no attempt to force Mussolini's hand could be made until the spring of 1940.⁹ Thus, when it came to the crunch, there was little hesitation in deciding that British (and Allied) interests would best be served by Italian neutrality. This policy has been criticised, with the benefit of considerable hindsight, as 'a serious error in judgment'.¹⁰ At the time, however, the possibility of limiting the conflict to a straight fight with Germany, especially in view of the Japanese reluctance to become involved, was too appealing to those in power to be outweighed by contentious strategic arguments about comparative naval strengths. The apparent disintegration of Hitler's Japanese and Italian alliances was too good a gift horse to be looked in the mouth. Even the conclusion of the Nazi-Soviet Pact was held by many to be a positive boon for Anglo-Italian relations: a paper on the subject by Ivone Kirkpatrick concluded that:

⁷ FO 371/23818 R6669/399/22 Halifax to Campbell No. 241, 22/8/39.

⁸ Mr. Ronald I. Campbell, Counsellor at the Paris Embassy 1938 - 1939, and subsequently British Minister in Belgrade December 1939 - 1941. Not to be confused with Sir Ronald H. Campbell, who was British Minister in Belgrade August 1935 - October 1939 and Ambassador to France November 1939 - June 1940.

⁹ FO 371/23818 R6670/399/22 Campbell to Halifax No. 536 Saving, 24/8/39.

¹⁰ Lowe, C. J. & Marzari, F. *Italian Foreign Policy 1870 - 1940* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975) p. 360. The argument is based on strategic rather than political grounds - in particular the British and French naval superiority in the Mediterranean.

The effect of the Russian agreement on Italy has been distinctly beneficial to us. The cynical repudiation of Germany's obligations to Japan is an obvious warning to Italy that she can expect no consideration from her ally when Italian and German interests conflict. The Agreement may therefore be regarded as having increased the possibility of Italian neutrality in the event of a war arising from a German attack on Poland.¹¹

Such speculation was borne out by events during the days that followed. Sir Percy Loraine, the British Ambassador in Rome, was assured by Count Ciano, the Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs, on 31 August and again the next morning that Italy would not enter a conflict triggered by events in Poland.¹² Indeed, Ciano's diary reveals that he was just as anxious as the Allies were to keep Italy out of the war, and gave these assurances in order to forestall the danger of Britain or France taking action against Italy which would make Italian non-intervention impossible. Having summoned Loraine to the Palazzo Chigi with the intention of committing 'an indiscretion', Ciano, 'acting as though I could no longer contain my feelings,' pleaded with the Ambassador: 'Can't you understand that we shall never start a war against you and the French?' Such melodramatics, according to Ciano's account, had the desired effect: 'Percy Loraine is moved. He is close to tears'.¹³ Nevertheless, given the British decision to do nothing that might dissuade the Italians from non-intervention, Ciano's anxiety, and his resultant 'indiscretion', were scarcely necessary. Indeed, the press statement issued by the Italian Council of Ministers on 1 September, declaring that Italy would 'take no initiative in the way of military operations', rendered the advance warning given to Loraine slightly nugatory.¹⁴ However, the repercussions of Italian neutrality or 'non-belligerence' (a term

¹¹ FO 371/22925 C12192/281/17 Paper by Kirkpatrick, 27/8/39.

¹² FO 371/23810 R7051/57/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 751, 1/9/39

¹³ *Ciano's Diary* p. 141. Entry for 31/8/39.

¹⁴ FO 371/23818 R7025/399/22 Loraine to Halifax unnumbered (by telephone), 1/9/39.

apparently adopted by Mussolini in order to appease Hitler and to avoid the stigma attached to true neutrality) were far from slight.

The rapid turnaround in Britain's attitude towards Italy is clearly illustrated by a telegram from Halifax to Loraine on the very day that war with Germany was declared. Fully aware of the problems which Italian neutrality might present to an economic blockade of Germany, the Foreign Secretary asked for the Ambassador's advice on 'how we had best proceed with Italy in the immediate future with a view to clarifying and stabilising her attitude and, if possible, bringing her in on our side'.¹⁵ Italy, so recently seen as an implacable enemy of the British Empire, was now to be courted as a possible ally! Such optimism, although scarcely warranted, was to hold sway in London throughout the early months of the war. As with Japan, the questionable premise that, since Italy was not fighting *with* Germany, she might be induced to fight *against* Germany, in addition to the shock-waves from the Nazi-Soviet Pact, gave rise to serious consideration of how to win the Italians over to the Allied cause. A note of realism was struck by the War Cabinet on 4 September, which agreed that 'Italy had further to go now than she had in 1914 [sic] before she would be induced to throw in her lot with us'; nevertheless the attractions of such an outcome 'regarding fleet dispositions in the Mediterranean and the ability to tighten the blockade on Germany' made it a goal which the Cabinet deemed well worth pursuing, and it was agreed that any restrictions on Italian trade would have to be carefully weighed in terms of their political effect.¹⁶ In other words, Italy, although a declared ally of the Germans, was to be treated leniently by the Allies in order to secure at least her continued abstention from German-led hostilities, and ideally her active participation as a belligerent on the Allied side.

¹⁵ FO 434/6 Halifax to Loraine No. 439, 3/9/39.

¹⁶ CAB 65/1 WM 2 (39) 4/9/39.

Why was such an outcome considered possible, and how was it to be achieved? The answer to the first of these questions lies not so much in wishful thinking as in a contentious, but not entirely unfeasible, appreciation of Italy's position following the outbreak of war. Mussolini's fascist regime was founded on solidly anti-communist principles. The 'Pact of Steel' which he had signed with Germany was more than incidentally an anti-Russian agreement. Now that Germany had sided with Soviet Russia, the basis for Italo-German co-operation might reasonably be expected to be somewhat diminished. If she were to seek powerful, solidly anti-bolshevist partners in Europe, Italy had no real options other than Britain and France. This much lay in the realms of theory; more concrete was the increasingly anti-German tide of Italian public opinion in general, and the views of the Italian King and Foreign Minister in particular. Here, personalities came into play: Sir Percy Loraine, not long arrived in Italy from the Middle East, quickly forged a close personal relationship with Count Ciano, whose bitterness at the German behaviour in Salzburg was clear for all to see. As a guide to future Italian policy, however, Ciano's views were potentially misleading: the final say lay always with Mussolini himself, and the Duce's sympathies were rather less fickle than those of his son-in-law. To be fair, this was clearly recognised on the British side: the real question mark was whether Mussolini's prestige was such that he could impose a pro-German policy on a reluctant Italian government and populace. This would depend heavily on military events: if Germany looked to be winning the war, it would be much easier for Mussolini to bring Italy in on her side. In the absence of such developments, the possibility of appeasing or buying off Italy remained. It was a path which many in the Foreign Office were keen to follow.

Since Mussolini had never been coy in giving voice to his ambitions for the Italian empire and his grievances over the *status quo*, the selection of potential bargaining counters

was not too difficult a task. To make matters easier, the MP and prominent Churchill supporter Bob Boothby had written to Vansittart on 30 August with details, obtained by a friend from a ‘high Italian diplomat’, of what were claimed to be Italian terms for a non-aggression pact with Britain and France. These were: ‘(1) Representation upon the Board of the Suez Canal; (2) Recognition of special Italian rights in the harbour at Jibuti; and (3) Some arrangement with regard to the status of Italian citizens in Tunis’.¹⁷ These issues, with the addition of possible changes to the status of Malta and Gibraltar, became accepted by the Foreign Office as the basis for any agreement with Italy. How, and when, to reach such an agreement was a different matter. Halifax’s uncharacteristically robust response to this suggestion was that: ‘I do not feel inclined to accept the view that we must pay Italy for signing such a Treaty. On the contrary I should hope that we should be in a position, if the case arose, to enquire what she would be prepared to pay us . . .’.¹⁸ Such an enquiry was, of course, never made, but hopes for a deal with the Italians remained.

The Foreign Office records reveal that it was not only the British who were prepared to buy off Mussolini with offers of territory and concession. On 4 September a telegram from Paris reported a suggestion by Alexis Léger, the Secretary-General of the French Foreign Ministry, that the colonies confiscated from Germany under the terms of the Treaty of Versailles might be offered to Italy in return for the Italy agreeing to join the Allied camp. Sir Orme Sargent, for the Foreign Office, first threw cold water over this proposal (Lord Perth, the recently retired British Ambassador to Italy, agreed that it would be ‘completely fatal’ to closer Anglo-Italian understanding¹⁹), but then proceeded to travel even further down the road of appeasement. ‘If she [Italy] were to come into the war’, wrote Sargent, ‘what *we* ought to offer her is British Somaliland & the French a settlement in Tunis & Djibuti. Both of us

¹⁷ FO 371/23818 R6958/399/22 Boothby to Vansittart 30/8/39.

¹⁸ FO 371/23818 R6958/399/22 Halifax to Loraine No. 440, 4/9/39.

would have of course to give her a proper status in the Suez Canal'.²⁰ That Sargent has a reputation for being perhaps the staunchest anti-appeaser in the senior ranks of the Foreign Office makes this suggestion all the more remarkable. Even more surprisingly, the French Foreign Minister had meanwhile told Sir Eric Phipps that, in view of the conviction of Generals Gamelin and Weygand that Italian neutrality was vital, the French Government was prepared to offer the Italians not only the former German colonies (as suggested by his Secretary-General) but also the 'sacrifices already contemplated, viz. (1) a reasonable settlement of the Tunis dispute, (2) Jibuti and (3) Suez Canal Directorships'.²¹ Bonnet was thus apparently prepared to offer the Italians even more to stay neutral than the British Foreign Office anticipated giving them to join in the war on the Allied side! Loraine too urged that, if winning Mussolini over to the Allied side was the intention, 'we shall then have to tell him the price we are willing to pay; and there will not be much time for haggling'.²² Again, however, it was Halifax (traditionally seen as an appeaser) who put a brake on the idea, minuting on 11 September: 'I should certainly not be in favour of large "offers" to Italy at the present moment.'²³ With such differences of opinion still unresolved, this extraordinary matter was left at that.

In the meantime, more conventional diplomacy had helped to bring about a distinct improvement in Anglo-Italian relations, born largely out of a mutual desire to avoid any danger of the two countries taking up arms against each other. Dino Grandi, the former Italian Ambassador to Great Britain, wrote a warm, if grammatically rather erratic, letter to Chamberlain following the Italian announcement of non-belligerency on 1 September.

¹⁹ FO 371/23819 R7423/399/22 Perth to Cadogan 11/9/39.

²⁰ FO 371/23819 R7128/399/22 Phipps to Halifax No. 630 Saving, 4/9/39; minute by Sargent on this, 7/9/39.

²¹ FO 371/23819 R7175/399/22 Phipps to Halifax No. 632 Saving, 5/9/39.

²² FO 371/23819 R7282/399/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 841, 10/9/39.

²³ FO 371/23819 R7175/399/22 Minute by Halifax 11/9/39.

I write to tell you how happy I am . . . All what I have aspired for during seven years of my mission in England, and during these last momentous weeks in Rome, has been saved . . . Great Britain and Italy come out from recent events as countries who are, and will be friends,

he effused, signing off ‘Yours, affectionate, Dino Grandi’.²⁴ Chamberlain replied in a broadly similar (though characteristically more restrained) vein, pointing out: ‘The one bright spot in this tragic denouement is the fact that our two countries are not fighting one another.’ Ever the aspiring peacemaker, he ended his letter with a wish that ‘it is permitted to us to work together in the restoration of peace to a troubled Europe’.²⁵ This desire for closer relations went beyond mere diplomatic blandishments. The War Cabinet agreed on 5 September to follow up a suggestion from Loraine to pursue closer trade links with Italy, in particular the purchase of Italian airframes and instruments and the export to Italy of British coal.²⁶ Loraine was also instructed to broker a naval agreement with Ciano to avoid the danger of Italian submarines being sunk by the British Mediterranean fleet.²⁷ Albeit that fear and military weakness (in global terms) lay behind such moves, it is nonetheless remarkable that a country with which Britain had been preparing to go to war for so long should suddenly become the target of such determined conciliatory activity.

There were clear indications that Italy too desired a rapprochement. Loraine came away from a meeting with Ciano on 6 September convinced of the Foreign Minister’s sincerity in seeking closer Anglo-Italian relations. ‘If Count Ciano is acting a part all the time (and I do not think he is),’ declared the Ambassador, ‘he is the greatest loss to the stage there

²⁴ NC 7/11/32/84 Grandi to Chamberlain 1/9/39. Grandi wrote similar letters to a number of leading British politicians and diplomats during the opening weeks of the war.

²⁵ NC 7/11/32/85 Chamberlain to Grandi 13/9/39.

²⁶ CAB 65/1 WM 4 (39) 5/9/39.

²⁷ FO 371/23819 R7118/399/22 Halifax to Loraine No. 445, 5/9/39.

ever was'.²⁸ In the course of their conversation, Ciano had given Loraine instructions on how British aircraft could avoid German anti-aircraft guns by flying either below 200 metres or above 5,000 metres - a piece of advice described by Sir Andrew Noble (of the Foreign Office's Southern Department) as 'astonishing'.²⁹ The Italian naval authorities also showed a surprising eagerness to meet the British desire for a submarine agreement in the Mediterranean, conceding that, except for Italian territorial waters, Italian colonies, and ten named zones, Italian submarines would not operate without prior notification to the British and French governments, and even then would only travel on the surface and with an escort.³⁰ For their part, the British decided on 'purely political grounds' to continue the practice, as established by an Anglo-Italian agreement in April 1938, of exchanging military information (disposition of forces in the Mediterranean region and such like) with the Italians. This decision was taken in the face of opposition from the Army Council, which understandably regarded such exchanges as 'most undesirable'. Halifax's view was that ending the practice 'might arouse unjustified suspicions and this would be most unfortunate at a moment when it is of paramount importance to ensure that Italy does not make common cause with Germany'.³¹ As we will see, this slightly surreal British desire to feed the Italians with military information was subsequently taken even further.

Meanwhile, as the war continued, the possibility of 'buying off' the Italians continued to exercise the minds of those concerned with British policy towards Italy. Noble suggested on 9 September that, as a 'small sop' to the Italians, Britain should recognise the conquest of Albania by the appointment of a consul-general (a suitable candidate had already been selected and was ready to take up the post). Sargent, Cadogan and Halifax all agreed that

²⁸ FO 371/23819 R7161/399/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 808, 6/9/39.

²⁹ FO 371/23786 R7170/1/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 806, 6/9/39.

³⁰ FO 371/23820 R8018/399/22 Copy of a letter from British Naval Attaché to the Italian Minister of Marine 18/9/39.

there was ‘nothing to be gained’ by withholding recognition, although the Foreign Secretary did feel that more discussion of the matter, not least by the War Cabinet, should take place before anything definite was decided.³² The matter subsequently cropped up in a War Cabinet discussion on trade with Italy: the proposal to establish an ‘Anglo-Italian Commercial Committee’ by means of a ‘Heads of State’ agreement was held to be undesirable because such a declaration ‘would involve His Majesty’s Government in a recognition of the King of Italy as King of Albania.’ The short-term solution to this was not recognition of Albania’s new status, but making the agreement an inter-governmental one instead.³³ Formal recognition, however, was eventually granted - albeit rather ashamedly. Halifax informed the War Cabinet on 25 October that notice would be given, in the form of a written reply to a Parliamentary Question, that ‘we had applied to the Italian Government for an *exequatur* for a British Consul-General to be stationed in Albania’.³⁴ Thus, British recognition of Italy’s conquest of Albania was sneaked in through the back door, as it were, with the minimum of fuss, and in the hope that nobody in Britain would even notice - which, it seems, they did not.

On 12 September 1939, the Supreme War Council, sitting for the first time, considered Allied policy towards Italy in the light of that country’s ‘non-belligerence’. There was no disagreement at all about the benefits of Italian neutrality: Daladier fully accepted the military necessity for this neutrality to continue, and therefore urged a policy of treating Italy ‘very carefully’. Chamberlain, whilst recognising that Mussolini was the key determinant in Italian policy, argued that in view of the Duce’s current irritation with Germany it was not necessary to go to him ‘cap in hand’ with ‘favours and bribes’. This echoes Halifax’s comments during the Foreign Office debates on making offers to Italy. Nevertheless, Chamberlain concluded

³¹ FO 371/23787 R7722/1/22 War Office to Foreign Office 17/9/39; Nichols to War Office 19/9/39.

³² FO 371/23820 R8172/399/22 Minutes by Noble (9/9/39), Sargent (10/9/39), Cadogan (11/9/39) & Halifax (11/9/39).

³³ CAB 65/1 WM 55 (39) 21/10/39.

with the observation that it was ‘not inconceivable’ that Italy ‘might one day be on the Allied side’.³⁵ On the same day as this meeting, Loraine, fearing that future German action in the Balkans might force Italy to make a decision one way or the other, pleaded for discretionary powers to put out ‘feelers’ to Ciano regarding possible guarantees to Italy by Britain and France - a request which Halifax granted, thereby reversing the existing (and short-lived) policy of waiting for the Italians to take the initiative in such matters.³⁶ However, by 17 September Loraine had calmed down a little, and now concluded that ‘as things are now it might be an error for us to make or hint at any offer to Italy’. Instead, given the generally satisfactory Italian attitude, he felt that Britain should concentrate on making it ‘politically possible and economically advantageous for Italy to remain neutral. . . . Meanwhile we can multiply evidences of our good will towards Italy and the development of the nascent atmosphere of reciprocal confidence’.³⁷ Now that the immediate danger of Italian intervention had receded, it was both realistic and desirable to work at improving Anglo-Italian relations. Halifax endorsed these views in a communication to the French Government:

If the Italian Government were . . . to make the first approach . . . His Majesty’s Government, and doubtless the French Government, would be ready, if necessary, to pay something to secure Italian support. Meanwhile, in our view, the policy of His Majesty’s Government should be directed towards encouraging the Italians to turn to us, both by giving them an impression of our strength and, at the same time, demonstrating our willingness to treat them as friends and equals.³⁸

³⁴ CAB 65/1 WM 66 (39) 31/10/39.

³⁵ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 1st Meeting, 12/9/39.

³⁶ FO 371/23819 R7406/399/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 860, 12/9/39; Halifax to Loraine No. 486, 13/9/39.

³⁷ FO 371/23820 R7686/399/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 897, 17/9/39.

³⁸ FO 371/23820 R7686/399/22 Halifax to Phipps No. 658, 19/9/39.

The previous policy of letting the Italians make the first move, having been temporarily abandoned, was now reinstated - another illustration of the Chamberlain wartime administration's characteristic 'wait and see' attitude towards difficult foreign policy decisions.

As the Polish campaign drew to a close, speculation mounted in London that Mussolini would try to associate himself with Hitler's widely-predicted peace offer.³⁹ This was a fair assumption to make: after all, Italian policy had already demonstrated Italy's inability or unwillingness to go to war at the present time. According to Ciano's diary, Mussolini believed that the war would be a short one, and that following a peace conference a European treaty of collective security would be signed by the powers. However, Ciano also comments: 'At heart, the Duce wishes the European powers to fight bitterly against one other, in spite of all that is said about our will to peace.'⁴⁰ At any rate, Mussolini was content to take a back seat in the events surrounding Hitler's Reichstag speech of 6 October, in which the Führer made a peace offer of sorts to the British and French Governments. Having decided virtually from the outset that any offer Hitler was likely to make should be rejected, the British Government was able to look beyond that eventuality and make plans accordingly. Mussolini, on the other hand, was apparently optimistic that the offer marked the end of the war, and the dismissive British and French reaction caused him to cancel a speech he had planned for the occasion - much to the relief of his Foreign Minister, who observed: 'This is the moment to keep one's mouth shut.'⁴¹ (Mussolini's uncharacteristic taciturnity had already given rise to Foreign Office speculation about the state of his health - not to mention his sex

³⁹ FO 371/23819 R7128/399/22 Minute by Cadogan 7/9/39, for example. Cadogan concluded that Italian policy should such a peace offer be refused would be dependent upon whether or not the war spread to the Balkans.

⁴⁰ *Ciano's Diary* pp. 144, 152, 163. Entries for 3/9/39, 15/9/39, 4/10/39. Ciano strongly disagreed with Mussolini as regards both the length of the war and Britain's probable response to a peace offer.

⁴¹ *Ciano's Diary* pp 164, 167. Entries for 6/10/39, 13/10/39.

life - although Cadogan cuttingly suggested that 'extreme embarrassment might be a sufficient explanation'.)⁴²

Thus the most significant 'peace offensive' of the Phoney War period passed off with little impact on Anglo-Italian relations. The danger that Hitler might reply to the Allied rejection of his offer by launching an attack in the Balkans, thereby drawing Italy (who saw the Balkans as part of the Italian sphere of interest) into the conflict, also receded as autumn turned to winter and the Russo-German pact, which placed obstacles in the way of such a move, remained intact. Nevertheless, Italy's somewhat anomalous position as a 'non-belligerent' ally of Germany continued to pose a strategic headache for the British. As Lord Chatfield informed the War Cabinet, 'the Italian problem dominated strategy. So long as Italy was neutral, large forces were immobilised in the Mediterranean'. He went on to suggest 'that it might now be possible to approach the Italians with a view to mutual withdrawal of troops from North Africa, and the establishment of a *détente* in the Mediterranean.' Halifax concurred and suggested two possible approaches to Italy: an invitation to join the Allies in constructing a 'Balkan neutrality bloc', and co-operation with Britain and France in keeping the war out of the Mediterranean. Loraine was authorised to raise these matters with Ciano at his own discretion.⁴³ Pre-war British strategic thinking had been much vexed by the need to eliminate Italy from any future war at an early stage (the fabled 'knock-out blow') - here, it was envisaged, was an opportunity to do just that without a shot being fired. But would it work? Or, put another way, could the Italians be trusted to stand by any agreement reached with the Allies to keep out of the war? This question of Italian reliability was the major sticking point in the British proposals - and it was one which was never overcome sufficiently to allow any concrete progress to be made.

⁴² FO 371/23814 R8398/179/22 Loraine to Nichols 26/9/39; minute by Cadogan 8/10/39.

⁴³ CAB 65/1 WM 39 (39) 6/10/39

Suspicious of Italian mendacity had never been far from the minds of those charged with uncovering Italy's future intentions. Indeed, it was perhaps this very quality which enabled them to envisage the possibility of Italy abandoning Germany and throwing in her lot with the Allies. Cadogan, who was not overly fond of the Italians (variously referring to them in his diaries as 'ice-creamers', 'double-crossing monkeys', and 'purulent dogs')⁴⁴ asserted in mid-September: 'I should never put any faith in Italy', attributing their non-belligerency to the difficulties involved in mobilising public support for war. 'That position might change,' he correctly forecast, 'if Germany looked like winning'.⁴⁵ Loraine, too, believed that 'the course of military events will probably decide the issue [of Italian intervention]. Don't expect any altruism from this end.' As for British policy, the Ambassador's advice was therefore that 'we must . . . avoid making mistakes with Italy'.⁴⁶ Mussolini remained the key figure. Unfortunately, penetrating his attitude was made even more difficult by his self-imposed seclusion throughout the early months of the war. Loraine did not get to see the Duce once during this period, and his public pronouncements were both infrequent and singularly unenlightening. Moreover, the Ambassador could never be certain that the information he gleaned from Ciano was representative also of the views of Mussolini (Ciano's diaries indicate just how far apart the two of them frequently were). After repeated anti-German indiscretions by Ciano, Loraine surmised, logically but probably incorrectly, that the Foreign Minister 'would not do it so consistently if he thought Mussolini would disapprove'.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, through the filter of Ciano's friendliness, Loraine claimed to perceive a decided

⁴⁴ ACAD 1/8-9 Diaries for 1939 & 1940. Entries for 9/4/39, 18/3/40, & 10/6/40.

⁴⁵ FO 371/23819 R7527/399/22 Minute by Cadogan 16/9/39.

⁴⁶ FO 371/23829 R8399/399/22 Loraine to Nichols 27/9/39; FO 1011/66 Loraine to Halifax 'Personal and Secret' 27/9/39.

⁴⁷ FO 371/23821 R8668/399/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 1026, 10/10/39.

shift in Italian policy towards the Allies following the rejection of Hitler's peace offer, leading him to declare on 13 October: 'There is a legitimate hope of detaching Italy from Germany'.⁴⁸

One of the main obstacles to the realisation of this goal was the stark fact that Britain was at war with Germany. Not only was Germany Italy's theoretical ally, but it was under the control of a regime with a totalitarian ideology broadly similar to Italian fascism. British propaganda towards Germany was at pains to stress that the Allies were not opposed to the German people *per se*, but rather to Hitler's Nazi ideology. Whilst this was a good way to encourage non-Nazis to rise up against their rulers, it posed certain problems as far as improving relations with Italy was concerned. Thus it became necessary for the British to draw a distinction between the German and Italian ideologies - a rather delicate task, but one which was approached with a certain amount of ingenuity. The matter seems to have been raised initially by the Ambassador to Roumania, Sir Reginald Hoare, who had received information from Italy that 'Signor Mussolini is rather upset by our ideological campaign against the Nazi regime. I hazard the guess that this is worthy of serious thought'. The Foreign Office apparently agreed: Sargent urged that the need to distinguish between Hitlerism and Italian fascism 'ought to be in the minds of ministers making speeches and whoever is in charge of our propaganda'.⁴⁹ Since Italy had always been regarded as a potential adversary in any future war, it is not surprising that this question had not been addressed earlier. In the bizarre and unforeseen circumstances of the Phoney War, this was just one among many problems which arose and had to be dealt with 'on the hoof'.

The first step that was taken following Hoare's warning was to consult with Loraine. Whilst admitting that there was indeed a problem, the Ambassador was rather stumped for a solution:

⁴⁸ FO 371/23821 R8932/399/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 334 Saving, 13/10/39.

⁴⁹ FO 371/23787 R7393/1/22 Hoare to Halifax No. 383, 12/9/39; minute by Sargent 13/9/39.

All we can do, I think, as time goes by, is by our general attitude of goodwill towards a non-belligerent Italy, to help Mussolini to feel that we are not engaged in a sympathetic crusade against Fascism in Italy. Fascism may have its undesirable aspects and its doctrines are certainly far apart from British political philosophy; but its methods of maintaining itself internally, etc., are conspicuously mild by comparison with those in use in Germany.⁵⁰

This ambivalence towards fascism as an ideology resurrected one of the notions behind the ‘appeasement’ of the 1930s. Nevertheless, it was undoubtedly an attitude borne out of necessity rather than conviction. Sir Noel Charles, the Counsellor at the Rome Embassy, urged Lord Perth (the former Ambassador to Italy, now at the Ministry of Information) that those in Britain should ‘go slow with the word ‘Nazi’ and talk rather of the methods of Hitlerism’.⁵¹ Even the King was brought in on the act (a task to which his brother, the Duke of Windsor, might have been rather better suited). Before receiving the new Italian Ambassador, His Majesty was sent a detailed briefing, composed by Orme Sargent and Philip Nichols (Head of the Southern Department of the Foreign Office), on the line that he should take. ‘He might assure Signor Bastianini that the English people as a whole held the Italian people in high regard,’ the advice began. ‘The Italians were noted for their kindness, especially to children, and their courtesy, and these were qualities which Englishmen always appreciated.’ Such flattery was to be accompanied by reminders that Britain and Italy had never been to war against each other, and that the British Government ‘wished for nothing better than to see the relations between the British and the Fascist Governments once again placed on the frank and friendly basis which characterised them in the past.’ This historically dubious interpretation of Anglo-Italian relations was accompanied by a covering letter

⁵⁰ FO 371/23830 R7739/399/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 311 Saving, 14/9/39.

⁵¹ FO 371/23787 R8927/1/22 Charles to Perth 6/10/39.

reminding the King of the need to stress that Britain distinguished between Nazism and Fascism.⁵² The results of this rather transparent attempt to curry favour with Rome are difficult to gauge - one suspects however that Mussolini, for all his vanity, would not have been entirely taken in.

British efforts at improving their standing with the Italian Government were further hampered by a rather unsatisfactory state of affairs at the troubled Ministry of Information. On 21 September, Loraine had telephoned the Foreign Office to express his horror at an article in early editions of the *Daily Express* reporting a meeting between himself and Ciano. Roger Makins, who was on the receiving end of the call, recorded Loraine's conviction 'that this sort of report was perfectly disastrous, was making his work quite impossible, and that it must be stopped.' Ciano had apparently already been carpeted by Mussolini (fearful no doubt of the German reaction to such a report) as a direct result.⁵³ The very next day, Sir Noel Charles, acting on Loraine's instructions, again telephoned the long-suffering Makins to complain about another report, this time on the BBC, of 'great diplomatic activity in Rome' - again implying that the British and Italian Governments were working closely together. Sargent resignedly confessed himself to be 'at a loss to know what to do.' Cadogan was more constructive: castigating the Ministry of Information as 'a disaster', he suggested that Lord Halifax should write personally to Lord Macmillan, head of that beleaguered Ministry, in an attempt to improve matters.⁵⁴ Further investigations by Nichols towards the end of September uncovered the disturbing truth: since it had always been assumed that Italy would be an enemy in any future war, 'no provision was made for her at all in the Ministry of Information proper'. Instead, responsibility lay with the organisation headed by Sir Campbell Stuart,

⁵² FO 371/23787 R8982/1/22 Notes for the King's interview with Bastianini 17/10/39.

⁵³ FO 371/23820 R7711/399/22 Minute by Makins 18/9/39.

⁵⁴ FO 371/23820 R7980/399/22 Minute by Makins 19/9/39, minute by Sargent 20/9/39, minute by Cadogan 20/9/39. A letter from Lord Halifax to Lord Macmillan was despatched on 21/9/39.

which was concerned solely with propaganda in hostile countries. However, since Italy was not, in fact, hostile, the latter organisation, like the Ministry of Information, was doing nothing about propaganda in Italy. 'It is almost incredible that this state of affairs should have been allowed to come about,' fumed Nichols. 'No wonder there have been difficulties over Italy lately, which have caused Sir Percy Loraine such distress.'⁵⁵

Lord Macmillan, replying to Halifax's letter, scarcely helped matters by suggesting that Loraine had been 'a little over-sensitive on this occasion'. He nevertheless pledged to take steps to avoid such slips in the future by submitting statements to Charles Peake (a Ministry of Information recruit from the Foreign Office) who could, if necessary, consult with Lord Perth.⁵⁶ Halifax, by now aware of Nichols' discoveries, was not satisfied with this. Stressing the dangers if Italy should learn how she was categorized by the British propaganda machinery, he urged 'as a matter of great political importance that the Counter-Propaganda Department [Sir Campbell Stuart's organisation] should confine its activities entirely to Germany and that in the Ministry of Information Italy should be in every respect assimilated to friendly neutral countries and given the same treatment'.⁵⁷ Macmillan denied that no plans had been made to deal with a neutral Italy, and offered to move one of Sir Campbell Stuart's Italian experts to the Ministry. Nichols and Sargent were indignant, the latter decrying the whole situation as 'entirely unsatisfactory'. Halifax therefore returned to the attack, pleading (rather ironically, given Foreign Office views on the inadequacy of Macmillan's Ministry) that 'the time has come to transfer Italian affairs to the Ministry of Information, lock, stock, and barrel'.⁵⁸ This time, Macmillan appears to have done as he was asked. Meanwhile, Loraine had written to Sir Campbell Stuart on his own initiative, clearly assuming him, in the

⁵⁵ FO 371/23787 R8053/1/22 Minute by Nichols 21/9/39.

⁵⁶ FO 371/23787 R8116/1/22 Macmillan to Halifax 22/9/39.

⁵⁷ FO 371/23787 R8124/1/22 Halifax to Macmillan 25/9/39.

⁵⁸ FO 371/23787 R8259/1/22 Macmillan to Halifax 26/9/39, Halifax to Macmillan 14/10/39.

absence of any other likely suspects, to be the man responsible for British propaganda in Italy. 'I am quite clear in my own mind,' he began, 'that I want no propaganda of any sort done in Italy which is not of precisely the right sort and done by precisely the right people.' Having identified the practices which he saw as particularly to be avoided, Loraine concluded (a little trenchantly perhaps):

Do all the propaganda you can with the Italians outside Italy, and none with the Italians inside Italy. There may be occasions in future in which you could be of the greatest assistance by sending out persons for particular objects, but if I may be frank, I would like the initiative there to lie with me.⁵⁹

The action taken in response to Loraine's complaints seems to have been successful in reducing the Ambassador's outbreaks of 'distress'. However, Anglo-Italian relations were shortly to be rocked by a further and more serious source of friction: the application of Contraband Control to Italian shipping.

The drawbacks of Italian non-belligerency were never more clearly exposed than when it was decided to bring in stricter controls over German trade. A hostile Italy, whatever the other implications might have been, would at least have made it easier to impose an effective naval blockade on Britain's enemies. An embargo on seaborne trade between Germany and a neutral Italy, however, would openly conflict with the policy of conciliation and non-provocation towards Italy which the War Cabinet had decided to adopt. Yet without such action, Germany's ability to prosecute the war would be enhanced, putting British lives and British security at risk. The outcome of this dilemma was that Italy, despite being a potential enemy of Britain as well as an ally of the Germans, was treated more leniently by the British in their exercise of Contraband Control than other neutral countries - even those

⁵⁹ FO 1011/205 Loraine to Sir Campbell Stuart 9/10/39.

who were sympathetic to the Allied cause. Not only was the effectiveness of the blockade thus compromised, but Anglo-Italian relations, despite British efforts, still suffered a marked deterioration as a result.

The first signs of trouble became apparent towards the end of October. Loraine was informed by Ciano that ‘Signor Mussolini is upset and getting very restive as regards the multiplying complaints about the treatment of Italian shipping by contraband control’. The Ambassador, in reporting this to Lord Halifax, concluded: ‘I must warn you frankly that things here are brewing up for an explosion on the question of the treatment of Italian shipping’.⁶⁰ Clearly alarmed, Halifax wrote immediately to Lord Finlay, the chairman of the Contraband Committee, stressing that

‘it is very important from the point of view of foreign policy that the inconvenience caused to Italy should be reduced to the indispensable minimum. . . . The political situation in Italy is not yet so clearly favourable that we can afford to take any risks and, as you no doubt know, the Chiefs of Staff have laid it down that it is of the highest importance to the Allied cause that Italy should not join Germany. . . . It is for this reason that I am so anxious that our contraband control should be exercised in such a manner as to give the Italians no ground for legitimate complaint.’⁶¹

The immediate cause of this scare was the stopping in late October of the Italian ship *Fortuna Stella*, from which were removed 400 bags of ground nuts bound for Germany. Whilst this ship was still being detained, an Italian tanker, the *Giove*, came within sight of the British contraband control vessels. A warning by Sir Noel Charles that stopping this tanker might have serious consequences led to the order being given (on political grounds) that the *Giove*

⁶⁰ FO 371/23828 R9370/7174/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 1080, 26/10/39.

⁶¹ FO 371/23828 R9370/7174/22 Halifax to Finlay 27/10/39.

should be allowed to pass through the controls without interference.⁶² Nevertheless, Italian resentment grew. When Halifax warned the War Cabinet of Bastianini's concern over the effect of contraband control on Anglo-Italian relations, even the Minister of Economic Warfare, R. H. Cross, agreed that 'it was essential to deal with the Italian complaints in a sympathetic manner'.⁶³

On 3 December, shortly after issue of the Orders in Council authorising British seizure of German seaborne exports, Ciano personally wrote to Halifax complaining that British Contraband Control had been, up to that point, 'extremely unsatisfactory. . . . the procedure of the control visits has come to assume a character which I do not hesitate to describe as vexatious'. Co-operation on the matter was vital, he went on, enclosing for good measure a list of all the Italian ships which had been stopped and details of the delays thus incurred.⁶⁴ At least part of Ciano's motivation for this move was the increasing pressure exerted on him by the German Foreign Minister, Ribbentrop, who, he noted in his diary, 'wants to create a crisis between us and London at any cost'.⁶⁵ Ciano's letter certainly had the desired effect: Halifax called an inter-departmental meeting for 18 December to discuss the question of the application of contraband control to Italy, at which representatives from the Foreign Office, Admiralty, Ministry of Economic Warfare, and all other departments involved were to be present. Again, Halifax advised the War Cabinet that 'the situation demanded the greatest care, and that our best course would be to go slow in the matter of Contraband Control in relation to Italian shipping'.⁶⁶ Such caution was well-merited: Ciano recorded how

Mussolini is becoming more and more exasperated by the British blockade. He threatens counter-measures and revenge. I believe, on the contrary, that we can

⁶² FO 371/23828 R9381/7174/22 Halifax to Loraine No. 634, 28/10/39, Charles to Halifax No. 1087, 28/10/39.

⁶³ CAB 65/2 WM 94 (39) 25/11/39.

⁶⁴ FO 371/23788 R11415/1/22 Ciano to Halifax 3/12/39.

⁶⁵ *Ciano's Diary* p. 179. Entry for 1/12/39.

do very little about it. Either we have the power to oppose, which means war, or else we keep our mouths shut and try to solve the difficulties in a friendly way.⁶⁷

Although Ciano clearly favoured the latter alternative, with Mussolini kicking his heels in frustration, it was probably wise for the British to take no risks. Contraband Control was, as Halifax informed the War Cabinet, ‘the only cloud on the Anglo-Italian horizon’ as 1939 drew to a close - an announcement which led Churchill to go so far as to suggest that Contraband Control in the Mediterranean be relaxed as a corollary to action against the Narvik iron ore traffic.⁶⁸ The year ended with a personal plea from Lorraine for Halifax to use his influence ‘in finding a radical remedy’ to the Contraband Control problem. ‘I am convinced,’ he warned, ‘that we cannot go on as we now are without the risk of a serious incident between the two countries.’⁶⁹

The best hope of improving Anglo-Italian relations seemed to lie in attempting to reach trade agreements, exchanging military information, and generally flattering the Italians as much as possible. It was also thought worthwhile to attempt to scare - or at any rate to impress - Italy with the resources which might be brought to bear against her should she throw down the gauntlet to the Allies. The lack of opportunity to show off British fighting strength on the battlefield was no obstacle to this policy: all that was necessary was to make the Italians aware of the extent of British military capabilities by giving them details of the strength of the British armed forces. This, bizarrely, is exactly what happened. Just over a month after the outbreak of war, with the Italian attitude still uncertain, Lorraine put forward his view that

⁶⁶ CAB 65/2 WM 105 (39) 6/12/39.

⁶⁷ *Ciano's Diary* p. 183. Entry for 10/12/39.

⁶⁸ CAB 65/2 WM 120 (39) 20/12/39. Churchill's suggestion was opposed by Lord Hankey, who stressed that Germany's iron ore and oil imports were of equal importance and should both be targeted.

the most potent way of influencing Mussolini's judgment and thenceforth that of Italy is to prove to him that already available resources of the Allies in men power, guns, aircraft, munitions etc., are such as to render any German break through on the Western Front impossible. . . . Naval power will probably interest him less, but concrete evidence of our ability to deal with [the] menace of submarines and surface raiders would also impress him.⁷⁰

Lorraine's confidence in Allied superiority drew a cautiously favourable response from the War Cabinet, which agreed to send him 'such particulars of a general nature regarding our naval and military strength as might be thought suitable for communication to Count Ciano in order to counteract recent German propaganda to Italy'.⁷¹ The first of these bulletins was ready for despatch by the end of October, and, although not going into as much detail as Lorraine had requested, gave fairly precise figures for various types of weaponry in the possession of the British Army.⁷² Thus the War Cabinet had sanctioned a 'carrot and stick' approach towards maintaining Italian neutrality: on the one hand, the promise of lucrative commercial agreements; on the other, the thinly-veiled threat of military defeat. The intention was to convince the Italians that Germany could not hope to defeat the Allies, and that they should not, therefore back a losing horse. This was undoubtedly sound thinking; however, it needed to be backed up with convincing proof. The first clash of arms between the belligerents needed to produce an impressive Allied performance in order to reinforce the British claims to invincibility. Unfortunately for the British, the events in Norway in April 1940 (and subsequently those in France) would prove to have the opposite effect.

⁶⁹ FO 371/23828 R11990/7174/22 Lorraine to Halifax No. 1076, 25/12/39.

⁷⁰ FO 371/23820 R8577/399/22 Lorraine to Halifax No. 1015, 8/10/39.

⁷¹ CAB 65/1 WM 44 (39) 11/10/39.

⁷² FO 371/23821 R9408/399/22 Details supplied by War Office for transmission to Rome.

A mutual desire to avoid hostilities had steered the fragile relationship through the dangerous waters of the outbreak of war, although the lack of any concerted military action had made it easy to maintain the stand-off. Nevertheless, as 1939 ended, the problem of discerning Italy's future policy remained as intractable as ever. On the one hand, there were still grounds for optimism: Halifax informed Sir Miles Lampson, the British Ambassador in Cairo, that '[t]he danger of Italy coming into the war on Germany's side . . . is less than it was at the beginning of the war. Indeed it is not unthinkable that in certain circumstances Italy might break with Germany'. On the other hand, as Halifax continued, 'her decision is likely to be very largely influenced by the course of military operations'. (In any case, he rather unscrupulously added, it might be better 'to leave the Egyptians to believe that the Italian danger is very real, in order not to diminish their readiness to co-operate with us'.)⁷³ This cautious optimism was shared by Loraine, who perceived that 'Italian diplomacy is working in Italian interests on lines that are advantageous to ourselves and France,' and that there was thus no need to force the pace.⁷⁴ Given that a country can generally be reckoned to conduct its foreign policy in accordance with its own national interest, and given also that the Italian national interest at the beginning of 1940 still dictated abstention from any serious hostilities, the immediate outlook for continued Italian non-belligerency was good. However, in the longer term, the signs were less encouraging. It was fully appreciated that military events could change Italy's policy almost overnight. Coupled to this was the fact that Mussolini was striving to rectify the deficiencies in Italy's military capabilities. The Allied rejection of Hitler's peace offer had disabused the Duce of the notion that the war would be resolved by peaceful means. This meant that a decision could only be reached by force of arms - and it was in Italian interests to be on the winning side when things came to a conclusion.

⁷³ FO 371/23822 R12215/399/22 Halifax to Lampson No. 2 Saving, 3/1/40.

⁷⁴ FO 371/24937 R306/58/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 2 Saving, 2/1/40.

Mussolini, at least, was far from happy to be confined to watching events from the sidelines, and would only do so as long as there was no realistic alternative. The gradual realisation of this, combined with changes in the European situation, led inexorably to a new, less optimistic, phase in Anglo-Italian relations.

4. ANGLO-ITALIAN DISENCHANTMENT, JANUARY - MAY 1940

I am of the opinion that Germany has gained and the Allies have lost a certain amount of ground here; and that this is Signor Mussolini's personal doing.

Sir Percy Loraine, 19 March 1940.¹

As 1940 began, the British exercise of Contraband Control remained the single biggest cause of friction in Anglo-Italian relations. In recognition of this, the government took further conciliatory steps in January in an attempt to ease the situation. Firstly, new regulations were put in place to allow Italian ships to avoid the ignominy of being searched, instead presenting a manifest of their cargo.² In addition to this, Loraine pleaded for exemption from the controls to be given to Italian colonial trade. The Ministry of Economic Warfare were extremely reluctant to grant such a concession, for fear that Holland and Belgium would seek similar terms, but the Foreign Office pushed the exemption through, largely on the grounds that 'we cannot afford to hold up the whole of our Italian negotiations on account of this question.' Henceforward, goods bound for Italian colonies carried in Italian ships and loaded in Italian ports were exempted from Contraband Control.³ As Loraine correctly observed, 'Negotiations on contraband control . . . are now entirely political'.⁴ Conducting economic warfare during a Phoney War was not simply a case of following economic dictates, as the Ministry of Economic Warfare increasingly came to discover.

¹ FO 371/24936 R3564/57/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 253 DIPP 19/3/40

² FO 371/24932 R671/51/22 Halifax to Loraine No. 70 Arfar 6/1/40.

³ FO 371/24932 R1472/51/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 740 Arfar 16/1/40; minutes by Sargent, Cadogan & Halifax, 3/2/40, 7/2/40 & 8/2/40; Foreign Office to Ministry of Economic Warfare 12/2/40.

⁴ FO 371/24932 R877/51/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 64, 17/1/40.

These Contraband Control concessions would, it was hoped, help to clear the way for Britain's true objective: a far-reaching trade agreement with Italy which would both restrict Italian trade with (and therefore reliance on) Germany and create closer links (economic if not political) between Britain and Italy. As envisaged at the outset of the war, the central features of such an agreement were to be the export of British coal to Italy, and the purchase of Italian war materials by the British. The additional hope of winning over the Italians to the Allied side was clearly implicit in all of this - an intention which was not lost on the Italians. The negotiations did not proceed smoothly.⁵ Mussolini, no doubt concerned about the German reaction, refused to countenance any limitation of Italian imports by quota.⁶ The other Italian demands were no easier to stomach. Halifax set the position before the War Cabinet:

The Italians were, in effect, asking us to rely on their assurances in regard to the destinations of imports which we wished to control, and wanted us to accept exports of vegetables, &c., which we did not require in exchange for our coal. . . . he might, in the circumstances, have to propose the acceptance, on political grounds, of Italian proposals, which would involve an otherwise unjustified drain on our exchange resources.⁷

The question, therefore, was whether to subsume economic considerations to political desiderata. As far as the Foreign Office were concerned, the answer to this should be yes. The War Cabinet seem to have agreed. On 23 January, in response to a paper by the Master of the Rolls, Sir Wilfred Greene,⁸ warning that 'we ought to go some way further to meeting the Italian demands, if we were to avoid a considerable deterioration in our

⁵ Robert Mallet 'The Anglo-Italian War Trade Negotiations, Contraband Control and the Failure to Appease Mussolini, 1939-40' *Diplomacy & Statecraft* Vol. 8 No. 1 (March 1997) pp. 137-167 gives a more detailed account of these negotiations and the background to them, although it tends to view economic policy towards Italy in isolation from other developments in Anglo-Italian relations.

⁶ FO 371/24932 R811/51/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 60, 16/1/40.

⁷ CAB 65/5 WM 18 (40) 19/1/40.

relations with Italy', they ordered that an inter-departmental meeting be held straight away 'to arrive at an agreed policy'.⁹ Six days later, the Master of the Rolls was authorised to return to Italy and to negotiate a trade agreement which included the import by Britain of Italian guns and up to £5 million of Italian agricultural produce.¹⁰

Realistically, the chances of Britain securing a favourable agreement with Italy were slim. Halifax warned Loraine that 'we are not yet so sure of Italy's future policy as to be able to view with equanimity the accumulation in Italy of large reserves of raw materials'. Preventing such an accumulation, however, presented difficulties: 'a rationing system . . . clearly is not practical politics; but in so far as we control the sources of supply we should wish to continue the present practice of feeding Italy from hand to mouth'.¹¹ That the British held such an attitude scarcely enhanced the chances of a mutually beneficial agreement being reached. However, as events turned out, the major sticking point in the negotiations was not Italian annoyance at trade limitations, but rather the British insistence that Italian arms form a *sine qua non* of any trade agreement.

An aide-mémoire handed by Loraine to Ciano on 3 February, setting out the British terms for an agreement, specified that Britain's proposals 'are dependent on the supply of the aircraft, guns, and other equipment which have been under discussion since November.'¹² Immediately Ciano picked up on the difficulties which this proviso might create, pointing out that 'Italy now had her re-armament to see to'.¹³ Even more of an obstacle, at least so far as Mussolini was concerned, was the impression which would be given to Hitler if his Axis partner were to start supplying the British with arms which would clearly be used against German forces. This is a point which seems not to have

⁸ Sir Wilfred was in charge of the British negotiations aimed at securing an economic agreement with Italy.

⁹ CAB 65/5 WM 21 (40) 23/1/40.

¹⁰ CAB 65/5 WM 26 (40) 29/1/40.

¹¹ FO 37/24938 R1528/48/22 Halifax to Loraine No. 68 DIPP, 2/2/40 (drafted by Sir Andrew Noble).

¹² FO 371/24928R2028/48/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 31 Saving, 7/2/40, enclosing the text of this aide mémoire.

occurred to the War Cabinet. Ciano, however, was under no illusions: 'I am certain that the Duce will not like it,' he wrote in his diary, 'but Riccardi [the Italian Minister of Exchange and Currency] says that we must make a virtue of necessity and reach an agreement with the English, otherwise the economic situation will become too burdensome'.¹⁴ The economic argument for Italy's reaching an agreement with Britain was certainly a strong one; the British threat to stop all seaborne supplies of German coal to Italy gave it added force. However, as Ciano was to discover, Mussolini (like the British) was motivated primarily by political rather than economic considerations. It was in his hands that the final decision over a trade agreement rested.

On 7 February, Mussolini informed Ciano that he was not prepared to sell arms to Britain, citing Italy's own armament needs, her obligations to Germany, and the need for a government to act with 'morality and honour'. 'He is not concerned with British reactions,' Ciano noted. 'Neither does the lack of coal weigh on his mind.'¹⁵ The British attempt to embroil Italy in an agreement which would detach her from Germany and bring her closer to the Allies had failed. Ciano, reluctant to close the door completely, hinted to Loraine that the Duce might be prepared to reconsider his decision in six months' time - a suggestion which Loraine dismissed on the grounds that, in his view, 'before six months had elapsed, the fate of European man for many generations to come would have been settled. Maybe war would not have ended, but the winner would be declared'.¹⁶ The future of Anglo-Italian relations suddenly looked much less promising.

With or without an Anglo-Italian war trade agreement, the key question remained whether Italy would enter the war. Halifax informed the War Cabinet on 15 February that, according to an Italian senator, the majority of Italians were against armed intervention on

¹³ FO 371/24928 R1641/48/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 90, 4/2/40.

¹⁴ *Ciano's Diary* p. 205 Entry for 3/2/40.

¹⁵ *Ciano's Diary* p. 205 Entry for 7/2/40.

¹⁶ FO 371/24928 R1883/48/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 109, 8/2/40.

the side of Germany, and Mussolini was rapidly losing the confidence of his people. On the basis of this, Halifax suggested that ‘our proper course was to go rather slowly in our relations with Italy and not to do anything having the appearance of running after the Duce with further offers.’ Chamberlain, too, thought that ‘if we did not act too hurriedly, there was a good chance that Italian policy might develop in the direction that we desired.’¹⁷ Seen in this light, the arms sale veto might not have seemed such a serious blow. Loraine also tried to strike a positive note. In a personal letter to Halifax, he noted that, had Mussolini accepted the British terms for a war trade agreement,

we should in essence have obtained a political success of considerable magnitude; a success which, on cold thinking, we were hardly entitled to expect in less than nine months after the signature of the Italo-German Alliance, and barely five months of a militarily indecisive war. We have therefore lost nothing that we had the right to expect and all our positions remain intact.¹⁸

This was probably putting too much of a gloss on things: if the chances of Italian acceptance had been so slim, why was the offer put to them in the first place? It might have been useful in determining where Italy’s sympathies really lay, but that does not seem to have been part of the thinking behind the scheme. Indeed, it had been decided early on in the war that it was best *not* to force Italy to declare her position.

It was easy to be wise after the event, but the truth is that Mussolini’s veto was a severe blow to the British aim of keeping Italy away from Germany and gradually winning her over to the Allied side. The Duce had given a clear indication of where he stood, and it was not what the British had wanted to hear. As Loraine observed to Ciano,

¹⁷ CAB 65/11 WM 42 (40) Confidential Annex 15/2/40; CAB 65/5 WM 42 (40) 15/2/40.

¹⁸ FO 1011/67 Loraine to Halifax ‘Secret’ 14/2/40.

my own hope was . . . that after this war was over, we should rebuild Anglo-Italian relations on a firm basis of friendship. I had hoped that during hostilities we might be able to lay some foundation stones of the new structure. In this respect Signor Mussolini's decision had grievously disappointed my hopes.¹⁹

The only good that came of this episode, from the British point of view, was the opportunity it presented to tighten up on economic sanctions against Germany - in particular the stoppage of seaborne exports of coal to Italy. Even so, this could only be effected in the knowledge that Italy was not, as yet, likely to retaliate by entering the war against Britain and France. When these circumstances changed a few months later, as we shall see, Britain's attitude was rather less robust, and the question of appeasing Italy in order to keep her out of the conflict once again came to the fore.

In the meantime, hopes of some form of limited co-operation with Italy remained. The Master of the Rolls, whilst recognising the near impossibility of getting the Italians to fight the Germans, had argued that the reportedly widespread Italian dislike of Germany presented an opportunity for the Allies to attempt to win Italian 'sympathy and trust', for example 'in matters affecting Russia, the Balkans, and the ultimate settlement of Europe'.²⁰ One suggestion, albeit rather extreme, was that Britain take Germany's place alongside Italy in the Anti-Comintern Pact. The matter seems to have been raised initially by Bastianini, who told an English friend that 'if Great Britain would take Germany's place . . . Mussolini (who was becoming increasingly anti-German) was ready to play'.²¹ Halifax sought the views of Loraine, who optimistically forecast

¹⁹ FO 371/24928 R2135/48/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 131, 14/2/40.

²⁰ FO 371/24927 R1200/48/22 Memo by Master of the Rolls 22/1/40.

²¹ FO 371/24949 R1103/60/22 Aide-mémoire for the French Government handed to Corbin by Cadogan 6/2/40.

that we could open up to Italy not only the replacement of Germany by ourselves in the anti-Comintern Pact but also, by implication . . . the prospect of a London-Paris-Rome axis as a preferable alternative to the Berlin-Rome axis which has not stood too well the acid test of events.²²

It is a measure of British eagerness to reach an agreement to keep Italy out of the war that this somewhat impractical suggestion met with considerable support in London. Nichols and Sargent urged that indications should be given in Rome of Britain's interest in such a scheme. R. G. Howe (of the Far Eastern Department) was more guarded, pointing out that such an agreement would put Britain on the same side as Japan, with implications for Anglo-Chinese (and therefore Anglo-American) relations. Similarly, Cadogan stressed that it would 'give us three very uncomfortable associates - Italy, Japan & Spain . . . it would be regarded . . . as a change of front, and a rather suspect one at that. . . . we had better leave it alone'. Halifax, however, was unconvinced by these protestations: 'I think I am disposed to take the course' he minuted with deceptive decisiveness, '. . . of saying that we are interested'.²³ An appropriate response was accordingly made to Bastianini's feeler, but nothing more seems to have come of it. Indeed, a few weeks later, Sir Reginald Hoare reported the Roumanian Government's fear that 'the Germans might seek to revive the Anti-Comintern Pact and, profiting by the present disorganisation of Russia and her estrangement from the Western Powers, endeavour to break that country [Russia] up in agreement with the Italians and the Japanese'. Sargent, proving himself in this case to be a worse judge of German intentions than the Roumanians, did not view such a development as a serious possibility, but noted nevertheless that 'all things are possible'.²⁴ In any case, effective anti-Russian collaboration between Italy and Great Britain was not a practical

²² FO 371/24949 R1103/60/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 11 Saving, 17/1/40.

²³ FO 371/24949 R1103/60/22 Minutes by Nichols 24/1/40, Sargent 25/1/40, Howe 29/1/40, Cadogan 29/1/40, Halifax 30/1/40.

²⁴ FO 371/24938 R2748/58/22 Sir R. Hoare to Halifax No. 71, 23/2/40; minute by Sargent 8/3/40.

possibility: the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact would doubtless have made Mussolini extremely reluctant to antagonise Hitler by plotting with Germany's enemies to damage her Russian ally.

Indeed, it was Germany which remained the major stumbling block to any meaningful improvement in Anglo-Italian relations. In the battle to secure a favourable Italian policy, Germany had a virtually unassailable advantage in the enduring loyalty of Mussolini - an advantage which the Anglophile tendencies of the Foreign Minister and a large proportion of the population would be hard-pressed to overcome. The Rome-Berlin Axis, although weakened, remained intact, and as Hitler's much-postponed western offensive drew ever closer, the ties between Germany and Italy were reasserted by a series of German diplomatic initiatives to which the Allies could find no reply.

In the vanguard of the German *démarche* was Joachim von Ribbentrop, Hitler's Foreign Minister, and Ciano's least favourite Nazi, who arrived in Rome on 10 March in an attempt to talk the Duce into taking a more active stance in the war. Although caught slightly on the hop by this development (which coincided with Anglo-Italian negotiations over German coal exports and the visit of the American envoy Sumner Welles to Europe), Lord Halifax was not unduly concerned, informing the War Cabinet that he 'was not unhopeful that Herr von Ribbentrop's sudden arrival with a large retinue of officials would do more good than harm from our point of view'.²⁵ This slightly complacent attitude was strengthened by Loraine's reports of the visit. The Ambassador was assured by Ciano 'that the visit of Ribbentrop to Rome had had no influence on Italian foreign policy'.²⁶ Indeed, the fact that the Italians eventually came to an agreement with the British over German coal exports from Rotterdam just as Ribbentrop was arriving in Rome was taken to be a

²⁵ CAB 65/6 WM 65 (40) 11/3/40.

²⁶ FO 371/24936 R3315/57/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 230, 13/3/40.

favourable sign. ‘One up, I think, to us’, Halifax recorded in his diary.²⁷ The truth of the matter, had the British been able to discern it, would have caused rather more disquiet. After pondering on Ribbentrop’s promise of continued coal supplies from Germany (to be transported overland if necessary) and assurances of an imminent German victory, Mussolini gave on 11 March what amounted to a pledge of future Italian intervention in a ‘parallel war’ with Germany against the Allies. Ribbentrop, delighted by the Duce’s compliance, endeavoured (as Ciano put it) ‘to dot his *i*’s as much as possible’, and suggested a meeting between Mussolini and Hitler at the Brenner Pass to finalise the details of Italy’s entry into the war.²⁸ It is tempting to see Mussolini’s assurances to Ribbentrop as a turning point in Italian policy: the abandonment of ‘wait and see’ in favour of a commitment to intervene.²⁹ Arguably, however, they made little material difference. A promise to join in the war at an unspecified future date was, after all, not exactly a cast-iron guarantee of Italian intervention. Indeed, the Duce was apparently having reservations the very next day (‘he believes’, wrote Ciano, ‘he has gone too far in his commitment to fight against the Allies’).³⁰ Despite appearances to the contrary, it can be argued that Italian policy still hung in the balance.

The news of an imminent meeting between Hitler and Mussolini at the Brenner Pass quickly reached British ears. A somewhat misleading report from D’Arcy Osborne, British Representative to the Holy See, suggested that Hitler was not satisfied with the results of Ribbentrop’s visit to Rome, and had therefore decided to speak to the Duce personally ‘on Italian soil’.³¹ In fact, as we have seen, the opposite was true: the meeting was arranged because Ribbentrop’s visit had gone so well. Halifax, passing Osborne’s report on to the War Cabinet, cast doubt upon his source (rumoured in the Foreign Office

²⁷ A7.8.3 Halifax Diary 1940 Entry for 9/3/40.

²⁸ *Ciano’s Diary* p. 220 Entry for 11/3/40

²⁹ See Knox *Mussolini Unleashed* p. 83 for a useful discussion of this point.

³⁰ *Ciano’s Diary* p. 220. Entry for 12/3/40.

to be Count Ciano's doctor), but added that, if true, 'it probably presaged not only trouble for us, but also trouble in Italy.' Chamberlain, on the other hand, doubted 'that any spectacular development was likely in the immediate future, even if Herr Hitler and Signor Mussolini were to meet'.³² By 'spectacular development' the Prime Minister seems to have been thinking as much of a German-Italian peace offensive as of Italian belligerency. In any case, buoyed up by his past experience of scare stories, he remained relatively unconcerned about a development which might have spelt the end for the British policy of containing the war and preserving Italian neutrality.

On the day of the Brenner meeting, Chamberlain admitted to the War Cabinet that 'if, as a result of the meeting between Hitler and Mussolini, Italy took sides with Germany, the whole situation would be altered and our policy would presumably take the form of a concentrated attack upon Italy'; nevertheless he still considered actual Italian hostility to be 'unlikely'.³³ Pre-Norway and France, this contention was not as naive as it might now appear. Chamberlain, like most of the Foreign Office experts, recognised that it would take a significant push to initiate Italian belligerency. Such a push might be administered by further German military victories, or demonstrations of Allied military weakness, or indeed both. Events in Poland and Finland, although they reflected badly on Britain and France, were not in themselves sufficient to convince Italy of the inevitability of German victory. In support of this argument, it should be noted that Italian intervention (in June 1940) did not actually transpire until consecutive military defeats for the Allies at German hands seemed to have settled the question beyond reasonable doubt. As Loraine and others frequently stressed, until things were really put to the test in a military sense, Italy could be

³¹ FO 371/24936 R3330/57/22 Osborne to Halifax No. 20, 14/3/40.

³² CAB 65/6 WM 69 (40) 15/3/40. For this identification of Osborne's source see FO 371/24936 R3548/57/22 Minute by Nichols 20/3/40.

³³ CAB 65/6 WM 71 (40) 18/3/40.

counted on to remain above the fray, however much Mussolini, or indeed Hitler, might have wanted her to take a hand.

The fall-out from the Brenner meeting soon reached Britain. Even as Hitler and Mussolini talked, Loraine and Osborne were telegraphing back to London with the news that Ciano, who had been rumoured to be barred from the talks at Hitler's request, was in fact present - a positive sign, it was felt, from the British point of view.³⁴ Loraine went on to assert his confidence, current events notwithstanding, that Mussolini would not 'take the plunge into war on Germany's side'.³⁵ The next day, he spoke to Ciano, who informed him that no change in Italian policy had been effected by the meeting, although Loraine added 'I think Count Ciano meant me to understand that he was not at liberty to reveal to me what passed in the conversation'. He felt 'that Ciano told me exactly as much about the Brenner meeting as he was allowed to by Signor Mussolini, and that his statement about "no change in Italian policy" and "no surprises" is genuine'. His conclusion, however, was that 'Signor Mussolini is resolved to uphold, at the minimum, the facade of the Axis and the Alliance'.³⁶

The indications from the Vatican were more pessimistic. Osborne was informed by his source

that Signor Mussolini returned from the Brenner Pass full of enthusiastic admiration for Herr Hitler and so certain of Herr Hitler's military success that even his own suite were impressed. . . . I am assured that if Herr Hitler should have an initial success it is most likely that Signor Mussolini will attack in the Mediterranean. He boasts that he will close the Mediterranean at Gibraltar and Suez and will conduct his own Blitzkrieg in and around the

³⁴ FO 371/24936 R3480/57/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 245; R3484/57/22 Osborne to Halifax No. 25 DIPP, both 18/3/40.

³⁵ FO 371/24936 R34549/57/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 247 DIPP, 18/3/40.

³⁶ FO 371/24936 R3563/57/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 25, 19/3/40.

Mediterranean. (On the other hand if we should have a considerable success he would probably become our best friend).³⁷

Osborne here raised two fundamental points: firstly that Italy's future policy, as had been repeatedly asserted by Loraine and others, would depend primarily upon military events, and secondly that there was still a possibility that, if the Allies could put up a convincing performance against German forces in any future hostilities, Mussolini might not throw in his lot with Hitler. Both of these assertions would seem to be justified. Even after the Brenner meeting, Mussolini retained a free hand in deciding not only when but indeed if Italy would intervene. Hitler, for all his pressure, could not force Italy into the war, especially if entry would run contrary to Italian national interests. To that extent, Ciano was right to argue that Italy's policy had not changed: it was still dependent on events. The meetings with Ribbentrop and Hitler may have convinced Mussolini of the merits of entering the war at Germany's side, but the circumstances under which he would contemplate such a move (imminent German victory in Europe) had not altered. Hitler had obtained assurances, not a change of policy. Italian intervention against Britain, although now more likely (Ciano informed the French Ambassador that Mussolini had 'doubled his bet' on Germany),³⁸ was still not inevitable.

As 1940 wore on, British views of future Italian policy became decidedly more pessimistic. In the wake of Osborne's report of the Brenner meeting, Halifax wrote to the three Service Ministers, warning them that the Foreign Office 'cannot guarantee that Italy will not at once join the Reich as a belligerent, should the Germans launch their Blitzkrieg and obtain what might be interpreted as an initial success'.³⁹ From this point on, British policy towards Italy took on a rather more desperate air. Philip Nichols, still grappling with the question of how to convince Mussolini that Britain was not ideologically opposed to

³⁷ FO 371/24936 R3661/57/22 Osborne to Halifax No. 28 DIPP, 22/3/40.

³⁸ FO 371/24938 R3660/58/22 O. Harvey (Paris) to Halifax No. 227 Saving, 22/3/40.

fascism *per se*, went so far as to observe that there were ‘many aspects of the Fascist system in Italy which it would be useful to preserve and which, I believe, if the Italian people themselves had the chance to express an opinion, they would wish to maintain’.⁴⁰ The War Cabinet, whilst casting doubt on Italy’s desire and ability to enter the war in the immediate future, instructed Halifax to re-consider Britain’s entire policy towards Italy, paying particular attention to Contraband Control. Chamberlain, whilst counselling caution, observed with indignation that ‘Signor Mussolini was rather presuming on our goodwill’.⁴¹

Applying himself to the task which the War Cabinet had set him, Halifax first sought the views of Loraine, who was in London for a spot of rest and recuperation. The Ambassador stuck to his usual (and, it must be said, perceptive) line that ‘Mussolini is not likely to try and get into war with us until he is quite sure that we are sufficiently near being beaten to bring him to a decision’.⁴² A further meeting with Loraine, Sir Wilfred Greene, and the Minister for Economic Warfare (Ronald Cross) shed little further light on Mussolini’s intentions. ‘I still adhere to my view that he is going to bark more than bite’, noted Halifax in his diary. ‘It is all part of dictator technique to keep poor timid democracies jittering.’ With a touch of bravado, he went on: ‘What they cannot as yet succeed in understanding is that we are much less frightened of them jumping out on us now than we were at the time of Munich’.⁴³ This was undoubtedly true, although it might be suggested that it was not, in itself, much of an achievement after seven months of war.

It is difficult to overestimate the impact of the campaign in Norway during April 1940 on Anglo-Italian relations. Here, for the first time, was what Mussolini had been

³⁹ FO 371/24936 R3661/57/22 Halifax to Churchill, Stanley & Kingsley Wood, 31/3/40.

⁴⁰ FO 371/24939 R4291/58/22 Minute by Nichols 1/4/40. Cadogan, whilst not dissenting from this view, pointed out that it would nevertheless be ‘a difficult - and delicate - matter to expound this to the Duce’ - minute by Cadogan 1/4/40.

⁴¹ CAB 65/6 WM 81(40) 4/4/40.

⁴² A7.8.3 Halifax Diary 1940. Entry for 4/4/40.

waiting for: a direct armed clash between the leading protagonists in the war. As Loraine and others had consistently maintained, it was the outcome of such hostilities, rather than any diplomatic initiative, which would determine Italian policy. Even though it is plausible, with hindsight, to argue that it was the fall of France which ultimately clinched Italian intervention in the war, events in Scandinavia played a full part in the development of Italian thinking. Right from the start, the signs were not good for the British. The embarrassment of a German task force sneaking past the might of the Royal Navy and landing at multiple points on the Norwegian coast was considerable: Sir Noel Charles (who had assumed control of the Rome Embassy during Loraine's leave of absence) reported that even Ciano 'could not conceal his admiration for the German *coup*'.⁴⁴ For Hitler, making a monkey out of the Allies was a supremely effective way of securing a more robust Italian stance. As Charles warned Loraine (in a letter principally concerned with reporting the progress of the Ambassador's racehorse) 'the Italians . . . are becoming more and more impressed by the German strength and initiative which will make them more disinclined to put up with any action on our part - such as stopping German or other ships in the Adriatic'. He went on to suggest that 'unless we are prepared for the worst it would be advisable to postpone any operations there for the moment'.⁴⁵

In a good example of the way in which events in one theatre directly affected those in another, German success in Norway raised the spectre of an Italian strike in the Mediterranean area whilst Allied attention and military forces were concentrated elsewhere. According to Ciano, Mussolini wanted to take advantage of the situation to have a crack at Croatia: 'His hands fairly itch. He intends to quicken the tempo, taking advantage of the disorder that reigns in Europe. . . . he is convinced that an attack against

⁴³ A7.8.3 Halifax Diary 1940. Entry for 6/4/40.

⁴⁴ FO 434/7 Sir N. Charles to Halifax No. 345, 9/4/40.

⁴⁵ FO 371/24939 R4646/58/22 Sir N. Charles to Loraine 10/4/40.

Yugoslavia will not lead France and Britain to strike at us'.⁴⁶ Others, too, feared an Italian attack - Harold Caccia reported from Athens that rumours were circulating of an Italian attack on Corfu, and that Greece 'would resist any Italian move with all her resources and call upon the Allies to implement their guarantee'.⁴⁷ This would have presented the British with a headache which they could well have done without, and it was perhaps just as well that Mussolini seemed concerned, for the moment at least, only to take action which would not elicit an Allied strike on Italy.

The danger of Italy abandoning non-belligerency in the wake of Germany's apparent success in Norway was clearly recognised by the Allies. Sir Ronald Campbell passed on a French warning (from Léger) that, in view of Germany's assiduousness in passing details of their successes onto the Italians, 'it was of the utmost importance for us to keep Signor Mussolini informed, if possible in advance of publication, of the real position', otherwise, the Duce might take 'some fatal step owing to a falsified appreciation of the situation'.⁴⁸ This suggestion emphasises how important it was for the Allies not only to do well in Norway, but to be *seen* to do well. As the Germans were demonstrating, military victories were by far the most effective type of propaganda in this war, and it was therefore important to make as much fuss as possible about any successes achieved by force of arms. Such blowing of one's own trumpet was an extremely un-British way of carrying on, but needs must in wartime, and on April 12 Halifax sent to both the Rome Embassy and Sir Robert Craigie, British Ambassador in Tokyo, information which 'you should use to convince Italian/Japanese Government by any means you think suitable that situation in Norway is not as depicted by German propaganda'.⁴⁹ The assessment of the

⁴⁶ *Ciano's Diary* p. 234. Entry for 9/4/40.

⁴⁷ FO 371/24939 R4551/58/22 Caccia to Halifax No. 183, 11/4/40.

⁴⁸ FO 371/24939 R4548/58/22 Campbell to Halifax No. 99, 11/4/40.

⁴⁹ FO 371/24939 R4548/58/22 Halifax to Sir N. Charles No. 223; Halifax to Craigie No. 289, 12/4/40.

Norwegian situation which followed was, it must be said, as blatant a piece of propaganda as can be imagined in the circumstances: Hitler, it was asserted,

has committed [a] grave strategic error . . . [the] Germans have always maintained that extension of war to Scandinavia would be to [the] advantage of [the] Allies, and it is only in desperation that they could have determined to bring about such a situation. Events of [the] next few weeks should prove this, and [the] Italian/Japanese Government would be well advised to await them.

It would not be difficult for Loraine to push this line so long as subsequent events in Norway proved it to be correct. If things went Germany's way, however, there was a very real danger that the Italians, spurred on by evidence of Allied weakness, would take just those 'fatal' steps which these claims had been designed to prevent.

As the Allied fightback in Norway began to falter, subsequent British action must have smacked even more of desperation. On 17 April, Halifax, worried that the details of Allied achievements in Norway now being sent to Italy was not reaching the highest quarters, suggested to Sir Noel Charles that 'all available information to date on our naval and air successes in Scandinavia' should be summarised in a memorandum and handed to Count Ciano 'with the request that it be brought personally to Signor Mussolini's attention'.⁵⁰ Ciano assured Charles that the Duce kept up to date with Allied military operations by reading the British press, but was less certain whether the information passed by the British Embassy to the Italian Foreign Ministry actually reached Mussolini himself.⁵¹ If nothing else, the British attitude in this matter at least illustrates a realisation that propaganda in Italy, if it were to have any effect on Italian policy, had to be directed specifically at the man who ultimately decided Italian policy. The only problem, as the

⁵⁰ FO 371/24950 R4870/60/22 Halifax to Sir N. Charles No. 247, 17/4/40.

⁵¹ FO 371/24950 R5300/60/22 Sir N. Charles to Halifax No. 424A, 24/4/40.

Norwegian campaign progressed, was that British words came increasingly to be contradicted by German actions. It was, after all, difficult to sustain the line that Hitler's actions had been a 'grave strategic error' when British troops were being evacuated and Norway left in the hands of her German captors. Indeed, by 26 April, Halifax was warning Lord Lothian in Washington that events in Norway might lead directly to Italy's entry into the war.⁵²

On 11 April, an unexpected communication reached Britain from a rather surprising source. Mussolini's daughter, Edda, who was also the wife of Count Ciano, apparently approached the British Government with what Cadogan described as an 'offer to sell her soul - and her father - to say nothing of her country!'⁵³ Unfortunately for the historian, the only record of this extraordinary *démarche* is an oblique reference (excised, for some reason, from the published version) in Cadogan's diary - neither the Foreign Office files, nor the War Cabinet Minutes, Halifax's diary, or any of the other sources consulted for this study can shed any light on the matter. In the absence of further evidence, all that can be known is that, at 7 p.m. on 11 April 1940, Cadogan and Halifax went to see Chamberlain at No. 10 Downing Street to discuss Countess Ciano's 'offer' (similar meetings had taken place at No. 10 earlier on in the war with regard to peace feelers from Germany, which, like this, were evidently considered too sensitive to be laid before even the War Cabinet). It is worth noting that Sir Percy Loraine, despite being in London at this time, was not present. All that Cadogan reveals of the talk is that Chamberlain, 'like ourselves, realises it's a gamble, but saw at once - bless him! - that if we could prove she rec[eive]d money from us we could blackmail her!' Exactly what it was that Countess Ciano had proposed remains a mystery. If she had offered to use her influence in some way on her father, her subsequent failure to prevent him from executing

⁵² FO 371/24941 R5428/58/22 Halifax to Lothian No. 651, 26/4/40.

⁵³ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 11/4/40.

her own husband suggests that she may have over-estimated her powers of persuasion. At any rate, the affair seems to have come to nothing, and, were it not for Cadogan's diary entry, the whole intriguing episode would have disappeared without a trace.

Another incident, less enigmatic but equally interesting, is revealed by some of the scant papers left by Sir Horace Wilson.⁵⁴ In a throwback to the 'appeasement' era of the pre-war years (such as the occasion when Chamberlain used his sister-in-law, Ivy, as an unofficial envoy in Rome), the Prime Minister and his chief advisor seem to have been prepared to conduct negotiations with the Italian leaders via wholly unofficial channels. The channel in question was the legal advisor to the Italian Embassy in London, Adrian Dingli. Having been in close touch before the war with Dino Grandi, the Italian Ambassador, Dingli continued after the outbreak of war to pass on information to Chamberlain via Sir Joseph Ball, head of the Conservative Party's Research Department and a close confidant of Chamberlain over the years. In December 1939, he provided details of secret clauses in the military alliance between Italy and Germany. Then, in April 1940, he reappeared on the scene claiming to be the bearer of peace feelers from none other than Signor Mussolini himself. Dingli, 'by arrangement with Sir J. Ball', had been in Italy during late March and early April. During his visit, he twice spoke with Ciano. At the second of these meetings, Ciano apparently 'said that he was authorised by Mussolini to send D[ingli] back to England with an intimation that he (Mussolini) was willing to see if negotiations could be begun between England and Germany and would be willing to put proposals to Hitler as his own.'⁵⁵ News of this was quickly passed on to the Prime Minister, but not, at this stage, to the Foreign Secretary. Even though events in Norway had now rendered any hopes of a negotiated peace unrealistic, Chamberlain was reluctant

⁵⁴ The papers in question somehow found their way into the papers of Sir Edward Bridges, Secretary to the War Cabinet, now held in the Public Record Office: T 273/410 'Discussions on the position of Italy prior to and during World War II'.

⁵⁵ T 273/410 Minute by Wilson 20/4/40.

to let the matter drop entirely, and asked Wilson on 25 April to talk to Ball and ‘find out what was happening’.⁵⁶ Ball informed him that Dingli wanted a reply to take back to Mussolini. Wilson, to his credit, came down firmly against any such idea, telling Ball ‘that I understood that the P.M. felt that D[ingli] had no authority and in any case the whole idea was impossible in present circumstances. Could we not assume that D. was exaggerating matters and leave it all alone? In any case . . . D. was *not* to go to Rome again with any reply or message’.⁵⁷

Nevertheless, Ball persisted with the idea of sending some sort of response to the apparent Italian *démarche*, even putting up a draft of a suitable reply. This draft asserted, somewhat disingenuously, that Chamberlain had ‘naturally found it necessary to discuss them [i.e. the proposals] with Lord H. personally,’ and Ball admitted that at this stage ‘it would be necessary to take H. into consultation . . . provided that he is not likely to “fly off the handle” or to discuss the matter with anyone else, save, perhaps, Rab Butler’.⁵⁸ Chamberlain, however, took the matter into his own hands, and spoke to Sir Percy Loraine on 2 May, shortly before the latter returned to Rome. Without mentioning the Dingli initiative, Chamberlain set out the British attitude towards any Italian proposals to mediate in a peace settlement (unfortunately there appears to be no record of this conversation). Ball noted admiringly that ‘the P.M., as usual, has himself discovered the best way out of a rather ticklish situation’.⁵⁹ Dingli, whose reliability was clearly open to question, was thus neatly removed from the equation, although he did, apparently on his own initiative, proceed to write to Ciano, informing him of the reception which his ‘mission’ had received in London.⁶⁰ Ultimately, then, official channels were preferred to unofficial ones, although

⁵⁶ T 273/410 Minute by Wilson 25/4/40.

⁵⁷ T 273/410 Minute by Wilson 30/4/40.

⁵⁸ T 273/410 Ball to Wilson 2/5/40.

⁵⁹ T 273/410 Wilson to Ball 2/5/40; Ball to Wilson 3/5/40.

⁶⁰ T 273/410 Dingli to Wilson 21/5/40.

both Loraine and the Foreign Office remained in the dark as far as the contacts via Dingli were concerned. For Chamberlain and Wilson, it seems, old habits died hard.

The other side of this curious story can be ascertained from Ciano's record of his talks with Dingli. What Wilson does not record is that Dingli, on his visit to Rome, took with him what Ciano describes as 'a useless and very general message from the Prime Minister, one of those messages of good-will destined from the start to remain unanswered'. However, when Ciano mentioned this letter to Mussolini, the Duce asked his son-in-law 'to suggest to Dingli, in his name, that he should attempt to bring about a compromise peace'. Ciano dutifully saw Dingli for a second time, telling him 'that in the event of Chamberlain being ready to offer possible conditions we could become intermediaries for his proposals and facilitate a compromise. Otherwise they must entertain no illusions. Italy will be at the side of Germany.' In other words, the initiative for any peace move had to come from Chamberlain himself - a point which Dingli does not seem to have made entirely clear in his report to the Prime Minister. In effect, Mussolini was offering little more than Italian 'good offices' in the event of Britain wishing to sue for a compromise peace with Germany. Nor does Dingli appear to have put across Ciano's assurances that Italy would otherwise side with Germany. If nothing else, the whole episode serves to illustrate the dangers of employing unofficial contacts in diplomacy. In any case, Ciano (rightly, as things turned out) held out little hope that the move would come to anything. Having sent Dingli on his way, he noted 'I have the vague impression that I shall not hear of him again. A man of little account.'⁶¹

In the wake of the German invasion of Norway and Denmark, British fears of Italian intervention in the war reached fever pitch. The War Cabinet discussed Italy on virtually a daily basis, endlessly debating how best to deal with the situation, and what

⁶¹ *Ciano's Diary* pp. 231-233. Entries for 5/4/40, 6/4/40, 7/4/40.

action to take should the danger of a hostile Italy become a reality. Although in many ways a classic example of ‘crisis management’, the British response during this period can broadly be defined as continued (and indeed accelerated) ‘appeasement’ of Italy, especially in the economic field, combined with frantic diplomatic activity and the implementation of precautionary measures. In the field of appeasement, the Cabinet strategically deployed its ultimate weapon, R. A. Butler, who was charged with heading an advisory committee on economic policy towards Italy. Disappointment over Mussolini’s arms sale veto had receded sufficiently to allow serious consideration to be given to a more realistic trade agreement with the Italians, and Butler set to work, in co-operation with the Ministry of Economic Warfare, establishing the basis for such an agreement.⁶² However, not all of those involved were optimistic about the possibilities. Ronald Cross, the Minister of Economic Warfare, informed Butler that, in his view, ‘it would be wise not to attempt more than to settle a purely interim policy. That policy should clearly not be provocative and must not involve taking any action from which we might afterwards have to retreat’. Cross went on to caution against ‘offering Italy any far reaching concessions’ as these ‘might well be regarded by Signor Mussolini as a sign of weakness’.⁶³ Nevertheless, as one of the few remaining weapons in Britain’s armoury, the idea of an economic agreement with Italy continued to play a central role in British policy. On 24 April the War Cabinet rejected the idea of abandoning the conciliatory attitude towards Italy by imposing fully effective Contraband Control. As Chamberlain himself observed, ‘our present military resources, combined with our military obligations, did not permit the adoption of strong diplomacy’.⁶⁴ On that same day, Butler was able to report progress on the question of how best to handle the shipping, coal, and clearing aspects of an economic agreement.⁶⁵

⁶² FO 371/24930 R4398/48/22 Minute by Butler 6/4/40.

⁶³ FO 371/24931 R5404/48/22 Cross to Butler 15/4/40.

⁶⁴ CAB 65/6 WM 102 (40) 24/4/40.

⁶⁵ FO 371/24931 R5429/48/22 Butler to Halifax 24/4/40.

Halifax, at his own suggestion, subsequently saw the Italian Ambassador in order to press the case for a resumption of trade negotiations, ending the interview with a plea for greater Anglo-Italian understanding:

The plain truth that I ventured to put to him was that our civilisation traced direct from Rome, and that for the future of Europe there could be no greater disaster than for the civilisations of Italy and of Great Britain, which had so much in common, to find themselves in opposition. And, although both Italy and Germany had dictators and both were authoritarian regimes, nothing could convince me that there was not a fundamental distinction between the philosophy that had now become current in Germany, and the philosophy, tradition and culture of Italy, which were in essence much nearer to and related to our own.⁶⁶

This somewhat melodramatic appeal is indicative of the sense of desperation felt in British circles over future Italian policy. Harking back to the days of the Roman Empire was scarcely likely to affect Italy's attitude towards intervention in the present conflict. In the circumstances, however, there were very few effective arguments that could be used to keep the Italians from entering the war on Germany's side, so strongly was the tide flowing in that direction.

The question of whether to go beyond limited 'appeasement' in the economic field and push for a full-scale settlement with Italy, including territorial and other concessions, inevitably resurfaced as the threat of Italian intervention increased. Halifax reported to the War Cabinet a suggestion by General Carboni, the Italian Director of Military Intelligence, that Britain and France should 'try to come to terms with Italy'. Having discussed the matter with Loraine, however, he concluded that such a move would be interpreted by the

⁶⁶ FO 434/7 Halifax to Sir N. Charles No. 338, 26/4/40.

Italians as a sign of weakness, and might as a result further incline them towards throwing in their lot with Germany. Chamberlain agreed, but mentioned in passing that, should such a settlement become desirable, the French Senate at least would be strongly in favour.⁶⁷ (The British House of Commons, however, might have been somewhat less compliant.) It is worth noting that, in this instance, the Cabinet apparently had no objection in principle to making territorial concessions to fascist Italy; it was just that the timing was not propitious. This attitude was not necessarily a reprehensible one. From a strategic point of view, any agreement which would keep Italy out of the war was certainly worth considering. The Chiefs of Staff had emphasised early in the war the serious implications of Italian intervention, and this advice had fortified the Cabinet's resolve to pursue a conciliatory policy towards Italy. Now that things were starting to go badly in the war, this consideration was not about to be cast aside. Desperate times called for desperate measures.

As his comments elsewhere show, no one was keener to advocate far-reaching foreign policy concessions than Butler. He now weighed in with the observation that, in the circumstances, the only remaining hope for keeping Italy out of the war was 'to open discussions with the head of the Italian Government on a broader canvas'. What he had in mind was no less than a dialogue with Mussolini on the future of Europe. His thinking bore striking similarities to the arguments which Halifax had used with the Italian Ambassador:

There is considerable similarity between the Italian civilisation and our own. There is also a fundamental similarity of views vis-à-vis the German menace. Both we and Italy realise that we have to live in Europe with many millions of wild and uncivilised Germans even after the war. We therefore

⁶⁷ CAB 65/6 WM 106 (40) 28/4/40.

have common ground with Italy - a joint civilisation and a joint interest in preserving our own lives in Europe in the future.

Sadly for the historian, Butler did not go into any detail as to what questions might be discussed with the Duce, adding only that 'our diplomacy must not be too cautious and we must excite interest if we are to retain affection'.⁶⁸ His thinking seems to have been that offering Italy a say in the reconstruction of post-war Europe might induce her to stay out of the war, as by so-doing she would stand to gain more in the long run than she would get by co-operating with Germany. This was all very well, and calculated to appeal to Mussolini's political instincts, but it did rest on one major presupposition: that Britain and France would win the war. It had long been advanced, particularly by Loraine, that Mussolini would wait for a winner to emerge before committing Italy to intervention. The difficulty - especially in the wake of events in Norway - lay in demonstrating that it would be the Allies who would emerge victorious. As Philip Nichols commented, Butler's suggestion could only be pursued when 'it is obvious even to those who have been most dazzled by the legend of German invincibility that the Germans are not going to win this war'.⁶⁹ That time was clearly not yet at hand.

At the Supreme War Council meeting of 23 April, the danger of Italian intervention was high on the agenda. The problem, from an Allied point of view, was that the most likely point for Italian aggression to occur seemed to be Yugoslavia - a country which neither Britain nor France had guaranteed, and which they were therefore under no obligation to go to the assistance of. The Allied reaction, Reynaud argued, should therefore be governed by the reaction of Yugoslavia and her neighbours, which might open the way for the sending of a force to Salonika - a pet scheme of the French Government which the British had never been very enthusiastic about. Chamberlain was not convinced that

⁶⁸ FO 371/24951 R5919/60/22 Minute by Butler 27/4/40.

⁶⁹ FO 371/24951 R5919/60/22 Minute by Nichols 29/4/40.

Mussolini would throw caution to the winds just yet, and thought that he would probably ‘continue to be as disagreeable as possible without actually going to war’. Nevertheless, the contingency ‘could not be completely excluded, as, like other Dictators, Signor Mussolini was neither reasonable nor normal’. What action, then, should the Allies take? A naval show of force in the Eastern Mediterranean might act as a deterrent to the Italians, and Churchill explained that plans were already in hand to carry this out. What if this deterrent failed, and Italy attacked Yugoslavia regardless? ‘The Allies could then go to war;’ Chamberlain confessed, ‘but the British Government, having examined the situation, did not consider this a wise course, in view of our commitments elsewhere’. He did not specify what these ‘commitments’ were, but it can be assumed that he was referring, at least in part, to the situation in Norway. As Churchill pointed out, moving a large number of ships of the eastern Mediterranean ‘should only be considered in case of clear necessity, for the Fleets were actively engaged in Norwegian waters’. It was agreed, therefore, that although the movement of large naval forces to the Mediterranean was desirable both as a deterrent to Italy and in order to be able effectively to counter any Italian aggression, ‘it would not be justifiable in present circumstances to move to the Mediterranean any naval forces which were expressly required for the Scandinavian campaign’.⁷⁰ Apart from sounding the Greeks about a possible Salonika expedition, there seemed very little that the Allies could do in the face of the Italian threat, at least whilst the Norwegian conflict continued. It was simply a case of wait and see.

When the Supreme War Council met again, just four days later, the Italian problem had assumed more serious proportions. A report had come in from D’Arcy Osborne at the Vatican, warning that Mussolini had ‘imposed his decision to enter the war on or about May 1st or May 2nd: this he would do by attack on Malta and Gibraltar’.⁷¹ This raised the

⁷⁰ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 8th Meeting, Second Session, 23/4/40.

⁷¹ FO 371/24941 R5425/58/22 Osborne to Halifax No. 49 DIPP, 26/4/40.

threat, for the first time, of direct Italian aggression against British territory, and the warning was taken very seriously indeed. The War Cabinet took immediate steps to divert British shipping away from the Mediterranean.⁷² Chamberlain now warned the Supreme War Council that war with Italy might become a reality 'in a few days'. This, he went on, raised serious problems:

the view of the Service Staffs was that the Naval and Air Strength of the Allies was not at present sufficient to allow them to undertake operations against Italy and in Central Scandinavia simultaneously. They might, therefore, have to consider abandoning operations in Central Scandinavia altogether.

This is a clear example of the interlinkage of factors affecting British strategic and foreign policy. If Italy were to come into the war by direct aggression against the Allies, the Scandinavian theatre - hitherto such a critical battle front - might have to be sacrificed to German control. This would be a humiliating defeat for the Allies, and it would take genuine successes against the Italians to outweigh the disadvantages it would bring. The bottom line, however, was that the Mediterranean was more important to the Allies than Scandinavia. If the Italians attacked Malta and Gibraltar, they would have to be countered. If that meant pulling out of Scandinavia, then so be it. Even if, as had previously been considered, Italy were only to attack Yugoslavia, the Allies might still be forced into a declaration of war. 'If they merely protested,' Chamberlain warned, 'they would lose all influence in the Balkan countries. The only other alternative was to declare war on Italy'. In that event, some military action against Italy was desirable at an early stage, before she could fully mobilise her armed forces. Chamberlain suggested that this take the form of air attacks from French bases on the industrial areas of north-west Italy, a step he was not

⁷² CAB 65/6 WM 105 (40) 27/4/40.

keen to take, ‘but it was necessary to face unpleasant decisions of this sort if they were to win the war’. The alternative, as Reynaud observed, was naval bombardment of the Italian coast - a move which Sir Dudley Pound, Churchill’s First Sea Lord, ‘deprecated’ on account of the risk of heavy losses. Events in Norway had proved how vulnerable large ships were to air attack. The British and French Air and Naval Staffs were instructed to make plans for both forms of attack. Other than that, all that could be done was to seek the reaction of the Greek Government to the landing of an Allied force at Salonika.⁷³ Whilst conceding the dangers of Italian intervention, therefore, the Supreme War Council was both unwilling and effectively unable to take concrete steps to counter it unless and until it actually took place.

What had become of the idea, first mooted at the outset of the war, of keeping the Italians out of the war by giving satisfaction to Mussolini’s designs on Tunis, Djibuti, and Suez? The suggestion was not yet dead, but was objected to, not on principle, but rather from a fear of appearing weak. It had been decided, according to Butler, that discussing the issue with the Italians ‘would be as infructuous as it would be undignified’.⁷⁴ Cadogan, too, thought that any such approach at the present time would ‘be misinterpreted and Italy’s price would soar to impossible heights’.⁷⁵ However, the pragmatic Sargent was unwilling to let the issue drop completely. If unfavourable developments in the war made continued Italian neutrality vital to Allied chances of final victory, he argued, ‘we would have to reconsider the question of whether we should not try to buy Italy off by satisfying her “claims”’.⁷⁶ It was simply a case of ends justifying means. Perhaps the Italians also sensed this, for on 3 May, Charles reported information obtained by the American Embassy that Mussolini now desired to ‘liberate the Mediterranean from British

⁷³ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 10th Meeting, 27/4/40.

⁷⁴ FO 371/24951 R5919/60/22 Minute by Butler 27/4/40.

⁷⁵ FO 371/24941 R5202/58/22 Minute by Cadogan 27/4/40.

⁷⁶ FO 371/24951 R5920/60/22 Minute by Sargent 1/5/40.

domination’, and that his demands would include ‘Egypt and all British possessions.’⁷⁷ As Nichols wryly observed, ‘The price has gone up’.⁷⁸

And yet the British position on concessions to Italy remained ambivalent. In a note on the Italian position for inclusion in Halifax’s speech in the Norway debate, Nichols raised the question of promising a post-war ‘modification’ of the status of Suez and Gibraltar, thus making it harder for Mussolini to bring Italy into the war over the issue of British control of the Mediterranean. Citing probable American and Dominion opposition to any such proposal, Nichols concluded that ‘I personally should not be in favour of making any such announcement unless our military position is such that it is quite out of the question to hope to knock Italy out in the first few months of a war should she intervene’.⁷⁹ (As we have seen, the ‘knock-out blow’ thesis had been discounted by Colonel Hollis the previous July - which rather begs the question of why Nichols continued to pin any hopes on it.) Sargent reiterated that ‘our policy towards Italy in present circumstances must depend on whether or not the military advisers of HM Government consider that we are in a position to wage a successful war on Italy even though we had to be on the defensive in the first stage’.⁸⁰ As regards Suez and Gibraltar, Halifax concluded that it would be better not to raise the question of their status in his speech; however, he did ask for a reconsideration of the question of ‘internationalising’ Gibraltar. Fully aware of how controversial an issue this would be, he added: ‘I don’t want to start ‘despondency and alarm’ in outside quarters. Have we got any material in the office?’⁸¹ For a British Foreign Secretary to be seriously considering the voluntary curtailment of British power in the Mediterranean says much about the dire straits in which the country found itself by the spring of 1940, even before the devastating fall of France. Once the dominant naval power

⁷⁷ FO 371/24943 R5752/58/22 Sir N. Charles to Halifax No. 454 DIPP, 3/5/40.

⁷⁸ FO 371/24943 R5752/58/22 Minute by Nichols 3/5/40.

⁷⁹ FO 371/24943 R5947/58/22 Minute by Nichols 6/5/40.

⁸⁰ FO 371/24943 R5947/58/22 Minute by Sargent 6/5/40.

in the world, she was now having to face the prospect of giving up such advantages as she still possessed in order to keep a traditionally third-rate power from making war on her.

Indeed, there can be no mistaking the unease which afflicted the War Cabinet once the threat of Italian intervention became acute in April and May of 1940. Precautionary measures such as the diversion of shipping from the Mediterranean, the movement of capital ships to Alexandria, and preparations to evacuate civilians from Malta and Gibraltar were sensible enough, but other action - such as the insertion into the *Times* of a warning to Italy not to interfere in the Balkans⁸² - suggests a distinct lack of confidence in Britain's ability to deal with a hostile Italy. Given that a war against Germany and Italy simultaneously had been the assumption on which most pre-war British strategic planning had rested, this says much about Britain's military shortcomings in the Mediterranean region. A Joint Planning Committee report of 1 May 1940 set out the position in no uncertain terms: Malta could be defended from seaborne attack but not attack from the air; bases on Crete could not be established due to 'our shortage of aircraft, troops and naval and A.A. defences', naval attack on mainland Italy was deemed 'inadvisable . . . unless escorted by fighters'; anti-aircraft defences for Allied territory, Egypt, Palestine and Syria were insufficient; British air strength in the Middle East was 'seriously weak, particularly in fighter aircraft'; availability of aircraft for naval reconnaissance was 'very unsatisfactory'; air attack on Italian industry was only possible 'at the expense of our present air strength in the United Kingdom and on the Western Front'; Italian air strength in the Aegean meant that 'there could be no question of landing Allied forces in Greece'; and finally, it was not possible to provide Turkey, Britain's most valuable potential ally in a war against Italy, with 'other than token British Army forces or air forces from the

⁸¹ FO 371/24943 R5947/58/22 Minute by Halifax 7/5/40.

⁸² FO 371/24951 R5881/60/22 gives details of this. The passage was inserted in the 3/5/40 edition of the *Times*.

Middle East'. This, as Sargent gloomily noted, was 'a most depressing report'.⁸³ If it was an accurate assessment, it was clear that no British Government could at that time enter into war with Italy confident of securing a quick and easy victory - and a protracted war in the Mediterranean could prove fatal for British chances elsewhere. Britain, in increasingly less favourable conditions, had little choice but to continue a policy of appeasement towards Italy. Who can say whether, had France not fallen, this might eventually have borne fruit? In the event, however, German force of arms once more got the better of British diplomacy. There was to be no repeat of 1915.

⁸³ FO 371/24942 R5677/58/22 Paper MR(J) (40) 63 'Military Action Open to the Allies in the event of War with Italy' - report by JPC for Chiefs of Staff 1/5/40. Minute by Sargent 6/5/40.

5. BRITISH POLICY AND THE SOVIET 'ENIGMA'

Our policy towards the Soviet Union being in fact an immoral one thrust upon us by necessity, the less we say about it the better.

Daniel Lascelles, Foreign Office Northern Department¹

Viewed from Britain, the attitude of the Soviet Union at the outbreak of the Second World War was nothing if not perplexing. Churchill famously termed it 'a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma'.² It was a puzzle which would long remain unsolved, and one which would complicate the whole question of Allied war strategy. In particular, the full implications of the Nazi-Soviet pact, on which the ink was scarcely dry, were far from clear. There was still considerable surprise that such an understanding had been reached at all - let alone so soon after the aborted attempts at securing an Anglo-Franco-Russian triple alliance. Potentially, its impact was huge. 'The signature of the German pact with Russia', wrote Ivone Kirkpatrick shortly before the outbreak of war, 'has changed the whole situation in Europe and the Far East.' Russia herself, he reasoned,

must be transferred from the category of neutrals (pro-ally) to neutrals (pro-enemy). There is even the possibility that Germany and Russia have concluded a secret understanding for the partition of Poland. The defection of Russia has obviously caused the military position of Poland to deteriorate very seriously and there is now no prospect of a war on two fronts for any length of time.³

Taken at face value, then, the pact appeared to be a formidable setback from the British point of view. Nevertheless, once the war had broken out, and throughout the Phoney War

¹ FO 371/23623 N5544/92/38 Minute by Lascelles 17/10/39.

² Churchill broadcast, 1/10/39, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* p. 191.

period, doubts remained as to exactly what game the Soviet Union was playing. Was she now committed to the German side for the duration of the conflict, acting hand in glove with her new-found ally throughout the world, or would she instead follow her own national interest, which for the time being just happened to coincide with that of Germany? Would co-operation with Germany, if indeed there was to be co-operation, be military, economic, or diplomatic? Was the Russian threat to British interests in the Near East, and especially to India, heightened as a result of the agreement? Or was the whole thing merely designed to buy a little breathing space for Russia whilst the other European powers fought amongst themselves? This chapter will attempt to contextualise and explain the British policy towards the Soviet Union during a period of tense and sometimes volatile relations between the two countries.

The historiography of this subject is sparse, but where it does exist it is often impressively thorough. A very readable general account, which supplements the treatment in Woodward's official history, can be found in the first chapter of Martin Kitchen's study of Anglo-Soviet relations in the Second World War.⁴ In addition, the response to the Finnish war is dealt with fully in Weinberg's volume, as well as receiving close attention in an article by J.A. Bayer.⁵ The question of British aggression against the Soviet Union in the Middle East is considered in an article by Brock Millman.⁶ Geoffrey Roberts' work on Nazi-Soviet relations provides a useful backdrop to the British policy, and the memoirs of Ivan Maisky, the Soviet Ambassador to Great Britain, are amusing - if not entirely objective.⁷ However, all of these accounts suffer to a greater or lesser extent from the

³ FO 371/22925 C12192/281/17 Minute by Kirkpatrick 27/8/39.

⁴ M. Kitchen *British Policy towards the Soviet Union during the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1986) pp. 1 - 28; Woodward *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War Vol 1*.

⁵ Weinberg *A World at Arms*; J.A. Bayer 'British Policy towards the Russo-Finnish Winter War' *Canadian Journal of History* 16 (1981).

⁶ Brock Millman 'Toward War with Russia: British Naval and Air Planning for Conflict in the Near East, 1939-40' *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 29, 1994.

⁷ Geoffrey Roberts *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1995); Ivan Maisky *Memoirs of a Soviet Ambassador: The War 1939-43* (London: Hutchinson, 1967).

problem of hindsight. The knowledge that the Soviet Union was to end up fighting on the same side as Britain cannot easily be laid aside, and this can give rise to misleading judgments on the British policy. Kitchen, in particular, appears determined to demonstrate the prescience of Churchill in this respect, whilst Bayer, in castigating the ‘miscalculations, contradictions and fantasies’ of the British response to events in Finland, seems to argue that the War Cabinet should have possessed a still greater degree of foresight. In reality, as will be shown, all that the government could do was to create a Soviet policy on the hoof, in accordance with perceived British interests, and in response to events and actions which seemed to shed light on Russian intentions. At certain times, genuine Anglo-Soviet co-operation (if not quite friendship) appeared to be a realistic possibility; at others, it seemed that war between the two countries could scarcely be avoided. It was the policy of a nation groping blindly in the dark, searching in vain for the illumination which would enable a more sure-footed approach.

In September 1939, Anglo-Soviet relations faced a very uncertain future. The Nazi-Soviet non-aggression pact seemed to indicate Soviet sympathy for Britain’s enemy, and might, as Kirkpatrick had warned, presage a Russian incursion into Poland - the very country for whose independence Britain claimed to be fighting. On the other hand, it was quite conceivable that, having embarked upon a war of aggression, Germany might take action (in south-eastern Europe, for example) which would be prejudicial to Russian interests. What then would the Soviet attitude be? Sir William Seeds, the British Ambassador in Moscow, informed the Foreign Office’s William Strang that, as far as discerning future Russian policy was concerned,

‘there is absolutely nothing to go on. I imagine that they themselves don’t really know but mean to act strictly according to developments of the situation and the necessities of the moment. But I have an uneasy forboding

that in *any* event we shall have serious trouble with them over shipping, contraband, and general war trade restrictions'.⁸

Seeds' comments on the *ad hoc* nature of Soviet policy-making accord with recent writing on the subject, in particular the work of Geoffrey Roberts, who maintains strongly that there was no pre-determined Russian foreign policy programme even after the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact.⁹ If this contention is correct, British attempts to divine a coherent Soviet policy were doomed to failure. It would also suggest that there was at least a window of opportunity for an improvement in Anglo-Russian relations - so long as the Soviets could be persuaded that such an improvement was in their own interests. With hindsight, therefore, it could be argued that Britain should have gone for broke to achieve a rapprochement. In practice, the traditional British distaste for the Soviet regime, the legacy of the failed Anglo-Soviet negotiations in August, the subsequent Soviet action in Poland, the Baltic states, and Finland, and the conclusion of a second Russo-German agreement were difficult obstacles to overcome. The prospect of any meaningful Anglo-Russian co-operation taking place was therefore remote unless and until there was a radical change in the international situation.

The first of the set-backs - the Soviet incursion into Poland - provides a revealing insight into Britain's initial intentions towards Russia. A get-out clause in the British guarantee to Poland conveniently saved the War Cabinet from having even to consider a declaration of war on the Soviet Union: as Halifax explained, 'there existed a Secret Protocol by which the British and Polish Governments recognised that the European Power referred to in the Agreement was Germany'.¹⁰ However, even the mild wrist-slapping of a protest note to Moscow was ruled out (despite the French making just such a protest); instead a vaguely condemnatory public statement was issued, and the matter was left at

⁸ Strang Papers STRN 4/7 Seeds to Strang 11/9/39.

⁹ G. Roberts *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War* (London: Macmillan, 1995).

that. Why did the British Government take such a cautious line? The answer must lie at least partly in two communications, hitherto overlooked by historians, sent by Seeds on 17 September, the day of the Russian move into Poland. The first contained a note from Molotov, sent to the British Embassy with a copy of the Russian note to the Polish Government justifying the invasion. 'In transmitting you the enclosed note', Molotov commented, '. . . I have the honour to inform you, on behalf of the Government, that the USSR will pursue a policy of neutrality in relations between the USSR and Great Britain'.¹¹ Such assurances may have been of dubious value, but the timing seems to indicate a genuine Russian fear of a British declaration of war following their action in Poland (Japan and Italy, by contrast, had chosen to proclaim their own forms of neutrality within days of the outbreak of war). The second communication, containing Seeds' own views on how best to respond to the Soviet action, is worth quoting at length.

I beg to submit [he wrote] that . . . our choice should lie between (a) war, and (b) maintenance of full diplomatic relations, as distinct from such half measures as my own recall, or merely a rupture of relations without declaration of war. . . . If not at war with the Soviet Union, it is imperative that Allied ambassadors should be here (at whatever cost to those unfortunates) with the possibility of direct access to M. Molotov when the Soviet-German friendship begins to wear thin. I do not see myself what advantage war with the Soviet Union would bring to us, though it would please me personally to declare it on M. Molotov. On the other hand, the Soviet invasion of Poland is not without advantages to us in the long run, for it will entail the keeping of a large army on a war footing outside Russia

¹⁰ CAB 65/1 WM 19 (39) 18/9/39.

¹¹ FO 418/85 Seeds to Halifax No. 287 17/9/39.

. . . Moreover, the German-Soviet close contact in the occupied country under war conditions, &c., should lead to a desirable friction.¹²

That the War Cabinet followed option b) almost to the letter tends to suggest that they agreed with Seeds' analysis - in other words, that they expected an opportunity for improved Anglo-Soviet relations to arise at some time in the future, probably as the result of a break-down in Russo-German relations, and that they wished to take no action at this stage which might prejudice or prevent such an improvement. This would certainly explain their determination not to make too much fuss about Russian activities in Poland. Their eyes were fixed firmly on the future.

Even whilst Russo-German friendship endured, cautious attempts to improve Anglo-Russian relations were attempted. An obvious conduit for any such attempt was the lugubrious Soviet Ambassador in London, Ivan Maisky. However, it quickly became apparent that the ambassador was playing his hand very close to his chest. When Halifax questioned Maisky about his government's policy on 23 September, he received very little in the way of enlightenment. 'M[aisky] very embarrassed' noted Cadogan of this encounter; 'of course he knows *nothing*'.¹³ Upon trying again some four days later, Halifax and Cadogan were met with 'evasive and silly answers to the questions we put to him on the 23rd'.¹⁴ Perhaps as a result, interviews between Halifax and Maisky became infrequent, with R. A. Butler often being delegated to the task. Questions were raised about Maisky's competence to discharge his functions: Anthony Eden, following a lunch with the ambassador, expressed doubts that Maisky was 'very well informed on all details of Soviet policy'; nevertheless, his impression was that the ambassador 'truly desires to improve relations between our two countries . . . for may be [sic] not only his future but his

¹² FO 418/85 Seeds to Halifax No. 292 17/9/39.

¹³ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 23/9/39.

¹⁴ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 27/9/39.

life may depend on the outcome'.¹⁵ Hampered by the activities of his government, Maisky was not to enjoy a particularly fertile relationship with his British hosts during the early months of the war. Sir Lancelot Oliphant, responding to a suggestion that Maisky be used as a channel for possible trade negotiations with Russia, bitingly observed that it might work 'were H[is] E[xcellency] not such a cypher'. Halifax agreed that it would be 'quite futile to try & deal through Maisky'.¹⁶ By late-October, Vansittart (admittedly not the most pro-Russian of officials) was urging Halifax to curtail Maisky's social activities, and in particular to prevent him from meeting Ministers¹⁷ - hardly the way to bring about greater Anglo-Soviet understanding.

Maisky's opposite number, Sir William Seeds, seems to have fared little better. As his comments about 'those unfortunates' in Moscow embassies indicate, he regarded his mission more as a penance than a privilege. Certainly he fulfilled his duties with diligence and skill, but it is clear that the strains of the post weighed heavily upon him. Before September was at an end, he was asking Halifax to make arrangements for his departure in the event of war with the Soviet Union, 'in view of the attitude amounting to persecution' which the Soviet authorities had lately adopted towards the unfortunate staff of the Polish Embassy in Moscow.¹⁸ Later, in another letter to William Strang, he lamented that

with a hostile press, small boys jeering at the flag on my car when I drive out, very few servants, nothing doing in the way of entertaining by my colleagues, greatly reduced supplies from home, etc., etc., life for His

¹⁵ FO 371/23682 N5426/92/38 Minute by Eden 13/10/39.

¹⁶ FO 371/23682 N4510/92/38 Minutes by Oliphant & Halifax 14/9/39.

¹⁷ FO 371/23701 N5717/5717/38 Minute by Vansittart 25/10/39.

¹⁸ FO 371/23678 N4837/57/38 Seeds to Halifax No. 228, 28/9/39. Halifax, at Seeds' request, made arrangements with the United States Embassy in Moscow to take charge of British interests in such an eventuality: FO 371/23678 N5011/57/38 Lothian to Halifax No. 581, 6/10/39.

Majesty's Ambassador in Moscow is even more (group undecipherable) than usual.¹⁹

Clearly the £2,500 salary, £4,150 'frais de représentation' allowance and £100 outfit allowance of His Majesty's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary at Moscow were insufficient compensation for such hardships.²⁰

The apparatus for improving Anglo-Russian relations, although intact, was not, then, in particularly good shape when news emerged of the second Nazi-Soviet agreement, brokered by Molotov and Ribbentrop in Moscow on 27-8 September. Nevertheless, the War Cabinet decided to come out fighting (or, at any rate, appeasing), and to press for limited trade negotiations with Russia in an attempt to arrest the slide in relations. The question had been raised a few weeks earlier (resulting in the barbed references to Maisky's usefulness in such matters), but seems to have been given an added push by a warning from Seeds that the Russians might be considering the seizure of British ships which had been detained in Murmansk.²¹ The War Cabinet decided there and then that an agreement should be struck by which Russian timber (for which, according to Sir John Simon, the need was 'urgent') was to be traded for British rubber and tin. Certainly there was an economic incentive to reach such an agreement, and this might even have outweighed the political considerations, but there can be no doubt that any positive political effect would be quite intentional. Even so, it was decided that British-made machine tools, for which the Russians had placed a large order before the war, should not form a part of any agreement, and should not be released for export.²² The tools were deemed necessary for Britain's own war effort. Clearly there were certain lengths to which the British were not yet prepared to go in pursuit of Soviet favour.

¹⁹ FO 371/23698 N6979/1459/38 Seeds to Strang 19/11/39.

²⁰ FO 371/23683 N105/105/38 Collier to Seeds (letter of appointment) 19/1/39.

²¹ CAB 65/1 WM 32(39) 30/9/39.

²² FO 371/23700 N4839/4427/38 Minute by Collier 30/9/39.

The Russian advance into Poland had raised the spectre of Soviet expansion elsewhere - a prospect which Britain could scarcely view with equanimity. Potentially the most serious threat, from the British point of view, was an attack on India via Afghanistan - but the chances of this materialising in the foreseeable future seemed slight.²³ Of more immediate concern were North West and South East Europe. Russian designs on the Roumanian territory of Bessarabia being well known, it must have come as no surprise that Virgil Tilea, the Roumanian Ambassador, soon began to seek clarification of whether the Anglo-French guarantee to Roumania (given in response to the German threat) would apply equally to invasion by the Soviet Union. Unlike the Polish case, there was no secret protocol to fall back on this time: a decision had to be taken. The Foreign Office were reluctant to undertake any further commitments. Sargent, anticipating the Roumanian enquiries, assumed 'that we do not intend to go to war with Russia unless we are directly attacked'. Cadogan felt that the Nazi-Soviet pact 'has changed . . . the situation so profoundly that our obligations can fairly be considered to have been modified.' Halifax agreed: 'I certainly should not suppose that we should be prepared to go to war with Russia over Roumania', he noted, 'but it's not too easy to discard the obligation'. It was decided, therefore, to ask the French Government, as co-guarantors of Roumania, for their views on the subject.²⁴ The French reply was reassuring: they too would be 'strongly opposed' to the extension of the guarantee to encompass attack by Russia.²⁵ Halifax was thus able to inform a no doubt disappointed Tilea on 17 October that the guarantee had only been intended as a deterrent against Germany, and that, since Britain and Germany were now at war, 'our guarantee had lost its deterrent value, and we did not feel that any useful purpose would be served by starting hostilities with an additional enemy in the shape of the Soviet

²³ The War Cabinet approved certain precautionary measures in view of this threat on 2/10/39: CAB 65/1 WM 34(40).

²⁴ FO 371/23846 R8158/328/37 Minutes by Sargent, Cadogan and Halifax 26/9/39.

²⁵ CAB 65/1 WM 39(39) 6/10/39.

Union'.²⁶ Another potential stumbling block in Anglo-Russian relations had been neatly side-stepped, although even Cadogan admitted that the British justification for their attitude - the changed circumstances since the original guarantee had been given - was 'pure Hitlerian doctrine . . . forced on us by circumstances over which we have no control'.²⁷ This episode clearly reveals the initial British fear of having to fight a war simultaneously against the Soviet Union and Germany. As we shall see, this attitude was to change significantly as the Phoney War continued.

The extension of Soviet influence in north western Europe was more tangible, but less problematic for Britain - at least until the attack on Finland was launched. Stalin's tactic of 'negotiating' (from a position of overwhelming superiority) mutual assistance pacts with Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania had the merit of involving no actual aggression, and therefore required nothing in the way of moral condemnation from the British Government. However, when *Izvestiya* sought to justify this action (which included the establishment of Soviet naval bases in the Baltic) on the dubious grounds of Russian fear of British aggression, Vansittart urged Halifax to lodge a protest in Moscow. Halifax, a little surprisingly, agreed, and Seeds was duly instructed to see Molotov 'in order to record a strong protest against these hostile and palpably absurd allegations in [the] official organ of the Soviet Government'.²⁸ It is unclear why Halifax was willing to take this step. He was not, after all, in the habit of being moved to action by Vansittart's frequent rants and raves. Perhaps the implied stain on Britain's character was too great for him to stomach. Whatever his motives, he can scarcely have expected Seeds' response to these instructions. The ambassador was clearly somewhat vexed: 'this critical moment when [the] Union of Soviet Socialist Republics may at any time come into the war against us is emphatically not one for taking action in the sense proposed', he protested. 'I do not see Monsieur

²⁶ FO 371/23846 R9447/328/37 Minute by Halifax 17/10/39.

²⁷ FO 371/23846 R858/328/37 Minute by Cadogan 26/9/39.

Molotov or even Monsieur Potemkin casually these days and, in these circumstances, a protest would be worse than useless, it would be regarded as a full dress provocation.’²⁹ Laurence Collier, head of the Northern Department, suggested that, not for the first time, ‘Sir W. Seeds is misreading the Bolshevik character’ - not exactly an encouraging trait considering the critical nature of Seeds’ responsibilities. His lack of contact with the Soviet Foreign Minister (more serious, indeed, than that between Halifax and Maisky) must also have occasioned some apprehension. But it was his reference to possible hostilities with Russia that stirred the greatest concern. Vansittart, again, urged Halifax to ask Seeds what he meant, pointing out that ‘this is the first time I have seen the black paint laid on quite so thick’. Once again, Halifax took the advice of his Chief Diplomatic Adviser, and asked Seeds to ‘elaborate your idea and supply me with the evidence which has led you to reach this conclusion’.³⁰

Seeds, in response to Halifax’s request, set out in some detail his thoughts on the present Soviet attitude. ‘I have not reached a conclusion that Russia is coming into the war against us in the immediate future’, he began, ‘[b]ut I think the chance is perhaps fifty-fifty that she might do so.’ He based this rather gloomy prognosis on a number of grounds: firstly the impact of Ribbentrop’s visits to Moscow, which ‘must tend to mutual incitement to more dictatorial action’; secondly the tone of the Soviet press, which characterised the Allies as ‘imperialists and capitalists prolonging the war against the interests of the workers’; thirdly the possible existence of a *quid pro quo* with Germany in return for allowing Russian expansion in the Baltic - for example, a Russian undertaking to enter the war, thus neutralizing Turkey and luring Italy into the conflict; fourthly the possibility that Stalin might regard a German victory as the best way of keeping those territorial gains

²⁸ FO 371/23678 N5082/57/38 Minutes by Vansittart and Halifax 5/10/39; Halifax to Seeds No. 288, 7/10/39.

²⁹ FO 371/23678 N5131/57/38 Seeds to Halifax No. 374, 9/10/39.

³⁰ FO 371/23678 N5131/57/38 Minutes by Collier 11/10/39 and Vansittart 10/10/39; Halifax to Seeds No. 303, 11/10/39.

which Russia had recently made, and indeed any others she might go on to make during the course of the conflict; and finally the silence with which Moscow had greeted the British suggestion of a War Trade Agreement. Against this, Seeds placed the possibility that Russian aims could be achieved without war; that Russo-German co-operation was ‘purely bluff’; and that Stalin was actually afraid of war with Britain.³¹ The weight of evidence was impressive, if largely circumstantial. Seeds’ fourth argument for Russian intervention must have created particular concern in London, for it made a clear case for a German victory lying in the best interests of the Soviet Union. Churchill, in making his famous reference to the Russian ‘enigma’, qualified his comments by suggesting the possibility of a ‘key’ to the puzzle: ‘That key is Russian national interest’.³² Chamberlain, assessing the impact of the second Russo-German agreement, told his sister that Churchill (‘to whose excellent broadcast we have just been listening’) was quite right: ‘I cannot believe that she would think her interest served by a German victory, followed by German domination of the Balkans’.³³ Whether a victorious Germany would actually allow the Soviet Union to retain its territorial gains is, of course another matter: we know now that Hitler meant to smash Russia or to be destroyed in the attempt. Also unclear is why Seeds felt that desire for a German victory would lead to Russian belligerence - would not neutrality have sufficed unless or until Germany seemed in danger of losing the war? As the ‘man on the spot’ (albeit, by his own admission, somewhat distant from the hub of Soviet foreign policy), Seeds must have had good reason for his pessimistic view of Soviet intentions towards Britain. Nevertheless, his evidence scarcely seems to justify his alarmist stance.

Shortly afterwards, the mercurial British ambassador had shifted his ground somewhat. On 20 October he forwarded reports by his naval, military and air attachés

³¹ FO 371/23678 N5240/57/38 Seeds to Halifax No. 393, 12/10/39.

³² Churchill broadcast 1/10/39, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* p. 192

concerning the offensive capabilities of the Soviet armed forces. In a covering note, Seeds commented that these reports 'are in general agreement with the opinion consistently held by the Embassy that Soviet Russia is not in a position effectively to wage an offensive war, and also with the view which I have expressed from the outset of the present hostilities that it is not in the interests of Russia to become a belligerent'.³⁴ This was a rather selective view of his recent communications on the subject of Russian belligerency, but at least his tone was now more reassuring. The reports made it clear that there was very little that a hostile Russia could do to threaten Britain. In the naval sphere, Russian involvement in submarine warfare would merely be 'a nuisance'; the Red Army was 'not fit to undertake an offensive war of any magnitude' and was therefore unlikely to get involved in active hostilities with British forces; and Russian air action seemed a remote possibility, not least because the inferiority of the men and machines of the Soviet air force 'would lead to heavy losses' were they used in the West.³⁵ The inference, as Daniel Lascelles of the Northern Department commented, was clear: '*at present* the Soviet Union have everything to gain by remaining technically neutral'. In such circumstances, then, there was little prospect of a Russian declaration of war on Britain; if the two countries were to come to blows, it would probably be on the initiative of the British. Remarkably, as time passed, serious consideration was increasingly given to taking just such a step.

In the meantime, before Russian action in Finland cast a shadow over Anglo-Soviet relations, the prospect of a trade agreement continued to be pursued with vigour, at least on the British side. As the War Cabinet had hoped, a limited and mutually beneficial arrangement was agreed with the Russians on 11 October for the barter of Russian timber in return for British rubber and tin. Buoyed up by this shining example of Anglo-Russian co-operation, Halifax wrote to Oliver Stanley, the President of the Board of Trade, asking

³³ NC 18/1/1123 Chamberlain to Hilda 1/10/39.

³⁴ FO 371/23678 N5778/57/38 Seeds to Halifax No. 303, 20/10/39.

for his opinion on the despatch of a trade delegation, led by Stanley himself, to Moscow. The idea, he explained, had been put to him by the renegade MP and Soviet enthusiast Sir Stafford Cripps, who was emphatic that the Russians were in fact anxious to trade with Britain, and that Maisky was, after all, a viable go-between in such matters.³⁶ On 16 October Halifax took the initiative and told Maisky that ‘if our political relations were to be in any way improved, it was more likely that we should be able to do this through the channel of trade than through any other’.³⁷ The Foreign Secretary subsequently expressed his hope for a more general Anglo-Soviet trade agreement to the War Cabinet on 20 October; as he admitted, it ‘might arouse a good deal of criticism in the country, but would have considerable political value, more especially as we should be negotiating from a position of strength’. Negotiations, he added prophetically, could always be aborted if Russian pressure on Finland increased.³⁸ He was wise to anticipate public criticism: the timber agreement had already provoked an indignant letter from a Miss J.F. Tuke, who castigated any deal with the Soviet Union in the face of that country’s activities in Poland and the Baltic. Daniel Lascelles, commenting on behalf of the Northern Department, was forced to admit that such criticisms were ‘for the most part morally sound.’ In an extraordinarily candid minute, he went on: ‘It *is* quite true that our attitude towards the Soviet Union is dictated by funk - fear of their combining with Germany if we annoy them. . . . Our policy towards the Soviet Union being in fact an immoral one thrust upon us by necessity, the less we say about it the better’. Sadly, this devastating display of *realpolitik* did not get as far as the valiant Miss Tuke (derided by Lascelles as ‘obviously a simple-minded old lady’); she was merely informed that the timber agreement was in Britain’s

³⁵ FO 371/23678 N5778/57/38 Reports by Naval, Military and Air Attachés, 19-20/10/39.

³⁶ FO 371/23682 N5296/92/38 Halifax to Stanley 14/10/39.

³⁷ FO 371/23682 N5342/92/38 Halifax to Seeds No. 736, 16/10/39.

³⁸ CAB 65/1 WM 54 (39) 20/10/39.

best interests and ‘implies no moral approval of the political actions of the Soviet Government’.³⁹

Halifax quickly put up a paper for discussion by the War Cabinet on the prospects of a more general Anglo-Soviet war trade agreement.⁴⁰ Well aware of the danger of appearing to be too eager, he urged a cautious approach, with initial negotiations to be held in London before any delegation went to Moscow. In suggesting this, he was probably influenced by a warning from Oliphant not to appear to be running after the Russians, and by Cadogan’s suggestion that this could be prevented by swearing the Russians to secrecy over any proposed visit to Moscow, and making that visit ‘conditional on virtual agreement in advance’.⁴¹ The War Cabinet approved the suggested procedure: Halifax and Stanley were to see Maisky and inform him of the need for initial talks to be held in London, hinting at the possibility of a subsequent ministerial delegation travelling to Moscow. In the meantime, the operation of contraband control as it affected Russia was to be reviewed in order to lower the risk of any unwanted tension from that quarter. The plan proceeded as per schedule. Halifax saw Maisky the following day to stress once again the prospect of a trade agreement improving, or at least stabilising, Anglo-Russian relations (adding that any Russian aggression towards Finland would jeopardise the whole scheme).⁴² Shortly afterwards, Stanley handed Maisky lists of goods which might form part of the agreement.⁴³ The Government had gone a long way in pursuit of Soviet favour. All that remained was to await the response from Moscow.

It was to be a long wait. As the growing Russian threat to Finland came to dominate Anglo-Soviet relations, there was an ominous silence from Moscow on the trade question. However, it was only after the Labour leaders, Attlee and Greenwood, had

³⁹ FO 371/23623 N5544/92/38 Minute by Lascelles 17/10/39 and other relevant papers.

⁴⁰ CAB 65/1 WM 58 (39) 24/10/39 (Discussion of WP (G) (39) 50).

⁴¹ FO 371/23683 N5598/92/30 Minutes by Oliphant and Cadogan 21/10/39.

⁴² FO 418/85 Halifax to Seeds No. 762, 25/10/39.

expressed their concerns over Moscow's silence that Halifax resolved, on 23 November, to send a reminder via Maisky. In contrast to his previous optimism, Halifax now told the War Cabinet that the chances of a favourable response were 'not very bright'.⁴⁴ Confusingly, on the same day as he made these comments, Halifax despatched a telegram to Seeds in which he (or whoever had drafted the communication) hoped that 'the trade discussions which, given a favourable Soviet response, it is proposed to continue and develop, may serve to restrain the Soviet Government from too malevolent an interpretation of their neutrality'.⁴⁵ What is clear is that the trade issue, having lain dormant for several weeks, had re-emerged as a matter of priority. Collier even raised the prospect of now releasing the machine tools previously withheld from the Soviets, in order to demonstrate Britain's good intentions - a suggestion which met with Cadogan's approval 'in so far as we do not require it [the machine tools] ourselves'.⁴⁶ Halifax duly saw Maisky on 27 November, and complained of the Soviet Government's unreasonable attitude in not responding to the proposals. After levelling an unsubstantiated accusation that Britain was 'working against Soviet interests in every part of the world', Maisky agreed to take the matter up with Moscow.⁴⁷ But no answer to this enquiry was ever received, and events on the Russo-Finnish border soon put the whole question of Anglo-Soviet trade talks on ice until the following March, when the termination of hostilities in Finland made it possible to broach the subject once more.

The Soviet threat to Finland had been apparent for some weeks, due partly to the willingness of the Finnish Government to keep the British informed of the negotiations between the two countries. As early as 9 October, the Finnish Minister in London had officially informed the British Government that if, as seemed likely, the Soviets made 'far

⁴³ CAB 65/1 WM 62 (39) 27/10/39.

⁴⁴ CAB 65/2 WM 92 (39) 23/11/39.

⁴⁵ FO 418/85 Halifax to Seeds No. 829, 23/11/39.

⁴⁶ FO 371/23683 N6602/92/38 Minute by Collier 25/11/39; minute by Cadogan 27/11/39.

reaching proposals' to the Finns, they would be opposed.⁴⁸ On the same day, Halifax saw the Swedish Minister, Bjorn Prytz, and informed him that in the event of a Russian attack on Finland (which neither considered to be imminent) it would be in Britain's interest to help the Finns as much as possible.⁴⁹ By 23 October, the War Cabinet were even discussing the possibility of a declaration of war on Russia should Finland be attacked - a sanction favoured by the British Minister in Helsinki, the appropriately-named Thomas Snow. Evidently this suggestion was taken seriously, as the matter was referred to the Chiefs of Staff for an evaluation of the military implications of such a move.⁵⁰ This appears to be the first time that a declaration of war on Russia was seriously considered. It was not to be the last.

As Russo-Finnish relations deteriorated, the War Cabinet gave more thought to their reaction in the event of hostilities breaking out between the two. On 27 October, it was argued (probably by Churchill - the minutes do not identify the speaker) that Soviet expansion into the Baltic might redound to Britain's advantage, 'since Germany would inevitably be forced thereby to take greater naval precautions in the Baltic, thus weakening her resources west of the Kiel Canal'.⁵¹ The same point was made by Churchill on 16 November - indeed, he now went so far as to suggest that 'it would be a mistake for us to stiffen the Finns against making concessions to the U.S.S.R. In general, it should be our policy to secure as much support as possible in this war from the U.S.S.R.'. Halifax, whilst agreeing in general terms, was far from happy about the implication that the Finns should be encouraged to compromise their national security.⁵² Collier, at the Foreign Office, was

⁴⁷ FO 418/85 Halifax to Seeds No. 836, 27/11/39; CAB 65/2 WM 97 (39) 28/11/39.

⁴⁸ FO 371/23692 N5203/991/38 Finnish note handed to Oliphant 9/10/39.

⁴⁹ FO 418/85 Halifax to Monson (unnumbered) 10/10/39.

⁵⁰ CAB 65/1 WM 57 (39) 23/10/39.

⁵¹ CAB 65/1 WM 62 (39) 27/10/39.

⁵² CAB 65/2 WM 85 (39) 16/11/39.

even more concerned by Churchill's attitude, and took the First Lord's conclusions strongly to task:

there is no evidence to show that the recent establishment of Soviet naval bases in the Baltic States has caused the Germans to transfer a single ship from the North Sea to the Baltic, and I can see no reason why the establishment of Soviet naval bases in Finland need weaken Germany's war effort against ourselves in any way. On the contrary, there is reason to think that the Germans are conniving at the Russian pressure on Finland in order to frighten the other Scandinavian countries and make them more amenable to German pressure directed against ourselves, particularly in economic matters; and from that point of view an increase in Soviet strength in the Baltic would be a positive disadvantage to us. The situation would of course be different if there were any reason to suppose that the Soviet Government could be induced to take up a definitely hostile attitude to Germany however, there is no reason to think this likely.

Prompted by Sargent, Halifax agreed to write to Churchill putting these very points.⁵³ The First Lord does not appear to have made a formal response. The whole issue rested, as Collier had observed, on Russo-German relations. If the two were working closely together, then a Russo-Finnish war would be, by implication at least, an extension of the war against Germany. If Russia was acting independently, and possibly even against German interests, the situation would be completely different. Ultimately, Churchill was right to forecast a breach between the two powers - but Collier too was quite correct in his estimation of Russo-German co-operation (or, at any rate, 'connivance' in each other's acts of aggression) during the early stages of the war. In terms of British policy, it was the

⁵³ FO 371/23683 N6384/92/38 Minute by Collier 20/11/39; Halifax to Churchill 25/11/39.

Foreign Office view which held sway when the crunch came, and as the 'Winter War' dragged on, it came to be taken as axiomatic that British interests lay with continued Finnish resistance to the Soviet aggression.

Once the Soviet-Finnish conflict had broken out, there was little that could be attempted in the way of improving Anglo-Soviet relations. World opinion rallied to the side of the Finns, and it would not have done to be seen running after the Russian aggressor with offers of trade negotiations and the like. The Soviet Union, it was felt, had revealed its true colours, and needed to be handled accordingly. On 29 November, E. H. Carr, at the Ministry of Information, appealed to Sargent that 'we may now relax the self-denying ordinance which we have hitherto imposed on ourselves in regard to Soviet Russia; and that when they say unpleasant things about us we may at any rate retaliate in kind'. Cadogan cautiously agreed, but stressed the danger of building Russia up to be vile and then doing nothing to counter her vile schemes - Germany was the main threat, and had to be dealt with first. Halifax was more emphatic, noting on 2 December: 'I certainly do not think that we need be tender in our public comments'.⁵⁴ The War Cabinet decided on the same day that maximum capital should be made out of the Soviet aggression, particularly with regard to bolstering Anglo-Italian and Anglo-Japanese relations. In itself, it was agreed, the attack on Finland was not a threat to British interests; however, in so far as it might presage Soviet aggression elsewhere it set a dangerous precedent. 'The Chiefs of Staff had consistently advised against being drawn into war with Russia', it was noted during the discussion, 'but if Russian aggression occurred in South-East Europe, we might be forced to declare war upon her whether we liked it or not'.⁵⁵ The impression which comes across is one of British powerlessness to arrest the slide into further conflict, the avoidance of which was a central plank of the War Cabinet's strategy for winning the war

⁵⁴ FO 371/203678 N7143/57/38 Carr to Sargent 29/11/39; minute by Cadogan 1/12/39; minute by Halifax 2/12/39.

against Germany. Churchill might have spoken for all of his colleagues when he noted on 5 December: 'I still hope war with Russia may be avoided: & it is my policy to try to avoid it'.⁵⁶ As with the Soviet invasion of Poland, the breaking off of diplomatic relations was rejected, and strong condemnations, initially at least, avoided, in the interests of minimising Anglo-Russian antagonism and preserving at least the remote possibility of a rapprochement at some point in the future.

The Finnish Government did little to help the British policy by lodging an appeal against the Russian action with the venerable, if toothless, League of Nations. Sargent, reporting French unease at the prospect of such an appeal, noted that 'The real danger, of course, is that once the matter is a subject of discussion at Geneva we may be led to a position where we shall be compelled to break off relations with Russia'.⁵⁷ Cadogan lamented the move on more general grounds:

'I think that it can only do harm in advertising the failure, at the moment, of the idea of consultation and co-operation, in the face of a number of gangster Great Powers. . . . What I fear is that each meeting of this kind brings the League into greater disrepute and will make it harder to set up anything in its place after the war'.⁵⁸

But there was no stopping the process once started, and since Britain could scarcely sit out the meeting, a delegation had to be selected and a suitable policy thrashed out. Branding the whole process 'insane', Cadogan caustically noted: 'We must send R.A.B.[utler] there!'.⁵⁹ Halifax, dismissing any idea that he himself should attend, made the same recommendation to the War Cabinet, to whom he also outlined his opposition to the imposition of sanctions against the Soviets, not least because of 'the bad effect it would

⁵⁵ CAB 65/2 WM 101 (39) 2/12/39.

⁵⁶ Quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* p. 467.

⁵⁷ FO 371/23694 N7100/991/38 Minute by Sargent 3/12/39.

⁵⁸ FO 371/23695 N7200/991/38 Minute by Cadogan 4/12/39.

cause in Italy' (a reference to the League's response to the invasion of Abyssinia). If the question were raised, he proposed that Butler reply 'that we considered that this was a case which could only be met by force of moral opinion'.⁶⁰ Conveniently, of course, 'force of moral opinion' required little in the way of concrete action which might bring conflict with Russia closer.

On 6 December, Butler chaired a meeting in the Foreign Office called to discuss the forthcoming meeting in Geneva. 'Very woolly', Cadogan noted of the occasion, 'but I got some decisions out of them. R.A.B. said he was chiefly 'concerned to keep our moral position intact'. Before he's finished, he'll be much more concerned to keep his mental position intact'.⁶¹ At the same time, on the other side of Downing Street, Chamberlain was telling the War Cabinet that the League meeting 'could not produce any useful results'. Halifax agreed that it would be 'futile'.⁶² As they compared notes that lunchtime, Halifax told Cadogan that he was 'very frightened' of war with Russia, which suggests that he saw a real danger of the Geneva meeting leading to such an outcome.⁶³ Perhaps as a result, Halifax wrote to Butler on the following day: 'The more I think about it, the less I like the idea of the expulsion of Russia. Try to prevent it coming up if you can! But if you fail, I don't think you can help voting for it!'. A subsequent note asked 'do you think it would be possible to arrange for a motion pressing Soviet Union to cease hostilities and negotiate, and for question of its expulsion if raised to be deferred pending result of this appeal?'.⁶⁴ The Foreign Secretary was clearly taking no chances. On 8 December he set Butler's instructions before the War Cabinet:

⁵⁹ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 4/12/39.

⁶⁰ CAB 65/2 WM 103 (39) 4/12/39.

⁶¹ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 6/12/39.

⁶² CAB 65/2 WM 107 (39) 6/12/39.

⁶³ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 6/12/39.

⁶⁴ FO 371/23694 N7123/991/38 Halifax to Butler 7/12/39; Halifax to Butler 8/12/39.

‘He was to have no hesitation in condemning the Soviet aggression on Finland. As regards the suggestion put forward that the U.S.S.R. should be expelled from the League, he was to prevent this being brought forward if he could, but if it were brought forward, he was unhesitatingly to vote for expulsion. As regards sanctions, he was to state clearly that in our view these were not practicable.’⁶⁵

This curious mixture of timidity and resolve was approved, and Butler set off for Switzerland, where (partly as a result of the French Government’s last minute decision to take a firmer line) the Soviet Union was deemed by its actions to have placed itself outside the League of Nations and was therefore expelled. Reporting his mission to Halifax, Butler seemed well pleased: ‘This meeting has shown that embarrassments can be avoided, and they may be avoided in the future if the League is not too ambitious, but encourages the growth of methods of international co-operation, which would prove valuable after the war’.⁶⁶ In a slightly different vein, however, he told Sir Ronald Campbell, the British Ambassador in Paris (whose official car Butler had borrowed on his journey back from Geneva): ‘In most ways it was a pity that the meeting was called at all’.⁶⁷ The truth is that the meeting was little more than an irrelevance: the League of Nations was already recognisably dead in the water, its ‘moral force’ worthless in the face of persistent and unopposed breaches of the principles which it had been designed to uphold. Halifax’s earlier jitters about the possible outcome were, therefore, rather unwarranted.

Meanwhile, the war in Finland had caused Anglo-Soviet relations to undergo a pronounced cooling off. Seeds wrote to Halifax on 6 December giving his assessment of the present state of Soviet policy:

⁶⁵ CAB 65/2 WM 108 (39) 8/12/39.

⁶⁶ FO 418/85 Butler to Halifax No. 43, 22/12/39.

⁶⁷ FO 371/23696 N7904/991/38 Butler to Campbell 19/12/39.

it has become more and more apparent that the Soviet Union has settled down definitely into an undeclared war against us which suits this country [the Soviet Union] admirably and Germany less admirably but still on the whole satisfactorily. Whether it also suits us or not is a question of high policy, but at any rate I had lately come to conclude that the idea of a German-Soviet rift must no longer be regarded as probable within any reasonable time. Soviet action against Finland has clinched the matter: Germany and Russia now stand together as partners in crime . . . if the Soviet Government pick a quarrel with us over Finland we need not look on it as a calamity.⁶⁸

This verdict looks rather shaky with the benefit of hindsight. Even at the time, it was not fully apparent that Russia's national interest (identified, as we have seen, as the critical factor in determining Soviet policy) lay along the lines indicated by Seeds. The Soviet attack on Finland, now generally agreed amongst historians to have been a misjudgment by Stalin, may have appeared to bear striking parallels to the German action in Poland, but this in itself was not proof positive of Russo-German collaboration. In reality, the supposed collaboration only went as far as delineating spheres of influence in northern Europe. Nevertheless, Seeds' views could scarcely be ignored. On the basis of this communication, Sargent advocated, and Halifax approved, asking the Chiefs of Staff to look again at the pros and cons of war with the Soviet Union.⁶⁹ Even so, Halifax maintained his resistance to a severance of diplomatic relations⁷⁰ - a policy which Seeds had originally advocated in anticipation of an early breach between the Soviet Union and Germany. British policy towards Russia was becoming distinctly confused. This confusion was exacerbated when,

⁶⁸ FO 371/23678 N7134/57/38 Seeds to Halifax No. 503, 6/12/39.

⁶⁹ FO 371/23678 N7134/57/38 Minutes by Sargent 16/12/39 and Halifax 17/12/39; Sargent to Ismay 22/12/39.

⁷⁰ CAB 54/2 WM 116 (39) 15/12/39.

on 22 December, Seeds put in a request to the Foreign Office. 'Having spent a year in Moscow in somewhat trying conditions', he wrote, 'I would be grateful if I could be granted leave of absence in England starting next month and leaving Mr Le Rougetel in charge of His Majesty's Embassy'. This may or may not have come as a surprise (or even a blessing) to those in London. At any rate, Cadogan apparently needed little time to consider this appeal, and telegraphed his approval on the very next day.⁷¹ Seeds left Moscow on 2 January 1940. He was not to return.

The abrupt departure of His Majesty's Ambassador at Moscow naturally gave rise to comment at the time. It had all the appearances of a deliberate, and timely, snub to the Soviet Union over events in Finland. Fitzroy Maclean of the Northern Department noted that, despite strenuous British efforts 'to avoid giving the impression that Sir W. Seeds has been recalled for political reasons . . . the Soviet authorities seem to have gone out of their way to suggest that this move is connected with the deterioration in Anglo-Soviet relations'.⁷² Even some historians have misinterpreted it: Kitchen baldly states that 'the British Ambassador had been recalled from Moscow at the end of 1939' (and compounds his error by mis-naming the *chargé d'affaires* as 'de Rougetal'). There is, however, no clear evidence of any political dimension to Seeds' departure: the documents contain no record of any discussions about the granting of his leave, and the matter did not come before the War Cabinet. On the contrary, his letters to Strang, and his call for arrangements to be made for evacuating British diplomatic personnel, clearly indicate that Seeds had no stomach for the strains of the Moscow post and took an early opportunity to jump ship. This is not to say that he was insincere in his conviction that war with Russia had suddenly become a serious possibility: his desire to leave probably sprang from this conviction rather than vice versa. There are, in any case, signs that Seeds' number was already up:

⁷¹ FO 371/23683 N7861/105/38 Seeds to Halifax No. 537, 22/12/39; minute by Cadogan 23/12/39.

⁷² FO 371/24845 N40/40/38 Minute by Maclean 2/1/40.

Eden, it now turns out, had openly raised the question of his replacement with Maisky on 13 October, suggesting that the post ‘did not seem to be a very pleasant one for a diplomat’ and raising the possibility instead of a left wing politician taking over. Maisky was unhelpful: what was the point, he asked, of sending a left wing politician when the British Government was right wing? It was more important to him that the incumbent was in the confidence of the Government, and had the right personal qualities. Commenting on this conversation, Collier (claiming also to represent the views of Seeds’ confidant, Strang) suggested for the job ‘a solid, well-known peer . . . a kind of Lord Derby (*mutatis mutandis* as between Paris and Moscow)’. Oliphant confirmed that the matter was already under discussion by Cadogan and Halifax, although Cadogan added ‘I have been unable to reach any helpful conclusion so far’.⁷³ Nor does he seem to have done so subsequently. In the months between Seeds’ departure at the beginning of January and Sir Stafford Cripps’ appointment as his successor in June, the government fended off requests to know when Seeds would return to his post with the line that the ambassador was having an ‘extended holiday’, and that in his absence Le Rougetel was a quite adequate representative.⁷⁴ They were clearly in no hurry to fill his shoes.

Before leaving Moscow, Seeds paid a rare visit to Molotov. It was not a particularly fruitful interview: Molotov repeated the line (previously employed by Maisky) that ‘his Government bore no enmity to Great Britain, but were convinced by our acts all over the world that His Majesty’s Government was unfriendly to Russia’. He went on to blame Britain and France for the Soviet expulsion from the League of Nations. ‘M. Molotov was personally friendly’, Seeds noted, ‘and spoke without heat but quite definitely’.⁷⁵ The Foreign Office took a more pessimistic view of this encounter. Maclean described it as

⁷³ FO 371/23682 N5426/92/38 Eden to Halifax ‘Personal and Confidential’ 13/10/39; minutes by Collier and Oliphant 19/10/39; minute by Cadogan 20/10/39.

⁷⁴ FO 371/24849 N93/93/38 Responses to questions in Parliament about Seeds’ return to Russia, 1940, *passim*.

‘conclusive proof, had this been necessary, that any hopes of useful co-operation with the Soviet Union must needs be in vain’.⁷⁶ This attitude held sway as long as the war in Finland continued - and, indeed, beyond. Furthermore, it was to prove a small step from the recognition of irreconcilable differences to speculation about the benefits of actual hostilities with Russia.

Amidst the diplomatic chill of the Winter War, one initiative - albeit unofficial - did manage to break the ice of Anglo-Soviet relations. Cripps had approached Halifax soon after the start of the war with a proposal that he visit the Soviet Union as a private citizen to investigate conditions there. The suggestion was not enthusiastically received by the Foreign Office - Lascelles had grudgingly remarked that ‘relations with the Soviet Union are now so bad that I doubt whether Sir Stafford Cripps could make them much worse if he tried’ - but no actual objections were raised, and it was only the refusal of the Russian Embassy to grant Cripps a visa that brought a halt to the scheme.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Cripps evidently took Halifax’s approval of his suggestion still to be valid when, during a visit to China in February 1940, he seized on the opportunity presented to him by the Soviet Ambassador of flying to Moscow for talks with leading Soviet figures. Halifax and Cadogan both expressed doubts as to the timing of the visit, but the War Cabinet raised no objection, and since in any case there was nothing that could be done to stop it, Le Rougetel was requested to furnish Cripps with any assistance he might need during his stay in Moscow.⁷⁸ Cripps reported back, via Sir Archibald Clark Kerr, at the beginning of March. Having spoken with Molotov, he had gained the impression that Russia was seeking to distance herself from Germany:

⁷⁵ FO 371/24845 N40/40/38 Seeds to Halifax No. 1, 2/1/40.

⁷⁶ FO 371/24845 N40/40/38 Minute by Maclean 2/1/40.

⁷⁷ FO 371/23678 N4571/57/38 Cripps to Halifax 19/9/39 and 18/9/39; minute by Lascelles 18/9/39; Halifax to Cripps 22/9/39; Cripps to Halifax 30/9/39.

⁷⁸ CAB 65/11 WM 35 (39) CA 7/2/40; FO 371/24855 N1523/1523/38 Clark Kerr to Halifax No. 46 Tour, 6/2/40; minute by Cadogan 8/2/40; Halifax to Le Rougetel No. 21 8/2/40.

I am sure that Russo-German situation is not any too easy at the moment and that if Great Britain is prepared to be friendly towards Russia it will be possible to prevent relationship between Russia and Germany from developing into anything closer, and indeed their gradual separation might be brought about.

He urged, therefore, that 'some steps should be taken now which may prevent Russia from committing herself too far to Germany in the immediate future'. The Foreign Office remained sceptical: Collier felt that only 'a complete economic break between Russia and Germany' would justify such steps, '& we should never get that so long as the war lasts'. Halifax too could see no reason to change the current policy towards the Soviet Union. Only Butler dared to suggest that 'by never meeting a Russian we are less informed & tend to increase rather than to decrease German-Russian amity. However', he added sadly, 'we are a proud people & seem to enjoy having the "world in arms" against us'.⁷⁹ Cripps selflessly offered to jump on the next plane to London in order to pursue further what he clearly perceived as an Anglo-Russian rapprochement, but the War Cabinet, on Halifax's advice, agreed that 'Sir Stafford need not put himself to the trouble of flying back'.⁸⁰ The opportunity, if indeed it was an opportunity, was allowed to go begging. Whatever the merits of Cripps' arguments, the timing of his suggested *démarche* was all wrong. Instead of seeking peaceful co-operation, there was now increasing talk in British circles of the possibility of provoking open hostilities with the Soviet Union.

The threat of a belligerent Soviet Union, first raised seriously by the Nazi-Soviet Pact, had naturally caused consideration to be given to British military action against that country. Clearly the scope was limited: the distance between Britain and Russia placed an obstacle in the way of direct attacks, and it was imperative that any hostile action be

⁷⁹ FO 371/24846 N2779/40/38 Clark Kerr to Halifax No. 87 Tour, 4/3/40; minute by Collier 8/3/40; minute by Halifax 10/3/40; minute by Butler 12/3/40.

justifiable from both a moral and a strategic point of view. Nevertheless, a suitable target was quickly found: Leslie Burgin, the Minister of Supply, wrote to Halifax on 31 October suggesting the possibility of an air attack on Soviet oil installations in the Caucasus. Not only would this hit the Soviet Union, but, more importantly, it would affect Germany's war effort by reducing the amount of oil which she was able to import from her ally. The Foreign Office response to this suggestion, revealed by recently opened documents, was initially luke-warm: Halifax pointed out to Burgin that the active co-operation of both Iran and Turkey would be necessary for such an attack, and that in present circumstances neither seemed likely to give their consent. Moreover, such action would also raise the danger of Soviet retaliation on the poorly defended Iraqi oilfields, on which the British were heavily reliant for their own supplies. 'I thoroughly sympathise with your desire for a stick with which to threaten, if not beat, the Russians', Halifax replied on 8 November, 'but I fear that, for the present, at least, we must look for it elsewhere'.⁸¹ However, a seed had been planted, and as Anglo-Soviet relations deteriorated and the prospect of war grew, the Baku plan enjoyed increasing support. When a member of the public proposed the very same scheme in February 1940, Maclean suggested following it up 'through devious channels'.⁸² The War Cabinet discussed the matter on 27 February, when it was confirmed by the Chiefs of Staff that the proposed attack could only be launched from Tehran, and it was agreed that efforts should therefore be made to maintain Iranian goodwill.⁸³ This, and the work which the Air Ministry put into planning the prospective strike, indicate that it was more than just pie in the sky.⁸⁴

⁸⁰ CAB 65/6 WM 62 (40) 7/3/40.

⁸¹ FO 371/23697 N5894/290/38 Burgin to Halifax 31/10/39; Halifax to Burgin 8/11/39.

⁸² FO 371/24854 N1923/531/38 Mr R. F. Browne, Erith, Kent to Churchill, 8/2/40; minute by Maclean 22/2/40.

⁸³ CAB 65/5 WM 53 (40) 27/2/40.

⁸⁴ For a fuller account of British plans for action in the Caucasus, see Brock Millman 'Towards War with Russia' *JCH* 1994.

Even after the end of the Russo-Finnish War, the plan to bomb Baku was not shelved, largely because it embodied a strike at the heart of the German war effort. Moreover, as trepidation at the Soviet Union throwing in her lot with Germany had receded into virtual complacency about the prospect of a belligerent Russia, the action could be contemplated without too much concern over the likely Russian response. Cadogan had mused along these lines in the midst of the Winter War: 'I have been coming to wonder more and more, lately, whether we need be deterred from any action that we may think advantageous, simply for fear of finding ourselves at war with Russia'.⁸⁵ This attitude came increasingly to be accepted within the Foreign Office - to the evident distress of Butler, whose views were strongly to the contrary. Thus, an attack on Baku came to be distanced from Anglo-Soviet relations, and viewed more in the context of its contribution towards winning the war against Germany. This was despite the contention by the Chiefs of Staff, who gave full consideration to the plan, that there was 'no . . . objective in Russia, by striking at which we could bring about the early defeat of Germany'.⁸⁶

The Baku plan was brought before the Supreme War Council in late March. Cadogan, forwarding papers on the question to Halifax, made his own position clear:

I sh[oul]d say that, if there were a reasonable chance of success, it ought to be tried. . . . We should hope to pick a quarrel with the Soviet, I suppose, before we launched our bombers. This I think could be done on the Blockade issue. Cannot we refer to the German-Soviet economic agreement, which we can maintain establishes the Soviet as a supplier of contraband to Germany? Then stop every shipment to Russia that we can catch. If that doesn't goad her into war, can't we then demand that she cease supplying certain articles to Germany? . . . An attack on the Soviet w[oul]d

⁸⁵ FO 371/24851 N1147/283/38 Minute by Cadogan 19/1/40.

obviously be less likely to bring Italy into the war against us than would any interference in the Balkans. And we might get the sympathy of Spain and Japan - and even (for what good that would do us) of . . . South Eastern Europe.

Indeed, the only drawback he could envisage was that Turkey would refuse to be a part of it, and would deny Britain use of the Straits as a result.⁸⁷ Halifax, too, was concerned about the Turkish reaction, and sent a telegram to Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen, British Ambassador to Turkey, asking for his personal views on this.⁸⁸ Nor was he convinced by some of the arguments put forward in support of the plan - for example, that it would win over Mussolini to the Allied side - and in general seemed not to share his Permanent Under-Secretary's eagerness.⁸⁹ The Supreme War Council vacillated on the question, asking for further investigations to be carried out.⁹⁰ Detailed plans, dated 2 April, were laid down by the Air Ministry for the operation, codenamed 'Plan W.A. 106'. It was to be no small undertaking: 4 squadrons of Blenheims were to operate at full strength for three months in an effort to knock out the three key refineries at Baku, Grozni and Batum.⁹¹ Even after events in Norway had intervened, Reynaud made a point of urging the British to get a move on with the preparations for the operation. However, it would appear that, contrary to Cadogan's devious schemes, there was agreement 'that the Allies should not force war with Russia', and that Baku should only be bombed 'after some hostile act had been committed by the U.S.S.R.'. ⁹² It was, then, to be a retaliatory, rather than a pre-emptive strike. Even so, the threat of the operation was a useful bargaining chip which the

⁸⁶ FO 371/24845 N2709/40/38 Draft COS report for consideration by the Joint Planning Sub-Committee, 29/2/40.

⁸⁷ FO 371/24846 N3698/40/38 Minute by Cadogan 23/3/40.

⁸⁸ FO 371/24846 N3588/40/38 Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen No. 187 DIPP, 25/3/40.

⁸⁹ FO 371/24846 N3698/40/38 Minute by Halifax 25/3/40.

⁹⁰ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 6th Meeting, 28/3/40.

⁹¹ FO 371/24847 N5087/40/38 Air Ministry 'Plan W.A. 106', 2/4/40.

⁹² FO 371/24847 N4385/40/38 Campbell to Halifax No. 298 Saving, 14/4/40.

British could use to strengthen their hand in their efforts to reach a trade agreement with the Soviet Union.

As the Finnish delegation in Moscow were negotiating an end to the Russo-Finnish conflict, the War Cabinet in London were considering the latest Chiefs of Staff report on the implications of war with the Soviet Union. Action by a belligerent Russia would, it was now claimed, 'be more in the nature of embarrassing diversions than vital blows'. The most serious threat remained that to India. However, just as there was not much that the Russians could do to threaten British interests, the scope for British action against the Soviet Union was severely limited - particularly if Turkey and Iran refused to co-operate. Halifax, commenting on the report, laid stress on these points. The Soviets, he argued, did not want to go to war with Britain, and it was not in Britain's interest to declare war on them. 'Nevertheless', he went on, 'he saw no reason why we should be deterred, by fear of Russia making war on us, from any action which we might wish to take to our advantage elsewhere'. This was strong stuff from the usually cautious Foreign Secretary, although tempered by his contention that there was 'little likelihood' of hostilities for the time being. Churchill contributed some fatuous remarks to the effect that Russian bombing of India might make the natives come to their senses, and Chamberlain concluded, typically, that 'in view of the improbability of our being involved in general hostilities with Russia, it might be as well to wait and see the outcome of present developments in Finland' before taking any further action.⁹³ Nevertheless, a marked shift had clearly taken place in the British attitude. The 'funk' which Lascelles had characterised as the decisive factor in British policy towards the Soviet Union had been replaced by boldness and aggression. The poor showing of the Red Army in the Finnish war must account for at least part of this

⁹³ CAB 65/6 WM 66 (40) 12/3/40.

change, but perhaps the inactivity of the Phoney War also contributed to produce a brave, if possibly foolhardy, stance towards the vast Soviet empire.

Once confirmation of the Soviet-Finnish armistice had been received, Anglo-Russian relations entered a new phase. Sargent was quick to get his views on this down on paper. In a minute of 14 March, he suggested that Russia was now in much the same position that Britain had been in after the Boer War. On that occasion, he argued, Britain had abandoned isolation and allied herself with France; might not Russia 'recognise that she is no longer in a position to stand alone in the world', and therefore seek a 'thorough-going alliance with another power?'. Rejecting closer Russo-German collaboration (and, by implication, any further fall-out from the Nazi-Soviet agreements) on the grounds of the implacable rivalry which existed between the two powers, Sargent suggested that either Britain or France would be the object of 'tentative approaches from the Soviet Union' in the following months. Cadogan was sceptical: Russian self-sufficiency would, he thought, allow her to take a back seat in the conflict, 'giving a push here and a push there occasionally to keep the war going, hoping in the end to be the one to profit from the war'. Halifax, by contrast, was more open-minded. 'It is a very uncertain world!' he noted.⁹⁴ Probably none of them appreciated just how uncertain it was. Sargent was proved right, ultimately, to predict an Anglo-Russian alliance, but the circumstances which produced it - invasion by Germany - were quite different from the rational calculation of Russian interests that he envisaged. As for Cadogan, he too was right to expect Russia to sit things out: it took the might of Barbarossa to force the abandonment of this policy. All this lay in the distant future, however; for the moment, Russia seemed content to lend support to Germany, and this was something which the British found it increasingly difficult to swallow.

⁹⁴ FO 371/24843 N3538/30/38 Minute by Sargent 14/3/40; minutes by Cadogan and Halifax, 15/3/40.

The increasingly casual attitude towards the prospect of war with the Soviet Union was challenged by Rab Butler. Having listened to Maisky complaining about the detention of Russian ships by British contraband control in the Far East, he stressed the dangers of continuing with such action. ‘There is a certain noble purity about British policy’, he observed, ‘which tends - provided right is on our side and the human brain dictates the logic of an action - to add one enemy after another to those opposed to us’. This was a bit rich, considering the strenuous British efforts up to this time to limit the war to a straight fight with Germany. The Foreign Office response to these comments was robust: Collier asserted that ‘[f]or most purposes the Soviet Government are already our enemy’, and suggested that Butler ask Maisky ‘why he should expect that the Allies should show any consideration for the trade of a country which is deliberately and ostentatiously assisting their enemy’. Sargent candidly added that ‘we sometimes feel compelled to propitiate certain neutrals, such as the U.S. and Italy, in matters of contraband control, but the justification for any such alleviations is entirely lacking in the case of the Soviet Government’. Butler countered these arguments on the more general grounds that ‘a reckless alienation of the Soviet Union would do more harm than good both internally and in the realm of European diplomacy. I have no great fear of Russia & no objection to doing harm to her interests but I wish to maintain contact’.⁹⁵ His fear was clearly of an unnecessary embroilment in hostilities with the Soviet Union as a result of the more hard-line attitude now being advocated on all sides. By and large, however, his voice was a lone one.

Nevertheless, the goal of a war trade agreement, shelved the previous November, now re-emerged as a credible way of thawing Anglo-Soviet relations in the aftermath of the Winter War. That the question was returned to at all suggests that, for all the sabre-

⁹⁵ FO 371/24846 N3485/40/38 Minute by Butler 18/3/40; minute by Collier 25/3/40; minute by Sargent 26/3/40; minute by Butler 29/3/40.

rattling of previous months, there remained an underlying desire to improve relations, as well as a belief that such an improvement was still possible even after all that had happened. The stimulus for action came from the Russians themselves. On 27 March, Maisky told Halifax, in a rare interview, that the Soviet Government, having been unable to reply sooner to the British proposals of the previous September and October, 'would be prepared to enter without delay into negotiations for an agreement on the lines then suggested'.⁹⁶ Halifax promised to look into the matter further, which he did the following day by referring it to the highest authority possible: the Supreme War Council. Chamberlain asked Reynaud, the recently-installed President of the Council, for his views on Maisky's approach. The French leader was clearly not impressed by the development:

his feeling was that it was impossible to place any trust in the Soviet Government. He feared that if feelers were thrown out, the Soviet would only use the opportunity to spin out subsequent discussions. . . . it was quite conceivable that Russia was merely seeking to gain time in which to complete her defences in the Caucasus.

Chamberlain then suggested that Britain might adopt the same strategy, spinning out the talks until the question of an Allied attack in the Caucasus had been settled one way or the other. It was agreed that 'the Allied Governments should adopt delaying tactics until they had reached a decision as to the general policy which they proposed to adopt towards the U.S.S.R.'. ⁹⁷ Owing to German action in Scandinavia and subsequently in France, not to mention the divergence between London and Paris on the issue, it appears that this mythical 'general policy' was never, in fact, arrived at. Action on the trade issue, however, was resumed.

⁹⁶ FO 371/24839 N3706/5/38 Halifax to Le Rougetel No. 146, 28/3/40.

⁹⁷ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 6th Meeting 28/3/40.

On 29 March Halifax told the War Cabinet that he did not expect much to come of the proposed trade negotiations, 'as it was clearly the policy of the Soviet Government to keep the war between the Allies and Germany going, to their own advantage'. However, he went on, it would be advantageous to increase British trade with the Soviet Union, and it might even prove possible to restrict Russian exports of oil to Germany into the bargain. The matter, it was agreed, should be pursued further.⁹⁸ The wheels began to turn. Gladwyn Jebb, Cadogan's private secretary, put forward an idea concocted by himself and Lord Perth to the effect that Britain should offer, as a prerequisite to a general agreement, to buy up all of Russia's exportable surplus of oil. Halifax was impressed and sought further views on the proposal.⁹⁹ Sir William Seeds, the almost-forgotten British Ambassador to the Soviet Union, also entered into the discussions, writing from the Travellers' Club in Pall Mall that 'we would be well advised to enter into trade negotiations but with a stiffer upper lip than was my intention when I first suggested such negotiations'.¹⁰⁰ He even went so far as to raise the prospect of his return to Moscow on the back of a successful conclusion to the talks - no mean sacrifice for a man heartily glad to be free of the burdens of his post. Not all were optimistic, however. Maclean, denouncing the Soviet export trade as 'barely equivalent to that of Switzerland', asserted that the sudden Russian interest in trade talks was 'dictated by purely political considerations'. The intention, he deduced, was to keep the Allies in play and thus to avoid drastic action on their part against the Soviet Union. It is safe to assume that this aspect of Soviet policy has the full approval of Germany who, in present circumstances, is able to derive far greater benefits from a neutral than a belligerent Soviet Union.¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ CAB 65/6 WM 77 (40) 29/3/40.

⁹⁹ FO 371/24839 N3921/5/38 Minute by Jebb 30/3/40; minute by Halifax 31/3/40.

¹⁰⁰ FO 371/24846 N3794/40/38 Seeds to Sargent, 1/4/40.

¹⁰¹ FO 371/24840 N4155/5/38 Minute by Maclean, 4/4/40.

Thus it was that a dual policy towards the Soviet Union came to be followed. On the one hand, serious consideration was given to attacking Russian oil facilities in the Caucasus; on the other, apparently genuine attempts were made to improve relations via the medium of a trade agreement. Future policy hung in the balance: if it was decided that a strike against Russian oil would have a decisive effect on the war against Germany, Britain and France seemed quite willing to burn their bridges with the Soviet Union. This attitude gave rise to concern in certain quarters. The New Zealand Government put up strong opposition to the prospect of war with Russia, provoking the Foreign Office to compose a reply so indignant that Eden, the Dominions Secretary, refused to send it.¹⁰² Butler returned to the fray, urging Halifax that Russian co-operation was vital for the ‘encirclement’ of Germany, and that contact should be maintained for three further reasons:

- (a) to disconcert Germany psychologically and make her feel that she is not secure in the east; (b) because it is going to be extremely difficult to fulfil our war aims of restoring Poland and Bohemia to some sort of independence if we are at daggers drawn with both Germany and Russia . . .
- (c) it must not be forgotten that on our home front here organised Labour is very averse to war with Russia. Political Labour is too. . .¹⁰³

Cripps, too, argued for co-operation rather than confrontation; in a telegram from the United States sent via Lord Lothian, he stressed that Russia’s interests lay in holding a middle position and not getting drawn into the war. She was, however, ‘sensitive to her national status . . . and if we forced her too far, may retaliate with a military alliance with

¹⁰² FO 371/24846 N3781/40/38 Batterbee to Eden No 127, 31/3/40; minutes by Maclean and Cavendish-Bentinck, 3/4/40; minutes by Sargent and Cadogan, 17/4/40. A more moderate reply was subsequently sent to all Dominion governments: Circular telegram Z No. 59, 20/4/40.

¹⁰³ FO 371/2486 N3867/40/38 Minute by Butler, 5/4/40.

Germany directed against the Allies'.¹⁰⁴ The Labour MP Josiah Wedgewood exhorted Halifax to do more to facilitate the proposed trade agreement - to which the Foreign Secretary curtly retorted that 'any coolness that may have crept into Anglo-Soviet relations of recent months is not due to the snobbishness with which you credit us, and I think the major share of responsibility must rest with the Soviet Government'.¹⁰⁵ But, in so far as the trade question was pursued, it was for motives which were apparently more cynical than idealistic. An interdepartmental meeting on the subject (at which representatives of the Foreign Office, Board of Trade, Ministry of Economic Warfare and Ministry of Supply were present) concluded that 'while we should not refuse to examine with the Soviet Government the question of possible trade negotiations, it would have to be made plain to them that our main concern was the prosecution of the war with Germany'.¹⁰⁶ This was the criterion by which policy towards the Soviet Union was now measured.

On 19 April the War Cabinet approved the draft of a reply to Maisky's approach. This made it clear that Britain's main concern was the re-export to Germany of goods exchanged as part of any agreement, and asked what 'concrete proposals' the Russians were willing to put forward.¹⁰⁷ The Foreign Secretary handed the reply to Maisky that same night, adding that the Soviet Government were welcome to make criticisms of the British formula 'since I would be glad to see the talks start for trade as well as for political reasons'.¹⁰⁸ Halifax, informing the British Ambassadors in France, America, Japan and Turkey of these developments, was candid about British motives: 'In view of the general war situation in Europe it was not considered desirable to reject the Soviet approach out of hand', he admitted, 'although small hope is entertained of achieving any substantial

¹⁰⁴ FO 418/86 Lothian to Halifax No. 481, 8/4/40.

¹⁰⁵ FO 371/24847 N4627/40/38 Wedgewood to Halifax 10/4/40; Halifax to Wedgewood 16/4/40.

¹⁰⁶ FO 371/24840 N4625/5/38 Minute by Maclean, 13/4/40.

¹⁰⁷ CAB 65/6 WM 97(40) 19/4/40.

¹⁰⁸ FO 371/24840 N4749/5/38 Halifax to Le Rougetel No. 185, 19/4/40.

result'.¹⁰⁹ The Russians were apparently more optimistic. Maisky presented Halifax with the Soviet response on 29 April, and spoke of his hope that a trade agreement would remove 'political misunderstandings' between Britain and the Soviet Union.¹¹⁰ However, Maclean dismissed this reply as 'expressly designed to safeguard German interests . . . it is hard to see what use there would be in pursuing the matter further'. Cadogan agreed, and warned against being drawn into

long negotiations which will lead nowhere and will only bring us into disrepute in quarters where we must look for goodwill. . . . we need have no fear of driving Russia into war. If we cannot get what we want out of these negotiations there is nothing to be lost - and may be something to be gained - by breaking them off early.¹¹¹

Halifax saw Maisky again on 8 May, and handed over a note setting out the British position once again: trade negotiations would be welcomed so long as certain assurances about the re-export of goods to Germany were given by the Soviet Government. Maisky, however, had now become pessimistic, arguing that progress was impossible 'unless there was an increase in confidence between the two Governments. . . . Altogether he considered the attitude of His Majesty's Government to be most unreasonable'.¹¹² This mutual suspicion was to remain, in the months and years that followed, the most serious barrier to an improvement in Anglo-Soviet relations. Even Sir Stafford Cripps would subsequently despair at the intractability of the two sides when it came to trade questions. Apart, therefore, from the barter agreement on tin and rubber for timber, and despite the efforts of those on both sides, no Anglo-Soviet War Trade Agreement was concluded during the Phoney War.

¹⁰⁹ FO 371/24840 N4839/5/38 Halifax to Lothian No. 626, Halifax to Campbell No. 266 Saving, Halifax to Craigie No. 326, 21/4/40; Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen No. 253, 23/4/40.

¹¹⁰ FO 418/86 Halifax to Le Rougetel No. 204, 29/4/40.

¹¹¹ FO 371/24840 N5449/5/38 Minutes by Maclean and Cadogan, 1/5/40.

It is clear, then, that British policy towards the Soviet Union underwent a number of changes within the relatively short timescale of the Phoney War. Initial trepidation and fear gave way to ambivalence and eventually virtual belligerence. The danger of Russia and Germany 'ganging up' on the Western democracies receded as it became apparent that Soviet help to Germany would be confined to the economic sphere. Otherwise, it appeared that Russia was following her own agenda, albeit with German acquiescence, with her expansion in the Baltic region. Military events in Finland seriously dented the credibility of Soviet armed forces, and seemed to confirm reports that the Red Army was not, after all, a force to be reckoned with. This was a comforting realisation, especially in view of the nominal Russian threat to India, and gave rise to a more forward British policy towards the Soviet Union. Since there appeared to be little that the Russians could do to damage British interests in the event of war, a breach of relations, which would enable tighter enforcement of the economic blockade of Germany, came to be seen as less of a threat than had previously been thought.. Implicitly, then, it was assumed that Russian policy was acting in favour of Germany and against the British war effort. Indeed, the Soviet aggression in Poland and Finland, as well as her economic aid to Germany, presented Britain with the moral ammunition for a future declaration of war, should she choose to pursue it.

Was the prospect of Anglo-Soviet hostilities a realistic one? It is difficult to say for sure. There were certainly plans for limited action against the Russians in Finland and the Caucasus, but the extent to which these initiatives, had they been implemented, would have led to more general hostilities is open to question. As regards the possible impact of a declaration of war - well, one need only consider the example of Germany, on whom Britain had declared war, but against whom only very limited action had been taken during the opening months of the conflict. The Soviet Union, which in any case presented even

¹¹² FO 418/86 Halifax to Le Rougetel No. 218, 8/5/40.

less scope for military adventures, was only envisaged as an enemy because of the assistance which she was rendering to Germany. It was made clear by the Chiefs of Staff and others that war with the Soviets should only be considered in so far as it would facilitate the defeat of Germany. The Baku plan, as we have seen, was aimed primarily at the German war effort - the consequences of the action on Anglo-Soviet relations were almost a secondary consideration. A full-scale conflict between Britain and the Soviet Union was certainly not on the cards - not least because neither country desired such an outcome. Even the Baku strike, it was eventually agreed, should be held in hand as a retaliatory measure. At the other extreme, serious consideration was given to the prospect of drawing the Russians away from Germany. However, the motivation in both cases - the weakening of Germany's war effort - was exactly the same. There was, then, some consistency in the confused, and confusing, British policy towards the Soviet Union.

6. KEEPING THE BALKANS NEUTRAL

Victory can only be secured by concentrating decisive force at the decisive point at the decisive moment . . . The decisive point . . . might turn out to be the Balkans.

Lord Hankey, 12 September 1939.¹

As the birthplace of the First World War, the Balkans were no stranger to conflict. Despite the efforts of the Versailles peacemakers, the area remained notoriously unstable. In the months before the outbreak of the Second World War, Germany's two-stage annexation of Czechoslovakia and the Italian seizure of Albania seemed ominous straws in the wind. It is perhaps surprising, then, that for the duration of the Phoney War, the Balkans remained at peace. Italy stood by her 'non-belligerence', and Germany and the Soviet Union both resisted the temptation of easy pickings in South-East Europe. The Allies, too, held their fire - although, as Hankey's comments show, Britain and France were not averse to action in the Balkans, when the time was right. Having given guarantees to both Roumania and Greece in April 1939 the Allies had made plain their interest in the region. One thing was for sure: the domination of South-Eastern Europe by Germany and her allies had to be avoided, not least because it would give the Germans free access to Roumanian oil, a vital wartime resource. The Balkans loomed large in British and Allied strategic thinking throughout the Phoney War, and, even though there was nothing in the way of military activity in the area, diplomatic activity, to pave the way for possible future developments, was often intense.

¹ Hankey Papers HNKY 11/1 Memorandum on War Policy, 12/9/39.

British policy towards the Balkan states was inevitably affected by the outbreak of the war with Germany. For instance, German trade with the Balkans had to be checked in some way, in order to curb Germany's war effort. This raised obvious problems: the states could hardly be expected voluntarily to abandon such an important market. The ideal solution would have been the purchase by Britain and France of the goods which would otherwise have gone to Germany, but this would have put a strain on the Allies' limited foreign exchange resources. Politically too, it was necessary to strengthen the appeal of the Allies as self-proclaimed defenders of small nations, in contrast to the Germans and their associates, who showed no regard for the rights of Czechoslovakia, Poland, and later Finland, Denmark and Norway. One way of achieving this would be to give effective assistance to Poland, thus setting an example of the determination of Britain and France to stand up to aggression against small states. This point was made just prior to the invasion of Poland by Sir Percy Loraine, British Ambassador to Italy, who reported that the military representatives of Yugoslavia, Roumania, Greece and Turkey had all urged the launching of an Allied offensive against Germany via the Balkans as a means of relieving pressure on Poland. This, they felt, would 'unite the Balkan powers and bring them in on the side of [the] Western powers . . . without such support mutual distrust might cause them to hesitate for fear of having to bear [the] full force of a German attack.'² This raised an important point: if the Balkan states were to be induced to co-operate with Allied policy against Germany and Italy, it was necessary to reassure them that Allied assistance would be forthcoming in the event of German retaliation against them. The lack of any Allied assistance to Poland, whilst understandable from a purely military point of view, can scarcely have been comforting in this respect, and may - as the negotiations with Turkey in

² FO 371/23753 R6816/2613/67 Loraine to Halifax No. 677, 26/8/39.

the early days of the war seem to indicate - actually have made it harder for Britain and France to secure agreements with Balkan states.

Lorraine's suggestion raises an interesting and controversial question: could, or indeed should, the Allies have opened up a Balkan front against Germany early in the war? This was one of the central problems which the strategists had to confront during the Phoney War, and one which saw much discussion - and indeed much disagreement - on both sides of the English Channel. It was widely agreed that Italian belligerence, if and when it came, would necessitate Allied action in the area and thus resolve the issue. However, recent historiography has argued that, notwithstanding Mussolini's declaration of 'non-belligerence', the Allies would have been better advised to bring Italy - and therefore the Balkans - into the war from the outset. Lynn Curtright, taking her cue from the work of Macgregor Knox and Williamson Murray, explicitly states that Chamberlain 'missed the bus' when he allowed Mussolini to stay out of the war in September 1939'.³ Keeping the Balkans neutral, she claims, was simply playing the German game - it suited Hitler better than the Allies - and a belligerent Italy would have been a drain on German resources rather than an asset. Whilst there is some force in this argument, it is clearly informed by the knowledge that Italy did, in fact, enter the war later on. Without this knowledge, and so long as Italy's attitude remained uncertain, it was a much harder calculation to make. Moreover, rather than seeking to judge the matter with the benefit of hindsight, it seems more sensible to view British and French attitudes towards opening up a Balkan front in the context of the actual conditions of the Phoney War, and not those which arose later on.

The most favourable development, from the British point of view, would have been a decision by the Balkan states themselves to band together and form a united front against

outside aggression. The argument for such a declaration was strengthened by a Chiefs of Staff report on 9 September, which stated unambiguously that, in view of Italian neutrality, Balkan neutrality was preferable even to the active intervention of Turkey, Greece and Roumania on the Allied side.⁴ One of the main sticking points in securing a Balkan neutrality declaration was the traditional rivalry among the Balkan states. Ronald Campbell in Belgrade, replying to the communication instigated by Sargent, suggested that ‘all these countries are still more concerned with their private squabbles than with the need for getting together in the face of common danger’. Moreover, there was, he thought, little that any outside power could do to change this: ‘movement for unity if it is to be successful must come from within and . . . any movement from without whilst welcome to some must be unwelcome to others of these countries and is therefore primarily doomed to failure’.⁵ ‘We really must be careful’, Sargent subsequently conceded, ‘not to make ourselves ridiculous by acting as meddling busybodies in the Balkans, or, still worse, get ourselves tied up in all sorts of false positions by giving unasked-for advice on the intricacies of Balkan politics.’⁶

The central plank of British Balkan policy following the Greek and Roumanian guarantees of April 1939 had been the securing of an Anglo-French treaty of alliance with Turkey. The Turks, fearful of Italian intentions, seemed more than willing to co-operate in this, and as war approached, an agreement seemed imminent. However, as Brock Millman has shown, the Turkish interest in co-operation with the Allies rested on anti-Italian, rather than anti-German, feeling. The central importance of German markets to the Turkish economy meant that Turkey could only be induced to take a stand against Germany if the

³ Lynn H. Curtright, ‘Great Britain, the Balkans, and Turkey in the Autumn of 1939’, *International History Review* X, 3 1988. The works cited in this connection are Knox *Mussolini Unleashed* and Murray *The Path to Ruin*.

⁴ FO 371/23754 R7407/2613/67 COS (39) 15, 9/9/39.

⁵ FO 371/23754 R7331/2613/67 Campbell to Halifax No. 196, 10/9/39.

⁶ FO 371/23754 R7603/2613/67 Rendel to Halifax No. 282, 9/9/39; minute by Sargent 28/9/39.

Allies were both willing and able to replace the Germans as Turkey's major trading partner. According to Millman, Britain 'was neither equipped nor willing to play her part . . . and perhaps did not fully appreciate what was required if the alliance were to work'.⁷ Curtright, too, castigates the War Cabinet's 'myopic view of the connection between the Italian and Turkish questions'.⁸ These are serious criticisms of the British policy - but are they justified?

Immediately the war with Germany had been declared, priority was given to the securing of the Anglo-Franco-Turkish treaty. Lord Halifax assured the War Cabinet on 3 September that signature would probably take place soon.⁹ Such optimism was misplaced: the very next day, Halifax had to report that the Turks had increased their financial demands and would probably not sign until these demands had been satisfied.¹⁰ Among the demands made by the Turks was the purchase by Britain of Turkish goods which would previously have been sold to Germany. One of the most important of these was tobacco. Here there developed one of those conflicts of interest which plagued the Chamberlain wartime administration. Britain's main supplier of tobacco was the United States, but Britain's limited dollar resources dictated that tobacco purchases from the United States be restricted. As Oliver Stanley announced to the War Cabinet on 6 September, 'it would be very unfortunate if we allowed it to appear that our real motive in reducing purchases of United States tobacco had been to enable us to purchase Turkish instead'.¹¹ The upshot of this was a slightly surreal exchange of views between the Foreign Office and the Treasury on what could be done with the Turkish tobacco. Baggallay of the Foreign Office recorded a bizarre suggestion that the Government Chemist at Twickenham be consulted on

⁷ Brock Millman, 'Credit and Supply in Turkish Foreign Policy and the Tripartite Alliance of October 1939: A Note', *International History Review* XVI, 1 1994.

⁸ Curtright, 'Great Britain, the Balkans, and Turkey' p. 444.

⁹ CAB 65/1 WM 1 (39) 3/9/39.

¹⁰ CAB 65/1 WM 2(39) 4/9/39.

¹¹ CAB 65/1 WM 6 (39) 6/9/39.

alternative uses for tobacco ‘apart from using it for smoking purposes’! Turkish tobacco, he had heard, ‘contains certain properties not found in other tobaccos, which are of great value in time of war’. Such action might help to allay the criticism of US tobacco producers.¹² His proposals drew a less than enthusiastic response from ‘Sigi’ Waley at the Treasury, who felt that the Americans would simply insist that *all* Turkish tobacco be burned. ‘They would give the matter full publicity and we should look exceedingly silly. We shall not satisfy the U.S. tobacco grower who wants someone to buy *his* crop and not someone to burn somebody else’s crop.’¹³ On this occasion, at least, the cold logic of the Treasury seems to have triumphed over the fertile imagination of the Foreign Office, and the mysterious ‘properties’ of Turkish tobacco were apparently left untapped.

Halifax expressed the British frustration at the delays in the signing of the treaty to the Turkish Ambassador, Rushdi Aras, on 12 September:

I said that I was frankly disappointed at the manner in which the negotiations were dragging on owing to inability to reach agreement over financial and economic questions . . . I considered it most important that the political agreement should be signed at the earliest possible moment in order that the world might see where our countries stood.¹⁴

Britain was anxious to secure the treaty on political grounds, whilst the Turks, understandably, were proceeding on the basis of their own economic needs. However, the British maintained their sense of urgency. The Chiefs of Staff advised that ‘the necessity of getting Turkey into the war on our side in the event of a German drive into the Aegean outweighs all other considerations. The conclusion of the Anglo-Turkish Alliance’, they went on, ‘is of the greatest military importance. If further delays in signing this Treaty

¹² FO 371/23861 R7266/7213/44 Minute by Baggallay 8/9/39.

¹³ FO 371/23861 R7417/7213/44 Waley to Baggallay 11/9/39.

¹⁴ FO 3371/23861 R7478/7213/44 Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen No. 526, 12/9/39.

should lead to the loss of Turkey as an ally, it would be a strategical disaster'.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the delays continued.

On 18 September the War Cabinet agreed, at the urging of Halifax, to increase the British offer of credits for raw materials to £21 million.¹⁶ Detailed instructions were accordingly sent to Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen. In addition to granting the Turks various other financial incentives, the Ambassador was given discretion to bargain with a cargo of war material, originally destined for Poland, on board the S.S. Lassell, and due to land shortly in Istanbul.¹⁷ This was a formidable offer, designed to bring an end to the haggling and settle the Treaty once and for all. However, it was still to be another month before signatures were finally exchanged.

Meanwhile, as a response to the growing feeling of Anglo-French divergence over Balkan issues, the Supreme War Council had devoted the entire first session of its second meeting (on 17 September) to hammering out a joint policy for the region. They did not get all that far: having agreed that German domination of the Balkans would be a bad thing, Chamberlain and Daladier were unable to come up with any really effective way of preventing such an outcome. The French premier wanted to instigate immediate preparations for an Allied force to be sent to Salonika, or, if the Italian attitude could not be taken for granted, to Constantinople. Chamberlain, having pointed out the diplomatic restrictions on such action, weighed in with the observation that sending an expeditionary force to the Balkans would be incompatible with creation of a neutral Balkan bloc (the preferred British solution). Daladier was forced to concede that the former should only be tried if the latter failed. In the end, all that was agreed was that soundings should be taken from the Italians and the Turks as to their response to an Allied expeditionary force being

¹⁵ FO 371/23747 R7501/661/67 COS (39) 25, 13/9/39.

¹⁶ CAB 65/1 WM 19 (39) 18/9/39.

¹⁷ FO 371/23861 R7644/7213/44 Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen No. 387, 18/9/39.

sent to the Balkans.¹⁸ This decision represented a victory for the cautious British view over the more pro-active French line - a pattern which would be repeated in the months that followed.

The policy which the War Cabinet and the Supreme War Council had arrived at was set out in clear terms in a telegram to the British representatives in Greece, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Italy, Bulgaria, Roumania and Turkey. This top secret communication was to be burned once read, and its receipt signified by the telegraphing to the Foreign Office of the code word 'Adolf'. It stated that, in the absence of a German attack in the Balkans, it was British policy to keep Italy and the Balkan states neutral. As things stood, there was 'no question of an expedition to Salonika'. However,

Should Germany attack Roumania and press on towards the Aegean, we should aim at forming a military front with Turkey in Thrace. In such circumstances no military commitments would be undertaken at Salonika, except at the invitation of Greece and with the prior agreement of Italy. The rôle of any force sent to Salonika would be limited to stiffening Greek resistance and would be purely defensive.¹⁹

This was all very well so long as the Italians (and indeed the Russians) played no part in the German offensive. Even so, it scarcely represented a decisive intervention in the Balkans. A Balkan neutrality bloc clearly looked preferable to a Balkan expedition, as Sargent subsequently explained to M. Cambon of the French Embassy:

for the moment . . . the neutrality of the Balkan States was the only policy we could recommend . . . Later on in changed circumstances no doubt it might be found feasible, and indeed necessary, to force the pace in the

¹⁸ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 2nd Meeting, 22/9/39.

¹⁹ FO 371/23755 R8575/2613/67 Halifax to Palairret, Campbell, O'Malley, Loraine, Rendel, R. Hoare, and Knatchbull-Hugessen, 13/10/39.

Balkans, in which case the policy of neutrality would go by the board. But in present circumstances we were certainly not in a position to do so.²⁰

This was a fair summation of the British position: there was apparently no fundamental objection to eventual operations in the Balkans, but as things stood, it did not make sense to instigate such action yet. This was in accordance with pre-war planning, which had been based on the assumption - arising out of necessity - that the Allies would remain on the defensive for at least the first year of any future conflict. Limited defensive action in the Balkans, if enemy aggression made it necessary, would fall within the remit of this strategy, but an unprovoked Allied offensive was not yet considered feasible.

At the beginning of October, the Turkish Foreign Minister, Suki Saracoglu, visited Moscow in an attempt to conclude a Soviet-Turkish treaty. Anxious not to alienate the Russians, Saracoglu provided them with details of the proposed Anglo-Franco-Turkish Treaty. The Turkish Government had been at pains to stress that these talks 'represented no departure from their policy of collaboration with Britain and France'.²¹ However, there was concern in London that they should be taking place before the Anglo-Franco-Turkish Treaty had even been signed. More disturbing still was the news that Ribbentrop, the German Foreign Minister, would be in Moscow for talks with the Soviets at the same time as Saracoglu - Sir William Seeds, the British Ambassador in Moscow, was ordered 'to keep in closest touch with M. Saracoglu during the latter's visit', presumably in order to counter any German influence which might be exerted over him.²² The possibility of a three-way talk between the Germans, Russians and Turks made Cadogan 'very uneasy . . . It's a sinister party, and I don't know what it means'.²³ These particular worries came to

²⁰ FO 371/23754 R8094/2613/67 Minute by Sargent 21/9/39.

²¹ FO 371/23861 R8073/7201/44 Minute by Sargent on talk with Aras 22/9/39.

²² CAB 65/1 WM 29 (39) 27/9/39.

²³ ACAD 1/8 (Dairy 1939) Entry for 27/9/39.

nothing, but it soon became clear what the Turkish talks with the Russian Government would cost.

In the meantime, the prospective Treaty had been dealt a further blow by the Turkish insistence upon the insertion of a 'suspense clause' which exempted them from taking any military action in fulfilment of the treaty until their deficiencies in war material had been remedied. This was certainly a blow to the British, but Chamberlain and Halifax agreed, without reference to the War Cabinet, that it should be acceded to - otherwise the Turks simply would not sign the Treaty until their military situation had improved. The diplomatic and moral value of securing the Treaty was clearly uppermost in the minds of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. As Halifax informed the War Cabinet, '[t]he signature of an Agreement with Turkey would be a diplomatic success for this country, such as we badly needed at the moment. If, on the contrary, we failed to secure an Agreement with Turkey, we should suffer a severe diplomatic defeat'.²⁴ It came to appear more and more that a treaty - *any* treaty - was preferable to no treaty at all.

Just as it appeared that agreement might finally be reached on the Turkish Treaty, news began to reach London that the Russians were demanding that certain changes be made to it before they would agree to a Russo-Turkish agreement. In particular, they wanted a further suspense clause to operate exempting Turkey in the event of Britain and the Soviet Union going to war against each other, and in addition for the Turks to abstain from involvement in any British action taken in fulfilment of the guarantees given to Greece and Roumania. As Halifax informed the War Cabinet, such an amendment would be 'most unsatisfactory', and threw the whole treaty into question. It was Chamberlain himself who took the initiative in deciding the British response:

²⁴ CAB 65/1 WM 24 (39) 23/9/39.

The present [he announced] might be one of the important psychological moments of the war, since there was evidence that Germany and perhaps other countries were wavering in their attitude. It might, therefore, be of great advantage to us that by accepting the Soviet demands we should secure not only the signature of our Treaty with Turkey with the concurrence of the U.S.S.R., but also the signature of a Turco-Soviet Pact. The world would then see Great Britain, France, Turkey and the U.S.S.R. entering into agreements with one another or with one another's concurrence, and would thus be enabled to judge the hollowness of Germany's boast of an alliance with the U.S.S.R.

Even Churchill 'agreed generally' with this far-sighted assessment, and the War Cabinet agreed on these grounds to accept the proposed amendments if Turkey chose to do the same.²⁵ On the face of it, this was giving away a lot in return for the perceived psychological advantage which the signature of a treaty would bring. Lying behind it, however, was the realisation that the Turks might enter the war anyway in defence of her interests, regardless of the specific terms of the Treaty. Halifax, taking notes during the War Cabinet discussion, wrote that '[e]ven if Italy did come in against us, Turkey w[oul]d come in Treaty or no Treaty'.²⁶

The French proved to be less willing to compromise the Turkish Treaty for the sake of the Russians. On 9 October, Cambon delivered to the Foreign Office what Halifax sadly described as 'an unqualified refusal to agree with the views of His Majesty's Government'. Sir Eric Phipps was ordered 'to seek an immediate interview with M. Daladier in order to convey to him a personal appeal from the Prime Minister begging him to reconsider his present decision which, if persisted in, may we are convinced have the most dangerous and

²⁵ CAB 65/1 WM 39 (39) 6/10/39.

²⁶ FO 371/23748 R8523/661/67 Notes by Halifax taken at War Cabinet, 6/10/39.

incalculable consequences'.²⁷ This was a bit rich - it was only a few days earlier that Halifax had given the War Cabinet the option of ditching the treaty altogether - but it seemed to have some effect. Halifax was able to report the following day that the French position had modified, and that they now seemed likely to accept the original changes after all.²⁸ However, this was never put to the test. On 18 October, Halifax announced to his War Cabinet colleagues the breakdown of Saracoglu's talks with Molotov. The Anglo-Franco-Turkish Treaty was finally signed, without the Russian amendments but with the 'suspense clause' intact, on the following day.

What did the much-delayed treaty actually comprise? In a telegram to Sir Miles Lampson in Egypt, Halifax set out the five main points: 1) Britain and France would come to the assistance of Turkey if she was attacked by a European power, or if an aggressive act by a European power led to war in the Mediterranean in which Turkey became embroiled; 2) Turkey would come to the assistance of Britain and France if they were involved in war in the Mediterranean, or had to implement their guarantees to either Roumania or Greece; 3) there would be immediate consultation about the best form of response to any other act of aggression which might threaten the interests of all or any of the signatories; 4) the treaty would last for fifteen years; and 5) Turkey would not be compelled to enter into hostilities against the Soviet Union as a result of the treaty.²⁹ All of this was subject to a suspense clause on the lines previously requested by the Turks. Did such an agreement justify the time and effort expended on it? Halifax's reaction was one of measured relief: in a letter to Lord Gort, Commander-in-Chief of the British forces in France, he professed himself

²⁷ FO 371/23748 R8567/661/67 Halifax to Phipps No. 374, 9/10/39.

²⁸ CAB 65/1 WM 43 (39) 10/10/39.

²⁹ FO 371/23749 R9111/661/67 Halifax to Lampson No. 774, 18/10/39. The full text of the Treaty (in French) can be found in FO 371/25018 R3352/542/44.

very glad that we have succeeded in bringing off the Turkish Treaty. It would have been a bad setback if we had not, and I think the fact of our having succeeded will have useful repercussions . . . it is a diplomatic score over Germany: it will have cheered up many of the smaller neutrals in that part of the world and will not have been without its effect on the United States. . . . The intrinsic value is at the same time less than it was when we first talked about it, having regard to the position of Italy.³⁰

Leaving aside the psychological value of the Treaty, if it were to mean anything in practice, the Turks would have to be supplied with sufficient resources to render them effective allies. But, as with the Poles (and subsequently the Finns), the question was how to give such support without compromising Britain's own military position. In September, the War Cabinet had authorised British military commanders in the Mediterranean and Middle East to discuss military questions with the Turks.³¹ In October, General Kazim Orbay, one of Turkey's most senior military figures, visited London to discuss Turkey's military requirements in the event of war. An earlier visit by Orbay, in June 1939, had ended in frustration on both sides: the British had been taken aback by the size and scale of the Turkish demands, and Orbay had left virtually empty-handed. The War Cabinet were anxious lest this should be repeated, and held a discussion prior to Orbay's arrival to determine exactly how much support could be offered. The Chiefs of Staff rejected a proposal to offer Anglo-French troops for the defence of Turkey's Thracian frontier, on the grounds that the troops were needed elsewhere. This left the supply of war material, rather than men, as the only viable offer. However, the military were adamant that nothing could be spared, and Chatfield had to report that the best hope of satisfying the Turks lay in a convoluted scheme involving reselling Turkish tobacco to the Spaniards in return for arms

³⁰ FO 800/328 Hal/39/44 Halifax to Gort 20/10/39.

³¹ CAB 65/1 WM 14 (39) 13/9/39.

which could then go to Turkey. Faced with the prospect of being ‘much embarrassed in his dealings with General Orbay by the emptiness of the offers we could make’, Chatfield urged that this proposal be investigated urgently. The Chancellor of the Exchequer was ordered to take the appropriate soundings.³²

A committee, comprising Chatfield, Churchill, Hore-Belisha, Kingsley Wood, Hankey and the Chiefs of Staff, was set up in order to consider how best to proceed.³³ This ‘Assistance to Turkey Committee’ met on 26 October, and agreed that Orbay should be told ‘that in the event of actual or threatened aggression against Turkey we should be prepared to lend assistance with naval forces provided they had suitably defended bases’.³⁴ This could scarcely be expected to satisfy the Turks, but it was at least an honest assessment. The War Cabinet approved the suggestion, and Churchill received Orbay on 1 November to deliver this promise.³⁵ Unfortunately for the British, the Turks were reluctant to be fobbed off by this. In the face of accusations that the promise of naval assistance was ‘intended to whittle down our obligations under the Anglo-Turkish Treaty’,³⁶ Halifax was forced to issue a clarification via Knatchbull-Hugessen: Churchill’s statement was ‘merely an indication of the nature of the assistance we are prepared to render’ which ‘does not and could not affect the terms of the Treaty’.³⁷ Nevertheless, Turkish suspicions had been aroused, and the episode can only have reinforced the impression created by events in Poland: that Britain could not be relied upon to back up her treaty commitments with armed force.

Keeping war out of the Balkans still seemed to be the most sensible policy, from the British point of view. The best hope of securing this was still thought to lie in the

³² CAB 65/1 WM 36 (39) 4/10/39.

³³ CAB 65/1 WM 54 (39) 20/10/39.

³⁴ Quoted in Gilbert, *At the Admiralty* p. 296.

³⁵ CAB 65/1 WM 66 (39) 31/10/39.

³⁶ CAB 65/2 WM 103 (39) 4/12/39.

³⁷ FO 371/23869 R10358/7378/44 Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen No. 644, 24/11/39.

creation of some kind of 'Balkan bloc'. Halifax reported to the War Cabinet on 26 October that things were now moving in a promising direction: there was a chance that Roumania and Bulgaria would come to an agreement over the disputed territory of Southern Dobrudja, and Italo-Yugoslav relations were also said to be improving. What he now suggested, however, went even further than had previously been anticipated. 'It was very important', he announced in connection with the proposed Balkan bloc, 'that a suitable place should be found for Italy in this project'. Chamberlain agreed, stressing the need 'to avoid taking any action which might prejudice our chances of securing Italian co-operation in the plan'.³⁸ Italian neutrality had opened up a range of new possibilities, some far-fetched, some more realistic. This scheme had the merit of coinciding British and Italian interests: both, for the time being at least, were anxious that the war should not spread to the Balkans, and both saw the creation of a Balkan bloc as a good way of achieving this.³⁹ The British Ambassador was instructed to raise the matter with Count Ciano without delay. Loraine replied, however, that such talk was rather premature. In a carefully argued telegram, he produced a long list of reasons why it would not be a good idea to raise 'highly political issues' with the Italian Government at that time. He felt instead that events, which were in any case moving in the direction desired by Britain, should be left to take their course, and was reluctant for the time being to raise the matter with Ciano.⁴⁰ Halifax told the War Cabinet that, in view of Loraine's arguments, he was inclined to put the matter on hold, and did so.⁴¹ It was not long, however, before it came back into consideration.

It would be misleading to suggest that the Allied attitude towards the Balkans was entirely one of pacification. Indeed, one of the most fundamental differences between the

³⁸ CAB 65/1 WM 61 (39) 26/10/39.

³⁹ See Frank Marzari 'Projects for an Italian-led Balkan Bloc of Neutrals, September - December 1939' *Historical Journal* XIII, 4 (1970).

⁴⁰ FO 371/23755 R9380/2613/67 Loraine to Halifax No. 1078, 26/10/39.

British and French Governments arose over the question of opening up a Balkan front in the war against Germany. The French were careful not to appear too eager for such an extension: in the Supreme War Council meeting of 17 November, Daladier stressed that it 'would now be too ambitious to think in terms of a Salonika front', but nevertheless urged that preliminary steps towards this end should be taken. Chamberlain was unenthusiastic, pointing out the danger of antagonising Italy by taking action in the Balkans, as well as the lack of available resources for any such action.⁴² On the ground, however, there were signs that the French were going further than they were prepared to admit. General Weygand, who had been put in charge of French troops in the Mediterranean and Middle East, seemed, to the British at least, to be hell-bent on paving the way for a Salonika front regardless of the consequences. Early in the war, Knatchbull-Hugessen anxiously reported a conversation with Weygand in which the General had advocated immediate occupation of Salonika in order to forestall Italian action in the Balkans. Sargent observed that Weygand's apparent conviction 'that a military campaign in the Balkans is necessary precisely because we are *not* sure of Italy' was at odds with the British view that such action was only possible if Italian neutrality was assured. 'I do not understand this reasoning', he confessed.⁴³ By the end of November, Weygand's indiscretions were becoming so frequent that Sargent was forced to write to Ismay to urge that 'something ought to be done to see that he is curbed'. He suggested either a quiet word with the French military representatives in the Anglo-French liaison, or else an approach to the French Government by Sir Ronald Campbell.⁴⁴

In the meantime, the Turks had sent another senior official to London: Numan Menemencioglu, the Secretary-General of the Turkish Foreign Office. Like Orbay, he

⁴¹ CAB 65/1 WM 63 (39) 28/10/39.

⁴² CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 3rd Meeting, 17/11/39.

⁴³ FO 371/23819 R7324/399/22 Knatchbull-Hugessen to Halifax No. 423, 10/9/39; minute by Sargent 16/9/39.

sought British assurances that the recently signed treaty would be more than a mere facade. In particular, he sought the supply of anti-tank and anti-aircraft guns, without which the suspense clause would not be rescinded. These points were made forcefully by Numan in an interview with Halifax on 29 November. However, the Secretary of State for War, Hore-Belisha, was adamant at the following day's War Cabinet that the Turkish demands were not only impossible to meet, but were also misleading as such weaponry was not, in fact, needed for the defence of Turkish borders. Halifax accepted this and urged that Chatfield, who was shortly to meet Numan, should be 'very firm' in explaining it to him.⁴⁵ On 12 December, however, the War Cabinet agreed that the question should now be considered on political rather than military grounds, and that for the sake of the Anglo-Turkish alliance it was necessary to supply the Turks with some of the armaments they requested. Halifax argued that there was a danger that the Turks would otherwise start to drift back towards the German orbit, and Chatfield was now authorised to offer Numan up to 150 anti-tank guns.⁴⁶ Numan left London apparently well satisfied with the fruits of his visit, and proceeded to Paris hopeful of obtaining similar results there. It was even thought possible that the 'suspense clause' might be lifted if the French were equally forthcoming. The fact that Britain had also been forced to buy up large quantities of Turkish sultanas and nuts grated slightly with the War Cabinet, but on the whole, as Sir John Simon concluded, the talks with Numan had been 'fairly satisfactory' from the British point of view.⁴⁷

During an exhaustive War Cabinet discussion of the position in the Balkans and the Middle East on 14 December, the pros and cons of creating a neutral Balkan bloc were once more debated at length. Halifax, hedging his bets, contended that since it was impossible to know how events in the Balkans would turn out, it was necessary to prepare

⁴⁴ FO 371/23756 R9929/3613/67 Sargent to Ismay 25/11/39.

⁴⁵ CAB 65/2 WM 99 (39) 30/11/39.

⁴⁶ CAB 65/2 WM 112 (39) 12/12/39.

⁴⁷ CAB 65/2 WM 118 (39) 18/12/39.

for every contingency. However, the extension of hostilities to the Balkans raised questions of a wider strategic nature. On the one hand, South-East Europe seemed to represent a more profitable angle of attack on Germany than her more heavily defended western frontier. On the other hand, any such concerted action on the part of the Allies would not only require their forces on the Western Front to be denuded for the purpose, but would also risk bringing Italy into the war, if she had not already entered it. The security of the Franco-Belgian frontier was a particular source of worry, and Chamberlain suggested that action only be taken in the Balkans after defences on that stretch of the Western Front had been tightened up. This would require further attempts to secure Belgian collaboration, making Belgium an unlikely yet significant factor in Britain's Balkan policy. Chamberlain concisely summed up the gist of a prolonged and not very decisive discussion: if a German offensive in the Balkans in the spring of 1940 were to be countered by the Allies, preparatory measures were necessary sooner rather than later; however, successful intervention in such a case would not be possible without Italy's 'benevolent neutrality'. An approach to Italy was not considered to be wise at that moment; therefore Britain's policy should be 'to go ahead with preparations for intervention in the Balkans, so far as this could be done without in any way antagonising Italy. This was the dominant consideration which should govern all action by the Allies in the Balkans'.⁴⁸ The effect of this restriction was to limit the scope of Allied activity in the area.

The following day, the War Cabinet considered a proposal by Loraine that he should now inform the Italian Government that the Allies were investigating the possible creation of a neutral Balkan bloc. Clearly, his earlier reservations about raising the matter with the Italians had now been dispelled. The War Cabinet appear to have made no decision on this question, preferring to wait on a speech due to be made by Count Ciano to

⁴⁸ CAB 65/2 WM 115 (39) 14/12/39.

the Italian Chamber the following day.⁴⁹ As Loraine subsequently reported, Ciano's words 'strengthen my opinion that Italy would take it ill if either belligerent intervened in that area [the Balkans] whether politically or militarily'.⁵⁰ This seemed to indicate that no Allied action in the Balkans was desirable. Cadogan, however, rightly pointed out that if no action was taken now, then there was nothing that the Allies could do in the event of future hostilities in the region. 'Even the conjuror has to insert the rabbit into the hat before he produces it at the appropriate moment', he observed. 'We shan't put up much resistance unless we plan it beforehand . . . no one wants to turn fire-hoses on houses that aren't alight, but that is no argument against maintaining an efficient fire-brigade.'⁵¹

At its fourth meeting, on 19 December, the Supreme War Council once more attempted to arrive at a policy on South-Eastern Europe. Daladier, anxious to play down British fears of any precipitate French action in the area, reassured Chamberlain that there 'was no thought in the French Government's mind of sending an Expeditionary Force at once to the Balkans'. Their intention was rather to offer encouragement and help to Turkey, Roumania, Greece and Yugoslavia to join together in a united front against aggression. He agreed with Chamberlain's fears about depleting forces on the Western Front by sending troops to the Balkans, but at the same time advocated staff talks with the four countries mentioned in order to prepare the ground for possible Allied military intervention in the future. Chamberlain then raised the problem of Italy's attitude towards such preliminary measures, and urged consultation with Italy prior to any Allied initiative in the Balkans. Daladier was less than convinced on this latter point; nevertheless, it was agreed (as the War Cabinet had agreed) that there could be 'no question of the despatch of any Franco-British armed forces even on a limited scale, unless Italy is at least a definitely benevolent neutral. The attitude of Italy is . . . an overriding consideration and it is

⁴⁹ CAB 65/2 WM 116 (39) 15/12/39.

⁵⁰ FO 371/23758 R11637/2613/67 Loraine to Halifax No. 1244, 17/12/39.

essential to avoid offending her sensibilities'. Loraine was therefore to keep Ciano informed of any developments, emphasising 'the preparatory and defensive character of the steps proposed against possible aggression in the Balkans by Germany and/or Russia'.⁵² Only small steps were deemed possible in the circumstances - and consequently, only modest results could be secured.

The Foreign Office were uneasy at the conclusions reached by the Supreme War Council, particularly the decision to let the Italians in on Allied intentions. Cadogan was again moved to put pen to paper at some length, arguing that it was impossible to tell the Italians what the Allies had in mind for the Balkans because no concrete decisions had yet been reached. In any case, Mussolini could scarcely be trusted to keep any information he was vouchsafed secret from the Germans. 'I am rather frightened', he wrote, 'of falling between 2 stools - of telling the Italians we are planning something (which they will pass on to the Germans) and of not being able to make plans for an effective Balkan expedition (largely owing to Italian hostility, or malevolent neutrality)'.⁵³ Perhaps as a result, Loraine was not, for the time being at least, authorised to raise the question of possible Allied action in the Balkans with Count Ciano. The French were less circumspect. Their Ambassador in Rome, André François-Poncet, saw Ciano on 24 December, and proceeded to let the cat out of the bag as regards proposed Allied action, and potential co-operation with Italy, in the Balkans. According to Ciano's account of the meeting, the Ambassador passed off these ideas as 'only his personal opinion'. Ciano does not seem to have been fooled, commenting that 'it is important to note that France has taken the initiative'.⁵⁴ The approach apparently yielded no ill effects, from the Allied point of view. 'My French colleague's initiative has broken the ice, I think successfully,' reported Loraine, 'and I find

⁵¹ FO 371/23758 R11637/2613/67 Minute by Cadogan 19/12/39

⁵² CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 4th Meeting, 19/12/39.

⁵³ FO 371/23758 R11838/2613/67 Minute by Cadogan 24/12/39.

⁵⁴ M. Muggeridge (ed.) *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943* (London: Heinemann, 1947) p. 188 Entry for 24/12/39.

Italian Minister for Foreign Affairs' reaction as hopeful as we could expect'.⁵⁵ Halifax, too, was apparently well satisfied. He told the War Cabinet, back after its Christmas break, that the best policy was to wait for Ciano to raise the matter again with the French Ambassador. If this did not happen, either François-Poncet or Loraine should take the initiative in raising the matter with him themselves. The War Cabinet raised no objection to this course.⁵⁶

When, after a few days, Ciano had failed to follow up his earlier comments, Loraine paid him a visit to fish for more clues. British and Italian aims as regards the Balkans were, he emphasised, 'very substantially similar'. He hoped that Ciano had not forgotten a letter which Halifax had sent him some six weeks earlier,⁵⁷ which 'opened the door to an exchange of views between us at any moment the Italian Government though[t] it desirable and ready for this'. The barrier, as ever, was the attitude of Mussolini, who, Ciano reported, 'was not ready to talk'. Loraine drew comfort from Ciano's own pro-Allied sympathies, but warned Halifax that 'Signor Mussolini's axis policy may be dragging at its anchors but it has not yet gone adrift'.⁵⁸ Whilst the possibility of co-operation to ensure Balkan neutrality appeared still to be on the cards, therefore, it was clearly not feasible unless and until the Duce could be induced, by words or deeds, to change his tune.

The final part of the Turkish jigsaw was put in place in January 1940, with the signing in Paris of economic agreements to accompany the political treaty. The British and French Governments agreed to provide the Turks with a £25 million armaments credit, a £15 million gold loan, and special arrangements for the import of Turkish chrome and

⁵⁵ FO 371/23822 R12132/399/22 Loraine to Halifax No. 1283, 27/12/39.

⁵⁶ CAB 65/5 WM 3 (40) 4/1/40.

⁵⁷ Ciano's impression on receiving this letter had been that it 'was very courteous but not of particular importance', which suggests that Halifax's words had not managed to convey the intended impression. *Ciano's Diary* p. 178, entry for 30/11/39.

⁵⁸ FO 371/24884 R512/5/67 Loraine to Halifax No. 32, 10/1/40.

agricultural produce (which would formerly have gone to Germany). In addition, Britain provided a £2 million loan to liquidate frozen balances in the Anglo-Turkish clearing account. In return, the Turks agreed to rescind the suspense clause in the Anglo-Franco-Turkish Treaty as soon as they received the gold.⁵⁹ Inskip, who had earlier expressed concern over Turkish demands, conceded that the agreement ‘is a good one, and will have an unfavourable effect on Germany’, although Britain had been forced to pay a ‘high price’.⁶⁰ Although the Treaty was never to come into operation, there is no denying that British policy towards Turkey achieved what it had set out to achieve, and was therefore, judged by its own criteria, a success.

The conclusion of the political and economic agreements, combined with the growing interest in operations in Scandinavia, meant that Turkey was seldom discussed at War Cabinet level in the months that followed. Nevertheless, there were still challenges to face. In a telegram sent on 23 February, congratulating Knatchbull-Hugessen on his sterling work to date, Halifax (or rather Bowker, Sargent and Cadogan, who had drafted the communication) acknowledged the problem of ‘how far we can supply Turkey’s present requirements in raw materials and the manufactured goods which she used in large part to get from Germany’.⁶¹ This goes some way towards answering Millman’s criticism that the British failed to grasp what was required of an alliance with Turkey. Even so, Knatchbull-Hugessen frequently gave vent in his diary to his irritation with the ‘spending departments’ which, he bitingly observed, ‘think only of cheese-paring and don’t give a damn for the unfortunate political reactions’.⁶² Knatchbull-Hugessen’s criticisms have some validity. Britain regarded Turkey primarily as a pawn in the international game, and conducted her policy on this basis. Naturally, the Turks saw things slightly differently.

⁵⁹ CAB 65/5 WM 7 (40) 9/1/40.

⁶⁰ INKP 2/1 (Inskip Diary) Entry for 10/1/40.

⁶¹ FO 371/25018 R2456/542/44 Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen, unnumbered personal letter, 23/2/40.

⁶² KNAT 1/13 (Knatchbull-Hugessen Diary) Entry for 8/12/39.

These attitudes are only to be expected. Had war struck into the heart of the Balkans, the Turks would soon enough have stopped pressing the British and French to buy their sultanas. Turkish demands for war material were a slightly different matter, but should also be seen in the context of the absence of war in the Balkans during this period. British policy centred on safeguarding her position in the event of Germany, with or without Italy or Russia, launching an offensive in South-Eastern Europe. So long as this offensive failed to materialise, the Turks can be forgiven for seeking to protect their own economic and military interests.

Still the questions remained: should a Balkan front be opened up? If so, when? The decision not to make such a move for the time being was heavily influenced by developments in Scandinavia. British and French minds were increasingly moving in the direction of action against German imports of Swedish iron ore, cloaked in the guise of assistance to the beleaguered Finns. Again the interrelatedness of policies comes to the fore: concerted action in Scandinavia might close the door on any Balkan operations. Cadogan made this point in no uncertain terms in a minute of 18 January: the proposed interventions, he claimed, were of a different character (Scandinavia being offensive and the Balkans being largely defensive), and the only way to avoid having to choose between the two was to create 'a strategic reserve that could be used for either purpose'. Halifax agreed to write to Lord Chatfield to ask whether the two operations were, in fact, mutually exclusive.⁶³ Chatfield's reply shed little light on the matter: whilst admitting to a 'cleavage of Anglo-French opinion . . . as to what the major Allied strategy should be in the Balkans', he declined to give any answer to the specific enquiry on the grounds that it 'would be incomplete and unsatisfactory and I must therefore ask you to give me a little

⁶³ FO 371/24884 R853/5/67 Minute by Cadogan 18/1/40; minute by Halifax 19/1/40; Halifax to Chatfield 23/1/40.

time before I send a reply'.⁶⁴ In any case, until the Balkan situation, or the war situation as a whole, altered fundamentally one way or another, there was little more that *could* be decided. As with many other areas of foreign policy at this time, it was largely a case of awaiting developments.

The prospect of a Balkan front was, however, visibly receding. Philip Nichols reassured an anxious Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen on 12 January 1940 that there was 'no fundamental difference of opinion' between the British and French Governments on the question of intervention, despite the existence of 'a tendency in French circles, headed, we think, by General Weygand, to wish to go further and faster than the circumstances warrant or the two Governments have as yet authorised'.⁶⁵ Sargent subsequently observed that

so long as the German Government do not commit any egregious mistake which would give us an opportunity of intervening, it is difficult to see why the present indecisive process of manoeuvring for position in the Balkans should not continue indefinitely, without its ever leading to a crisis.⁶⁶

At the same time, there were indications that the Balkan states themselves were taking steps to resolve their differences with one another. The War Cabinet enthusiastically greeted reports that Mussolini was to meet the Roumanian king in an attempt to moderate in the Roumanian-Hungarian dispute over Transylvania.⁶⁷ A further boost was a report from Knatchbull-Hugessen that, according to Saracoglu (who had recently returned from talks with his opposite numbers in Yugoslavia and Bulgaria), the Balkan Entente powers were shortly to hold staff conversations with a view to co-ordinating 'plans for mutual

⁶⁴ FO 371/24886 R2623/5/67 Chatfield to Halifax 26/2/40.

⁶⁵ FO 371/25015 R361/316/44 Nichols to Knatchbull-Hugessen 12/1/40.

⁶⁶ FO 371/24886 R 1864/5/67 Minute by Sargent 1/2/40.

⁶⁷ CAB 65/5 WM 30 (40) 2/2/40. Halifax suggested that 'there seemed . . . reason to hope that, in general, the situation was better than we had thought'.

defence against outside aggression'. Halifax termed this development 'very satisfactory'.⁶⁸ By the middle of February, Halifax was able to tell Chatfield that preparations for action in South-East Europe should be continued primarily to 'leave the enemy guessing as to our intentions'.⁶⁹ A combination of factors - the lack of a German or Russian offensive in the area, continued Italian neutrality, Allied preoccupation with Scandinavia, the perceived improvement in inter-Balkan relations - meant that the Balkans were increasingly becoming marginalised in British strategic thinking.

In the brief lull between the conclusion of the Soviet-Finnish war in March and the explosion of activity in Norway in April, the Balkan situation was subject to a reassessment. The collapse of Finland had made a bad impression on many small neutral states, and in an attempt to salvage something of the British reputation, Halifax suggested to the War Cabinet that he might pay a visit to Turkey. Whilst a visit which achieved nothing might be more damaging, it would at the very least 'have the merit of making Germany, Russia and Italy wonder exactly what was afoot'. The matter was referred to Knatchbull-Hugessen for his views.⁷⁰ At the same time, it was decided to clarify British policy in South-East Europe by recalling all British heads of mission in the area to London for consultation. 'Such a meeting', Halifax informed them, 'would not only give concrete evidence that we are actively interesting ourselves in the Balkans but should prove a very useful discussion and assist in the maintenance of a coherent and constructive policy in South Eastern Europe'.⁷¹ The very fact that such measures were deemed necessary is suggestive of a lack of confidence in British policy among the Balkan states. Whether this could be remedied by words alone, or even treaties and declarations, is open to question. In

⁶⁸ CAB 65/5 WM 39 (40) 12/2/40.

⁶⁹ CAB 127/10 (Ismaay Papers) Halifax to Chatfield 16/2/40.

⁷⁰ CAB 65/6 WM 72 (40) 19/3/40; FO 371/25018 R3573/542/44 Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen No. 181 DIPP, 21/3/40.

⁷¹ FO 371/24887 R4010/5/67 Halifax to Knatchbull-Hugessen, Palairet, Rendel, R. I. Campbell, O'Malley, & R. Hoare, Circular No. 26, 25/3/40.

time of war, as events elsewhere were to show, it was action (and successful action at that) which was the most effective means of persuasion.

Halifax's proposed visit to Turkey found favour in the Foreign Office and elsewhere. Cadogan, in a minute of 28 March, raised the possibility of including Greece and even Italy in the itinerary, although he added 'I don't quite like the idea of a Balkan tour'.⁷² Eden wrote to Halifax reporting the Dominion High Commissioners' wish that the visit take place as soon as possible. Cadogan, however, pointed out that 'one of the main purposes of the visit would be to sound the Turkish Government about an operation which could not be ready, I understand, for about 6 weeks; so there may not be very great urgency'.⁷³ Presumably, the operation to which he refers was the planned bombing raid on Soviet oil installations in the Caucasus. Although strategically valuable, any agreement reached on such matters would obviously have to remain confidential, and therefore could not have the desired effect on public opinion. The 'public relations' value of the visit was of central importance: whatever else it achieved, it had to be *seen* to be a success.

Preparations for the meeting of Balkan ministers, scheduled (with unfortunate timing) to begin on 8 April, included the submission by the Chiefs of Staff of a paper detailing possible military action in the area. They reiterated that no British or French troops could be despatched there 'unless Italy is at least a definitely benevolent neutral'. Furthermore, the Italian attitude to any such involvement was 'an overriding consideration and it is essential to avoid offending her sensibilities'. This was a line of argument worthy of the Foreign Office itself. However, the possibility of some sort of military action in the Balkans was conceded in the remainder of the paper:

Whilst securing British and French interests in the Near East and Africa against possible Italian hostility, our military policy should be directed

⁷² FO 371/24887 R3490/5/67 Minute by Cadogan 28/3/40.

⁷³ FO 371/24887 R3990/5/67 Eden to Halifax 27/3/40; minute by Cadogan 28/3/40.

towards the following objectives:- (a) The retention of the Bosphorus and the Dardanelles in the hands of the Anglo-French-Turkish coalition; (b) In anticipation of the spread of war to the Balkans, the development of the powers of resistance of potential Balkan Allies; (c) In the event of war spreading to the Balkans, the stiffening of Balkan resistance by Allied troops and material as far as circumstances permit.

The paper ended by setting out the governing considerations of Allied policy in the Balkans: it was to be 'purely defensive'; no commitments to action should be given, nothing should be done to upset Italy or Bulgaria, and diplomatic action should be taken to push Bulgaria into co-operation with the 'Balkan coalition' (presumably a reference to the Balkan Entente).⁷⁴ For a paper supposedly concerned with military action in the Balkans, it does little to shed light on what form such action might actually take.

The British representatives to Turkey, Roumania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Greece duly arrived in London in the first week of April. On 8 and 11 April they met with their Foreign Office colleagues, and on 15 April they held talks with the Chiefs of Staff. The latter meeting yielded little of substance - the minutes simply record a string of points made by the Chiefs of Staff and the diplomats.⁷⁵ The two meetings in the Foreign Office, however, are of more interest. Cadogan records that the first of these, on 8 April, lasted some three hours, and that, whilst it was useful to both sides, it was 'a lengthy & rather time-wasting performance'.⁷⁶ It is interesting to note that he did not attend the second (Lord Halifax chaired both meetings). In addition to the Balkan representatives, Sir Percy Loraine and Sir William Seeds (theoretically still Ambassador to the U.S.S.R.) both took part - a reflection of the crucial importance of both Italy and Russia to Balkan stability.

⁷⁴ FO 371/24888 R4666/5/67 Paper COS (40) 285, 6/4/40.

⁷⁵ FO 371/24888 R4951/5/67 Papers S/50/23/3, 15/4/40.

The first meeting, on 8 April, concentrated on three burning issues. The first of these was the general Balkan situation, and how best to turn it to the advantage of the Allies. A whistle-stop tour of the attitudes of the various Balkan countries led to the conclusion that progress was steadily being made (without the need for much direct action) towards the goal of ‘the general consolidation of the Balkan States’. An undertaking by Britain or France to deal, in the peace settlement at the end of the war, with the vexed issue of Dobrudja (which was currently part of Roumania, but was claimed by Bulgaria) was the only concrete proposal made. Next up was the recent approach by Maisky suggesting the resumption of Anglo-Soviet trade talks - a strange choice of subject for the meeting. The gist of this discussion was that, as Seeds put it, the proposals should be followed up ‘but with a stiff upper lip’. Finally, the Turkish attitude towards the Soviet Union was considered, in relation to the proposed attack on Russian oil facilities at Baku in the Caucasus, and also the proposed imposition of contraband control operations in the Black Sea. Halifax was keen on the Baku project, but opposition from Knatchbull-Hugessen and Seeds forced him to agree to the postponement of such an attack, at least until the autumn. Similarly, proposed contraband control operations in the Black Sea were considered to face ‘insuperable’ difficulties, and as a result could not yet be implemented. Turkey had to be convinced of Allied strength before she would consider cutting her ties with the Soviets and co-operating in either of these enterprises.⁷⁷

It seems that the discussions were due to continue the following day, but the German invasion of Norway put paid to that idea, and they did not reconvene until 11 April. As Knatchbull-Hugessen noted in his diary, ‘the Scandinavian affair has thrown our programme out’.⁷⁸ This time, four topics were debated in depth. The first was the critical

⁷⁶ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 8/4/40.

⁷⁷ FO 371/24902 R4832/4156/67 ‘Meetings of His Majesty’s Representatives in South-Eastern Europe held at the Foreign Office on April 8 and 11, 1940’, 11/4/40.

⁷⁸ KNAT 1/13 (Diary 1939-40) Entry for 11/4/40 (written 21/4/40).

and much discussed question of whether the British and French guarantees to Roumania should be extended to cover attack by the Soviet Union. Once again, the critical factor was the attitude of Turkey, and after much discussion it was agreed that British help should indeed be offered to Roumania if Russia attacked her, but that this help would be dependent on the positions adopted by Turkey, Italy, and even Bulgaria. Bulgaria was, in fact, the next topic of discussion. Rendel pointed out that Soviet, rather than German, influence remained the greatest danger there, and possible ways of reducing this influence were raised, including the despatch of a letter from the King to the Bulgarian Prince Regent, Turkish diplomatic action in Sophia, and the giving of an assurance that Britain and France would respect Bulgarian neutrality so long as other nations did the same. Next up was the question of securing Italian intervention in support of Hungary or Roumania if either was attacked by Russia. It was suggested that both the Hungarian and Roumanian governments should approach Italy and urge her to discuss this question with Britain and France. The Turks (yet again!) might also be employed to sound the Yugoslavs on the possibility of Italian troops passing through en route to assisting Hungary or Roumania. Finally, the question of Halifax's proposed visit to Turkey was raised. Knatchbull-Hugessen argued that, for the time being at least, talks with the Turkish Government would be better conducted by himself, with the possibility of Halifax going over at a later date, and the others were inclined to agree with him. And with that, the meeting ended.⁷⁹

What had these talks actually achieved? Rather like many Supreme War Council meetings, their effect was more along the lines of ruling things out than deciding on action. The delegates had thrown cold water over the proposed Baku operation, the possibility of contraband control being extended to the Black Sea, and the suggestion that Halifax visit the Balkans for talks. On the other hand, they had given a cautious welcome to the

⁷⁹ FO 371/24902 R4832/4156/67 'Meetings of His Majesty's Representatives in South-Eastern Europe held at the Foreign Office on April 8 and 11, 1940', 11/4/40.

continued pursuit of a trade agreement with the Soviet Union and the extension of the Roumanian guarantee. Turkey was seen as the linchpin of Allied Balkan policy, building on the tripartite treaty of the previous November, although just how keen the Turks would be to carry out what they might reasonably regard as Britain's dirty work in the area remained to be seen. Certainly the British representatives (with the exception of Knatchbull-Hugessen) had left themselves with very little to do on their return to their posts. The general feeling seems to have been one of satisfaction with the way things were developing in the Balkans. With hindsight, this view might appear slightly complacent, but it must be remembered that, until the Allies began to suffer serious reverses in Western Europe at the hands of the Germans, things did indeed appear to be going well. Almost as soon as these meetings were over, however, alarm bells started to ring over a possible Italian attack on Yugoslavia.

On 10 April, Lord Lothian reported on rumours in Washington (said to have emanated from the Italian Embassy) that Italy was 'about to take action against Yugoslavia'.⁸⁰ The very next day, David Kelly reported from Switzerland that Germany was ready to stage an offensive in the Balkans, with the support and co-operation of both the Soviet Union and Italy.⁸¹ At the same time, Harold Caccia was telegraphing from Athens to warn that the Greeks had received the same information from several sources (Geneva, Sofia, and Rome), and that they had also heard of Italian plans to seize Corfu and declare the Adriatic a no-go zone for British contraband control. These and other reports were enough to arouse Foreign Office suspicions that something was afoot, and on 12 April Philip Nichols tried to make some sense of them all. Suspecting that the Italians might choose to strike whilst the Allies were tied up in Scandinavia, he thought that 'the

⁸⁰ FO 371/24961 R4531/1627/22 Lothian to Halifax No. 503, 10/4/40.

⁸¹ VNST 3/7 Kelly to Halifax No. 52 11/4/40. I have been unable to locate this document in the Public Record Office, but the copy in the Vansittart papers is reliable. Kelly's source was the Roumanian Minister in Berne.

Italian move would take the form, on the Norway model, of a rapid occupation of the principal ports on the Dalmatian coast [of Yugoslavia]'. Sargent, never one to be swayed by idle rumours, shared Nichols' apprehension:

I am inclined to think that as events may be moving very swiftly in the Mediterranean in the near future we ought to consider at once what line we and the French would take if Italy were to attack Yugoslavia. Would we, as in the case of Finland and Russia, remain in diplomatic relations with Italy; or would we at once go to war with Italy? It would be wiser to weigh the pros and cons now rather than after the event.

Cadogan endorsed this suggestion, and advised contacting the Turkish Government as well as the French. 'Let us ask both!', Halifax responded; 'I don't know what the Chiefs of Staff might say, but politically I should think it would be very disadvantageous to us to do nothing about it!'.⁸²

The Chiefs of Staff had, in fact, already delivered their views on a military response to Italian aggression. In a paper of 8 April they had noted of the Balkan situation generally: 'Initially we could not spare either land or air forces on any considerable scale to assist the Turks or other Balkan countries . . . The strength of the forces we could employ, and the precise nature of the operations, would depend on the general situation in the Balkans and other theatres of war'.⁸³ A subsequent report by the Anglo-French Allied Military Committee was even more pessimistic:

In the event of Italian aggression on the Dalmatian coast, there is no effective action which we could take short of going to war with Italy. The consequences of involving ourselves in war with Italy at the present juncture would be more serious than anything we should lose by failing to

⁸² FO 371/24939 R4698/58/22 Minutes by Nichols, Sargent, Cadogan and Halifax, 12/4/40.

help the Yugoslavs. . . . In the event of an Italian attack on Corfu, the Allies would be under a direct obligation to implement their guarantee to Greece, and any failure to do so would have disastrous consequences on our whole position in the Balkans. There is nothing we could do, however, short of going to war with Italy.⁸⁴

The parallels with Poland, and also, in a sense, with Finland, are striking. No direct military action was possible, only a general declaration of war against the aggressor. But what would this actually achieve? As the Chiefs of Staff had explained, the Allied military policy in the event of war with Italy ‘would be to render untenable the Italian position in Libya, and eventually in East Africa’.⁸⁵ Such action would scarcely reassure the beleaguered Balkan states that the Allies were able to help them, but it was all that was deemed possible. A declaration of war on Italy would, therefore, be little more than symbolic - and coming on top of the Polish and Finnish affairs might well have done more harm than good to British prestige.

Chamberlain took a similarly pragmatic line in the War Cabinet. The French had suggested that the Allied response to an Italian attack on Yugoslavia should be dependent on the attitude taken by Turkey, Greece and Roumania. Halifax said that he took the opposite view - that these countries would base their policies on whatever the Allies did. Yugoslavia was more likely to resist an invasion if she knew in advance that Britain, France and Turkey would intervene to support her. Waiting for the Balkan states to take the initiative would, he thought, ‘produce a disastrous effect on our position in South Eastern Europe’. In any case, it was agreed, nothing could be decided until the Chiefs of

⁸³ FO 371/24888 R466/5/67 Paper COS (40) 282 (S) ‘Allied Military Policy in the Mediterranean and Middle East in the Event of Italy Entering the War on the Side of Germany’, 8/4/40.

⁸⁴ FO 371/24940 R4986/58/22 Paper MR (40) 20 ‘Military Implications of Italian Aggression on the Dalmatian Coast or Against Corfu’, 18/4/40.

⁸⁵ FO 371/24888 R466/5/67 Paper COS (40) 282 (S) ‘Allied Military Policy in the Mediterranean and Middle East in the Event of Italy Entering the War on the Side of Germany’, 8/4/40.

Staff had once more pronounced on the pros and cons of war against Italy. Once their views had been received, Chamberlain suggested, the course should be as follows: firstly, decide ‘whether the political disadvantages of seeing Yugoslavia over run justified us incurring the risk of becoming involved in war with Italy in order to prevent it’. If the answer to this question was yes, ‘we should have to find out whether we could count on assistance from Turkey’. If the answer to this was also yes, assurances could then be given to the Yugoslavs of British, French and Turkish support.⁸⁶ This typically methodical course of action would have been rather time-consuming, and the danger of being caught on the hop by Italian action before the process had been completed must have been apparent. Nevertheless, the French agreed to modify their stance, and Chamberlain’s suggestion was adopted as Allied policy pending a fuller discussion in the Supreme War Council.⁸⁷

In the meantime, the Foreign Office had taken an ingenious approach to the problem of warning Italy off attacking Yugoslavia without making a definite commitment to intervention. What they did was to insert warnings in the press that the Allies would take a very dim view of any Italian aggression in the Balkans. Halifax instructed Charles Peake in the Ministry of Information to arrange for editorials to this effect in the *Times* of 20 April, the *Sunday Times* of 21 April, and the *Telegraph* of 22 April. ‘On no account must it look like a Government view’, he emphasised. Sure enough, such leader comments duly appeared.⁸⁸ The Foreign Office subsequently went even further, inserting verbatim an article drafted by Peake and Sargent into the *Times* of 3 May. Under the headline ‘Disquieting rumours’, the article (attributed, appropriately, to ‘our diplomatic

⁸⁶ CAB 65/6 WM 96 (40) 18/4/40.

⁸⁷ CAB 65/6 WM 98 (40) 20/4/40.

⁸⁸ FO 371/24942 R5566/58/22 Minute by Halifax 19/4/40. Copies of the relevant articles are also preserved here.

correspondent') referred to indications that the peace in the Balkans might be breached in the near future. 'It is greatly to be hoped', it went on,

. . . that the signs and symptoms which have given rise to these disturbing rumours will soon cease, for it would be the height of rashness to assume that an act of aggression against any one of the Balkan States would not rapidly lead to a wide extension of the war, with incalculable consequences to those concerned.

Telegrams were despatched to the British representatives in Rome, Angora, Athens, Bucharest, Sofia and Belgrade giving the text of the article, and advising that 'these paragraphs have been inspired by His Majesty's Government. If enquiries are addressed to you on this point, you may let it be understood that this is probably the case'.⁸⁹ Such deviousness was probably all that could be done, in view of the War Cabinet's conviction that no firm promises could be given until the matter had been further studied and discussed. It certainly supports the view held by many throughout the world that the *Times* was the official mouthpiece of the British Government, although it was unusual for it to go quite this far.

As the Allied campaign in Norway began to suffer major setbacks, the Supreme War Council met twice within five days, on 23 and 27 April. On both occasions, the Italian threat to Yugoslavia was discussed. At the former meeting, Reynaud was keen to stress that the Allies 'had no direct obligation to go to the assistance of Yugoslavia' if she were attacked by Italy, but nevertheless advocated sending Allied forces to Salonika, with Greek approval, 'to assist the Yugoslavs and any other friendly Balkan forces'. This action, he rather optimistically stated, 'might well result in the Allies having the support of up to 100 Balkan Divisions'. Chamberlain, whilst admitting that Italy's attitude had recently been

⁸⁹ FO 371/24951 R5831/60/22 Copy of the article and these telegrams (despatched 4/5/40).

‘provocative and sometimes insolent’, was reluctant to believe that Mussolini would go so far as to enter the war; instead he would ‘continue to be as disagreeable as possible without actually going to war’. Nevertheless, he conceded that action both to deter, and to meet, Italian aggression should be seriously considered. It was resolved that Allied naval strength in the Mediterranean should be increased, if possible; that further action to deter Italy, such as military movements in North Africa, should be considered; that the Greek attitude towards an Italian attack on Yugoslavia, and the landing of Allied troops at Salonika in response to such an attack should be sought; and that the operational side of a Salonika expedition should be re-examined.⁹⁰ It is difficult to escape the conclusion that, had Italy indeed struck at the Dalmatian coast, all of this time-consuming consultation and consideration would have been rather too little rather too late, but to be fair the signs coming out of Italy were gradually becoming more hopeful, and the urgency behind the matter did seem to be receding.

However, when the Council met on 27 April, Chamberlain now warned: ‘In a few days . . . we might be at war with Italy’, basing this view on recent intelligence that Mussolini had forced the Fascist Grand Council to consent to Italian entry into the war on 1 or 2 May. As for action if Yugoslavia were attacked, Chamberlain raised British concerns about a Salonika expedition, based, he claimed, on ‘our recent experience in Scandinavia’. The vulnerability of such a force to attack from the air was a particular source of worry. He then raised the question of what should be done if the Greeks refused to sanction a Salonika force, or if the resources for such an expedition were unavailable. The Allies risked losing Balkan support if they did nothing, he went on, but the only alternative was a declaration of war on Italy. How would such a war be fought?

⁹⁰ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 8th Meeting, 23/4/40.

His own suggestion was that, in view of internal conditions, Italy might well collapse if she were hit a hard blow at the very outset of the war. If, on the other hand, the Allies did nothing at all for a long time except exercise economic pressure, they would give Mussolini an excellent opportunity of convincing the Italian people that once again they were being starved by “sanctions”. “Sanctions” were a bitter memory in the mind of the Italians and their imposition was the most likely method of uniting them behind the Duce.

The belief that an internal collapse could be brought about without the need for a long military struggle carries echoes of his policy towards Germany. However, his opposition to economic warfare alone was in direct contrast to his earlier views on how best to defeat Hitler. To be fair, these views had been somewhat modified as the war had progressed - Chamberlain now believed that German morale required ‘a good hard punch in the stomach’⁹¹ before it would crumble, similar perhaps to the ‘hard blow’ which he hoped to deal the Italians. What he had in mind was the bombing of Italian industry. ‘This was a form of action which the British Government would be reluctant to undertake,’ he solemnly informed Reynaud, ‘but it was necessary to face unpleasant decisions of this sort if they were to win the war’. Reynaud agreed to discussions on the use of French air bases for this purpose. Finally, it was resolved that soundings should be taken from the Turkish Government as to their attitude should Italy attack Yugoslavia.⁹²

This, then, was the extent of Allied policy towards the Balkans at the end of the Phoney War. The power struggle between the French desire for a Salonika front and the British reluctance to commit a significant force to the area remained largely unresolved - although the actual differences between the two positions was not as great as it might

⁹¹ NC 18/1/1133A Chamberlain to Ida, 3/12/39.

⁹² CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 10th Meeting, 27/4/40.

sometimes have appeared. Britain was prepared to countenance the sending of troops, but only under very specific conditions. The French had agreed that such action should be reactive and defensive rather than pre-emptive. Italy, Turkey, and, to a lesser extent, Greece, were the key determinants of Allied action or inaction. Russian, German and Italian action in the area remained a threat, but the Allied response to such action was dependent upon external factors. Who would invade, and where? Would the move be resisted by the invaded country? How far would the invasion penetrate? What would the reaction of the neighbouring states be? Since these were questions which it was difficult, if not impossible, to answer in advance, there was a limit to how far ahead plans could be made. As elsewhere, the Allies were condemned to wait for their opponents to make the first move - by which time it might well be too late to implement any effective response.

7. SCANDINAVIA: FROM THE MARGINS TO CENTRE STAGE

I have a feeling that Scandinavia may well end by being the chief theatre of war. . .

John Colville, 16 December 1939.¹

If, at the outbreak of the Second World War, it had been suggested to those in charge of British policy that the first concerted clash of arms between the belligerents would occur in Scandinavia, few would have paid much attention to the suggestion. And yet, some seven months later, the extension of the conflict to that part of the world was greeted by those same policy makers not as a surprise so much as a welcome and promising development - one which, indeed, many of them had striven to bring about. This attitude was one which they came swiftly to regret. The British and French failure to secure a foothold in Norway, following the German invasion of both that country and her close neighbour Denmark, led directly to the fall from office of the Chamberlain wartime administration. An earlier crisis in the same region, this time over Finland, had precipitated the downfall of the French régime of Edouard Daladier, as well as weakening Chamberlain's government. Scarcely mentioned at the outset of the conflict, Norway, Sweden and Finland came to dominate British strategic thinking and planning during the first four months of 1940. When actual hostilities there began, the eyes of the world turned to this previously neglected corner of North-West Europe. The failure of British policy in Scandinavia, and in a sense of Britain's entire Phoney War strategy, cast a dark cloud over the wartime achievements of the Chamberlain wartime administration which posterity has failed to disperse. This chapter aims not at revision, but at re-evaluation: it is an attempt to place British policy

¹ CLVL 1/1 (Diary 1939) Entry for 16/12/39.

towards Scandinavia in its proper context, and thereby to explain more convincingly than previous accounts both what this policy was, and why it was pursued.

It is not surprising that in a period otherwise apparently devoid of dramatic developments, the coming of war to Scandinavia has received a significant amount of attention from historians. The Soviet invasion of Finland, British and French plans to intervene in that conflict, and the Allied campaign in Norway represent the first significant military action in the west, and as such have been a focus for military and diplomatic historians. The problem with this is that, in tending to deal with the campaigns in virtual isolation, the context within which they took place is often ignored or passed over. Thus we have several excellent accounts of what happened, but few attempts to link these events with developments elsewhere. Two official works, by T. K. Derry and Christopher Buckley, give detailed accounts of the Norwegian campaign itself, but they treat it in isolation, and also, it must be said, adopt a rather judgmental tone.² A more recent work on the same subject by Maurice Harvey follows the same route, and seems to suggest that the British intervention in Norway, at least from a strategic point of view, was in fact unnecessary.³ All three studies seem more concerned with extracting the 'lessons' of the campaign rather than explaining why it actually took place, and why it followed the pattern that it did. There is an excellent account by Thomas Munch-Peterson of British policy towards Sweden in 1939-40, but the scope of this work is limited to Anglo-Swedish relations, and in particular the problem of iron ore.⁴ Jukka Nevakivi deals thoroughly with the Allied response to the Russo-Finnish conflict, but not the wider context within which

² T. K. Derry *The Campaign in Norway* (London: H.M.S.O., 1952); Christopher Buckley *Norway, The Commandos, Dieppe* (London: H.M.S.O., 1952). Both works form part of the official History of the Second World War.

³ Maurice Harvey *Scandinavian Misadventure - The Campaign in Norway 1940* (Tunbridge Wells: Spellmont Ltd, 1990). See in particular p. 303.

⁴ Thomas Munch-Peterson *The Strategy of Phoney War - Britain, Sweden and the Iron Ore Question 1939-40* (Stockholm: Militärhistoriska Förlaget, 1981).

this response was made.⁵ Journal articles tend to take a similar approach.⁶ What is lacking, therefore, is an appreciation of the external pressures bearing on British policy towards Scandinavia. As this chapter will show, these pressures were instrumental in framing this policy, and therefore the policy cannot fully be understood without taking them into account. As Munch-Peterson perceptively concludes, it was ‘the conjunction of the particular conditions which arose out of the phoney war with the opportunities offered by the Finnish conflict and the German attack on Norway which shaped this unique and singular phase in British policy towards northern Europe’.⁷ These conditions and opportunities, especially the external ones, will therefore form the basis of this consideration.

As far as British planning for a future war went, Scandinavia was certainly mentioned. It would have been a gross dereliction of duty by the planners and strategists if the area had been ignored altogether. Nevertheless, it is fair to say that the importance accorded to it prior to the conflict was significantly less than the importance which the area was to assume in the early stages of the war. It is axiomatic that past conflicts inform, and often unduly influence, the planning for future wars, and with the example of the First World War still in the minds of those in charge of Britain’s war plans, it is not surprising that it influenced much of the strategic thinking in the run-up to the Second World War. A paper from early 1939, probably written by Admiral Drax, notes how Norwegian territorial waters ‘were used continually in the last war for the passage of German merchant ships, and occasionally for merchant ships armed as raiders’, and goes on to suggest that if, in a future conflict, the Norwegian Government (or any other neutral government) allowed a

⁵ Jukka Nevakivi *The Appeal that was Never Made - The Allies, Scandinavia and the Finnish Winter War 1939-40* (London: C. Hurst & Company, 1976). The original, Finnish, edition was published in 1972.

⁶ For example, J. A. Bayer ‘British Policy towards the Russo-Finnish Winter War 1939-40’ *Canadian Journal of History* 16 (1981). Parker, R. A. C. ‘Britain, France and Scandinavia 1939-40’ *History* 61 (1976) gives a more balanced account.

⁷ Munch-Peterson *The Strategy of Phoney War* p. 259.

repeat of this sort of behaviour ‘the only course left open to us would be . . . to enter territorial waters and sink enemy ships’.⁸ Norwegian neutrality, then, was largely taken for granted, mainly in view of the fact that she had remained neutral in 1914-18. Nor was this an unreasonable assumption: lying on the margins of Europe, Norway and her neighbours hardly seemed likely to be dragged into a war between the central and western European powers. However, a glance further back into history might have given pause for thought: the Danish-Norwegian union had been annexed by Napoleon between 1807 and 1814 (and consequently blockaded by the Royal Navy), and Norway and Sweden had given serious thought to siding with Britain against Russia during the Crimean War.⁹ But a great deal had changed since those times, and the shadow cast by the First World War was large enough to obliterate much, if not all, that had preceded it. If Scandinavia were to play any part in a future conflict, it seemed probable that it would only be a marginal role.

That involvement was most likely to revolve around the connected issues of iron ore exports and the use of territorial waters. It was, therefore, in the sphere of economic warfare that Scandinavia’s importance was thought to lie. The paper by Drax mentioned above shows that the problems surrounding the abuse of territorial waters were fully understood well in advance. Similarly, Patrick Salmon has shown how, more than two years before the outbreak of the Second World War, serious attention was being paid to the possibility of crippling any future German war effort by curtailing her iron ore imports from Sweden. He quotes a report by the Industrial Intelligence Centre (one of the Ministry of Economic Warfare’s forebears) dating from June 1937, which argues that ‘were Sweden alone to refuse to supply Germany with iron ore, German industry would come to a stop in

⁸ DRAX 2/10 (Drax Papers) Paper O.P.C. 4 ‘Destruction of Enemy Merchant Ships and Potential Raiders’ 7/2/39.

⁹ Derry *The Campaign in Norway* pp. 3-4.

a very short time, possibly measurable in weeks'.¹⁰ Clearly the issue was at the forefront of British thinking on Economic Warfare. The Foreign Office, too, kept itself informed on such matters. In response to an enquiry by Thomas Snow, the British Minister in Finland, the Director of Naval Intelligence confirmed to Rab Butler on 8 August 1939 that it was possible for German ships transporting Swedish iron ore from the Norwegian port of Narvik to remain within Norwegian territorial waters on their journey south. Daniel Lascelles, of the Foreign Office's Northern Department, noted that 'it has generally been assumed that German imports from the Norwegian side would at least have to be reduced, if not discontinued altogether'.¹¹ It seems clear that the passage of German iron ore exports via Norwegian territorial waters had been anticipated well in advance of the outbreak of war. The only real question was what to do about it.

The matter was first raised in the War Cabinet on 19 September. Churchill made a statement to the effect that pressure should be put on the Norwegian Government to stop the use of their territorial waters by German ships carrying iron ore from the Norwegian port of Narvik, and that if this pressure proved unsuccessful, mines should be laid in these waters to force the ships beyond the three-mile limit of territorial waters. This sanction, he pointed out, had been applied in the latter stages of the previous war, after the United States had become a belligerent.¹² Following the meeting, Churchill wrote to Sir Dudley Pound, the First Sea Lord, asking that all preparations be set in motion for such action.¹³ However, Churchill's reference to the circumstances in which the mining had been carried out in 1918 is significant. So long as the United States remained neutral, it was dangerous to tamper with the rights of other neutral countries. Large sections of American opinion

¹⁰ Patrick Salmon 'British Plans for Economic Warfare against Germany 1937-1939: The Problem of Swedish Iron Ore' *Journal of Contemporary History* 16 (1981) p. 59.

¹¹ FO 371/23648 N3737/509/56 DNI (Admiral Godfrey) to R. A. Butler, 8/8/39. This letter also contains interesting comments about the possibility of maintaining trade with Finland in time of war via Norwegian and Swedish railways.

¹² CAB 65/1 WM 20 (39) 19/9/39.

were bound to protest at such action, and Churchill understood as well as anyone that Roosevelt would find it much harder to ensure the supply of vital war materials to a Britain which violated the rights of neutral countries. There was more at stake than simply the alienation of the Norwegians.

One way around the problem was to attempt to stop the iron ore at source. To this end, Halifax met with Erik Boheman, Secretary-General of the Swedish Foreign Ministry, in London on 28 September. The meeting did not go quite as well as Halifax had hoped; Boheman, he told the War Cabinet the following day, 'had adopted a very stiff and unhelpful attitude'. Although the main point of dispute on this occasion was the Swedish refusal to allow the export of Bofors guns to Britain, Boheman also argued that little iron ore would actually go to Germany via Narvik that winter. This assertion was apparently confirmed by Pound.¹⁴ By the beginning of October, the Narvik ore trade was thought to have ceased altogether. Churchill submitted a memorandum to his War Cabinet colleagues stating that no iron ore ships had left Narvik during the first three weeks of the war.¹⁵ At the War Cabinet on 5 October, in response to a suggestion from Oliver Stanley, the President of the Board of Trade, that it was now time 'to speak plainly to the Norwegian Government', it was noted that 'no action on our part would be necessary unless supplies from Narvik to Germany started moving once more. In that event,' the minutes record with a touch of bravado lifted straight from Churchill's memorandum, 'the Royal Navy would take drastic action'.¹⁶ According to figures quoted by Munch-Peterson, this was a rather optimistic assessment. Iron ore shipments from Narvik had certainly declined, and would continue to do so, but they still stood at some 21% of the corresponding total for

¹³ Churchill to Pound, 19/9/39, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* pp. 120-121.

¹⁴ CAB 65/1 WM 31 (39) 29/9/39.

¹⁵ Memorandum by Churchill 'Norway and Sweden' (circulated to the War Cabinet as WP (39) 57) 29/9/39, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* pp. 180-182.

¹⁶ CAB 65/1 WM 38 (39) 5/10/39.

September 1938.¹⁷ Nevertheless, the threat of ‘drastic action’ was put on ice for the time being.

Aside from the iron ore issue, Norway, Sweden and Finland made little impact on British policy in the early weeks of the war. The one significant development was the decision at the very outset of the war to tell the Norwegians that a German attack on Norway would be regarded in the same light as a German attack on Britain. The importance of this move, in view of what was to transpire in April 1940, should not be overstated. As the records show, the motives behind it were largely diplomatic: on 24 August, Lascelles had written to the Committee of Imperial Defence asking whether the Chiefs of Staff thought that a message should be sent to the Norwegian Government, informing them that ‘His Majesty’s Government would regard a German attack on Norway as tantamount to an attack on this country’.¹⁸ The Chiefs of Staff thought it ‘unlikely’ that Germany would take such action except in retaliation for interference with her iron ore supplies. As to the form that retaliation might take, the following assessment was made:

A seaborne expedition in the face of superior British naval forces would be attended by very serious risks. Any such operations against Norway’s western seaboard can be dismissed as impracticable for this reason. An operation directed against the Southern coast is less improbable owing to the shorter distance, but even so would be a risky undertaking the results of which would not be commensurate with the effort involved. . . . It appears therefore that, with the exception of the direct protection of Norway against air attack, all other forms of possible German action against Norway fall

¹⁷ Munch-Peterson *The Strategy of Phoney War* p. 43. Munch-Peterson claims that this decline, which was even more dramatic the following month, was the result of a decision taken in Berlin to divert trade via Luleå rather than Narvik, so long as the former port remained ice-free.

¹⁸ FO 371/23658 N4218/64/63 Lascelles to Committee of Imperial Defence, 24/8/39.

into the category of operations which it would be in our interest to combat, and which we could undertake with a reasonable chance of success.¹⁹

No objection was raised to the sending of the proposed message to the Norwegian Government, and Sir Cecil Dormer, the British Minister in Oslo, was authorised to inform them ‘confidentially but formally that His Majesty’s Government would regard a German attack on Norway as tantamount to an attack on this country’.²⁰

Subsequent events, of course, were to show that the view of the Chiefs of Staff was a slightly optimistic one. Nevertheless, it was upon just such assessments that British policy in Scandinavia, and elsewhere, was founded. As with other countries with which Britain had to deal, military appreciations were of central importance in policy making. They formed the ‘bottom line’ above which diplomacy had to operate. In the case of the Soviet Union, for example, it was eventually decided by the Chiefs of Staff that no retaliatory action which that country might take could directly affect British interests, and therefore offensive action against the U.S.S.R. would, in certain circumstances, be justifiable and largely risk-free. The same was not true of Italy and Japan, so more caution had to be exercised when dealing with those countries. At the same time, although it was not stated explicitly in the Chiefs of Staff’s paper, Britain’s ability to defend Norway against German attack would depend to a large extent on her military commitments elsewhere. If a substantial naval force had to be employed in the Mediterranean, for example, there might be insufficient seapower left over to counter a German move against Norway’s western ports. As we will see, this consideration did indeed come to the fore during the Norwegian campaign, when it seemed for a time as though Italy was on the brink of entering the war.

¹⁹ FO 371/23658 N4218/64/63 Paper COS (39) 7, 4/9/39.

²⁰ FO 371/23658 N4218/64/63 Halifax to Dormer No. 50, 11/9/39.

On 2 November, the War Cabinet approved the draft of a war trade agreement with Sweden. Assured by Ronald Cross, the Minister for Economic Warfare, that 'the only alternative [to accepting the proposals] would be to conclude no agreement', the War Cabinet accepted 'a somewhat indefinite assurance in regard to Swedish exports of iron ore as a necessary condition of securing a satisfactory . . . agreement'.²¹ This side-stepping of the iron ore issue was clearly a compromise on the British side, and it was not one which could be tolerated for long. By the end of November, plans for tougher action against the trade were once more being discussed. Churchill told the American Ambassador on 28 November that 'it might prove necessary to plant a minefield in Norwegian territorial waters' - a subject on which Kennedy promised to ascertain the views of Roosevelt.²² Apparently, news had reached London that the ore shipments from Narvik had not, in fact, ceased completely, and the imminent freezing of the northern parts of the Baltic meant that Luleå, the alternative departure point for the ore shipments, would shortly be rendered unusable, forcing all iron ore shipments to Germany to leave via Narvik for the rest of the winter. On 30 November, Churchill again raised the question of repeating the action taken in the First World War by mining Norwegian waters. Halifax, however, was far from keen, and urged that before any such action took place, the matter should be investigated further to take into account the military considerations, the possibility of German retaliation, the economic effects, and other 'imponderable factors' such as 'the moral and legal aspects of the violation of Norwegian neutrality'. Even Churchill was forced to concede that 'the attitude of the United States might be a determining factor'. The War Cabinet agreed that all of these points should be looked into, the ensuing reports considered by the Military Co-ordination Committee, and the matter then brought back before the Cabinet itself.²³ Clearly they were in no hurry to take a step which might have an unfortunate effect on

²¹ CAB 65/2 WM 68 (39) 2/11/39.

²² CAB 65/2 WM 98 (39) 29/11/39.

neutral opinion, and were only prepared to act if it could be shown to be worth while. This ‘softly, softly’ approach, so typical of the Chamberlain wartime administration, was certainly a sensible one in the circumstances, but it is difficult to understand why such preliminary studies had not already been carried out. After all, this was not the first time that the scheme had been mentioned as a realistic possibility, and Churchill, as we have seen, had already asked Pound to prepare the technical side of the operation. Things were now moving - but slowly. A meeting to discuss the iron ore issue held in the Foreign Office that same day, at which Halifax, Hankey, the head of MI6 (Colonel Stewart Menzies) and Cadogan were present, agreed, according to the latter, ‘probably, to do nothing’.²⁴ It was a foretaste of things to come.

On the day that the War Cabinet authorised serious consideration of the mining of Norwegian territorial waters, the role of Scandinavia in Britain’s Phoney War policy entered a new and more active phase following the Soviet invasion of Finland. Initially, however, there were no real indications that this was to be the case. The Soviet incursion was treated, on the whole, as regrettable and unseemly, but not something about which Britain could, or should, do a great deal. Vague notions about ‘helping the Finns’, which were later to crystallise into far-reaching plans to occupy parts of Scandinavia, began life with strictly limited objectives. When the possibility of a Russian attack had begun to materialise some weeks earlier, the prospect of sending some sort of aid to Finland had already been raised. Snow had pointed out on 28 September that in the event of Russian aggression, it would be extremely difficult to get supplies to Finland (and at the same time had urged that arrangements be made to facilitate the evacuation of British citizens in Finland - including, of course, the British Minister himself!).²⁵ Perhaps as a result of such speculation, Chatfield wrote a stern letter to Halifax reminding him of Britain’s own needs

²³ CAB 65/2 WM 99 (39) 30/11/39.

²⁴ ACAD 1/8 (Cadogan Diary 1939) Entry for 30/11/39.

in the field or armaments. 'You are, of course, aware', he stressed, '... that it is only with the greatest difficulty that we have been able to meet a proportion of the requirements of those foreign countries which are allied to us or guaranteed by us, and Departments are clearly obliged to give preference to such countries'. He concluded by pointing out that 'Finland has never figured in *any* form of priority list, either political or strategical'.²⁶ Nevertheless, when the War Cabinet discussed the supply to Finland of tanks ordered by the Finnish Government from the Vickers company, they came down in favour of expediting such transactions as far as was possible.²⁷ They were similarly sympathetic when, following the outbreak of hostilities, Georg Gripenberg, the 'clever and polished' Finnish Minister in London,²⁸ asked for British help with certain supply problems.²⁹ When the Finns upped the stakes and requested that aircraft be supplied from Britain, the War Cabinet remained accommodating (if not overly generous) and authorised the delivery of 20 Gladiators - although, 'in order to avoid legal difficulties' the action was to retain the facade of 'a commercial transaction between the manufacturers and the Finnish Government'.³⁰

The thinking behind this level of support for Finland had been spelled out at the War Cabinet meeting on 4 December. Halifax, warning of the possible Bolshevisation of Finland, had urged that it was politically in Britain's interests to help the Finns. Chamberlain agreed 'that every effort should be made to give the Finns at least a measure of support. The political effect of such a gesture might be very considerable, particularly on the Swedes'. Hore-Belisha chipped in with the observation that such support might also

²⁵ FO 419/33 Snow to Halifax No. 114, 28/9/39.

²⁶ FO 371/23644 N5686/194/56 Chatfield to Halifax, 21/10/39.

²⁷ CAB 65/2 WM 70 (39) 4/11/39.

²⁸ FO 371/23649 N2730/2730/56 Snow to Halifax No. 114 'Leading Personalities in Finland', 1/7/39.

²⁹ CAB 65/2 WM 100 (39) 1/12/39.

³⁰ CAB 65/2 WM 104 (39) 5/12/39.

‘produce a good moral effect on the United States’.³¹ Being seen to give support to the Finns was clearly important. After all, Britain had supposedly gone to war in defence of the sovereignty of small countries, and to stand by whilst just such a country lost its sovereignty to a powerful neighbour would have been somewhat hypocritical. Even though, as Chatfield had cautioned, Britain could ill afford to spare any war material, her moral position dictated that some aid be given to the Finns. And yet, by doing a certain amount and no more, Britain was laying herself open to another charge. Monson wrote from Stockholm to warn that, from the Swedish point of view, ‘supplying war material without facing up to the wider implications of our actions is deeply suspect’. The danger of losing Swedish support by such a policy was, he felt, very real.³² What he apparently failed to grasp was that the only alternatives - doing even less, or nothing at all - would give rise to even greater suspicion and condemnation. In any case, Monson’s implication - that Britain should involve herself more actively in the Finnish struggle - was contradicted by a further message three days later, in which he reported the Swedish Government’s fervent desire to avoid any Anglo-Russian hostilities.³³ It is perhaps no coincidence that Monson was recalled from his post shortly afterwards, to be replaced by Victor Mallet. Cadogan, debriefing ‘poor old Monson’ on his return to London, noted that Sir Edmund was ‘v[er]y nice, but distressed’.³⁴

As December progressed, and it became clear that the Finnish resistance would considerably outlast that of the Poles, attention switched increasingly to that part of the world. Now that winter (and an exceptionally harsh winter at that) had set in on the Western Front, making the prospect of a major German offensive there ever more remote, Finland became the focus of world interest. This David versus Goliath struggle, fought out

³¹ CAB 65/2 WM 103 (39) 4/12/39.

³² FO 419/33 Monson to Halifax No. 345, 9/12/39.

³³ FO 419/33 Monson to Halifax No. 231, 12/12/39.

³⁴ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 12/1/40.

between two countries which were both technically non-belligerent in the 'real' war, quickly took on greater significance than it would have merited if other theatres of war had been active at the time. The symbolism of a democratic nation being crushed by a totalitarian state was apparent to all, and parallels with the behaviour of Germany were soon being drawn. Given, too, that Britain and France had been at pains to stress that their quarrel was not with Germany or the Germans *per se*, but rather with the militaristic policy of her rulers, it was inevitable that Britain's moral position over the Soviet aggression would be called into question. It was within this context that plans for more direct intervention in the Soviet-Finnish dispute, and in the Scandinavian region generally, began to gain currency in official circles.

What needs to be stressed in considering the plans which were eventually settled upon is the element of coincidence involved. Ideas about restricting German imports of Swedish iron ore had been floating round since long before the Soviet invasion of Finland. That the two issues became linked as closely as they did was the product of totally unforeseen circumstances. Put simply, any aid to Finland, be it men or equipment, had to travel through Norway and Sweden. This made the attitude of these two countries an essential factor in the sending of such aid. Only material which the Swedish and Norwegian governments were prepared to allow to pass through their territory could be sent. Whatever their sympathies, both governments - understandably enough given their vulnerability to attack from either the Soviet Union or Germany - were determined to uphold an attitude of strict neutrality towards the war in Finland and the wider European conflict. In particular, they were most emphatic that no troop formations be permitted - or be seen to be permitted - to pass through their territory en route to Finland. This was not moral cowardice. The Swedish and Norwegian armies were in no way equipped to repel a concerted invasion launched in retaliation for such partisan behaviour. Even the promise of

British and French assistance in such an event could not guarantee their acquiescence in Allied schemes - events in Poland had demonstrated that such promises had to be taken with a large pinch of salt. But if, as seemed likely, some measure of coercion were necessary to secure their participation in Allied plans to help Finland, then could not the Norwegian and Swedish Governments be coerced over other questions too - such as iron ore? Thus it was that these two separate strands of thought - the need to help Finland and the need to curtail German supplies of Swedish iron ore - coalesced into a single, audacious, but ultimately flawed plan.

It is difficult to ascertain when or where the two issues were first linked together. Throughout December, the War Cabinet discussed each one separately. On 15 December, Sir Samuel Hoare suggested taking advantage of the 'goodwill' which British support for Finland had engendered in Scandinavia by implementing Churchill's frequently mooted plans for naval action within Norwegian territorial waters.³⁵ The following day, even Halifax was apparently prepared to sanction such a breach of neutrality, although he urged that the Allies 'should admit that our action was an infringement of neutral rights, but that it was as nothing compared with the completely unscrupulous manner in which these rights had been violated by Germany' - an argument which begs for a rejoinder along the lines of two wrongs not making a right. Churchill anticipated, apparently with relish, the prospect of tit-for-tat reprisals with the Norwegians. 'For example,' he proposed, 'if Norway decided to retaliate against us by denying us supplies of aluminium, we could proceed to withhold vital supplies of other kinds from Norway'. What was important, to his mind at least, was that German iron ore imports be halted. If this could be achieved, he predicted, it would 'shorten the war and save many thousands of lives'.³⁶ Although no decision was taken at this meeting, it was clear which way the wind was blowing. As Chamberlain's

³⁵ CAB 65/2 WM 116 (39) 15/12/39.

³⁶ CAB 65/2 WM 117 (39) 16/12/39.

assistant private secretary, John Colville, noted in his diary, 'I have a feeling that Scandinavia may well end by being the chief theatre of war and that we may have to send troops there'.³⁷ He was at least half right.

Meanwhile, assisting Finland remained a separate, but crucial, issue. On 18 December the War Cabinet sanctioned, in addition to the 20 Gladiators already promised, the diversion of a consignment of 28 obsolete Gauntlet aircraft, intended for South Africa, to Finland (having first, wisely, secured the agreement of the South African Government to this proposal).³⁸ Two days later, Sir Kingsley Wood announced to his colleagues that the Air Ministry had found a further 10 Gladiators to send to Finland, and suggested that, in view of the large price tag attached to this transaction, 'the British Government should make a present of these aircraft to Finland'. As far as the public and the wider world were concerned, however, 'it would be made to appear that the aircraft were supplied to Finland by the aircraft firm concerned'. The War Cabinet readily agreed to both the transaction and the subterfuge.³⁹ A further two days on, Halifax passed on to the Air Ministry an urgent request from Finland for 12 Blenheim bombers. 'I would like to endorse this request most strongly', he added, pointing out that the Finns wanted the aircraft in order to bomb the Murmansk railway, a vital line of communication for Soviet troops in Finland. 'Nor can we overlook the possibility that we ourselves may sooner or later become involved in hostilities with the Soviet Union', he went on, 'and, by helping the Finns to destroy the Murmansk railway, we should save ourselves the trouble of doing it in less favourable circumstances later on'.⁴⁰ The following day, Sir Cyril Newall, the Chief of the Air Staff, telephoned Cadogan and agreed to release the 12 Blenheims requested - although he

³⁷ CLVL 1/1 (Diary 1939) Entry for 16/12/39.

³⁸ CAB 65/2 WM 118 (39) 18/12/39.

³⁹ CAB 65/2 WM 120 (39) 20/12/39.

⁴⁰ FO 371/23645 N7675/194/56 Halifax to Kingsley Wood, 22/12/39 (signed by Cadogan - Halifax had left London to spend Christmas at his Yorkshire home that day and had apparently neglected to complete his administrative duties).

warned that this time the aircraft ‘would not be a gift, but would have to be paid for somehow by the Finnish Government’.⁴¹ Nor were such transactions without propaganda value in the wider world. Sir Percy Loraine, Ambassador to Italy, wrote to Cadogan on Boxing Day to urge that ‘we should do all we can to lend or facilitate material aid for Finland. There can hardly be any doubt that our stock would rise in Italy if we took some vigorous action on behalf of Finland’.⁴² Whatever else it achieved, taking a pop at the Soviet Union would have hidden benefits for British relations with Mussolini’s virulently anti-Communist Italian Government.

On 19 December, just before ministers and officials dispersed for their Christmas break, the Supreme War Council met for the fourth time, at the French Ministry of War in Paris. This meeting came hard on the heels of the League of Nations get-together at Geneva, at which Russian aggression on Finland had been condemned, the Soviet Union expelled from the League, and every League member urged to give Finland ‘such material and humanitarian assistance as may be in its power’, an appeal which Cadogan deemed ‘silly’.⁴³ In the light of this, and the growing importance of the Finnish conflict in the eyes of the world, the Allied leaders considered their Scandinavian policy. Halifax, opening the discussion, saw through straight away to the real significance of the Soviet-Finnish conflict: its impact on the important neutrals. The attitude of Britain and France at Geneva had, he thought, ‘enhanced their standing in the eyes of the United States, Italy, Spain and Japan’. More than that, the continuation of hostilities offered some security against Soviet action elsewhere. ‘The longer Finland can resist the Soviet attack,’ he explained, ‘the harder it would be for Russia to take the initiative in the Balkans. Everything should, therefore, be done to strengthen Scandinavia’.⁴⁴ In his mind (and it was a view which all of

⁴¹ FO 371/23646 N7784/194/56 Minute by Cadogan, 23/12/39.

⁴² FO 371/24795 N80/9/56 Loraine to Cadogan, 26/12/39.

⁴³ FO 371/23696 N7581/991/38 League of Nations Secretary-General to Halifax, 18/12/39.

⁴⁴ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 4th Meeting, 19/12/39.

his colleagues and allies seemed to share) Finland, and indeed the whole of Scandinavia, could exercise a decisive influence over the course of the wider war. This argument is rubbished by the Canadian historian J. A. Bayer, who claims that ‘miscalculations, contradictions and fantasies created the grand illusion that the fate of Finland mattered to the outcome of the Allied war against Germany’.⁴⁵ At the time, it was harder to be so dismissive of the potential repercussions of events in that region. As the only ‘active’ theatre of war, Finland’s symbolic importance was far greater than its actual or strategic importance. It was, to the outside world at least, a barometer of the wider conflict. Russia, the aggressor, was an accomplice of Germany, and to that extent the Soviet attack on Finland seemed to be an extension of the German policy of forcibly annexing small countries. In any case, there was a greater prize at stake than the survival or otherwise of Finland, one that it was hoped would play an even greater part in the war against Germany: Sweden’s iron ore.

Halifax presented the Supreme War Council with a worrying hypothesis concerning the future of Swedish iron ore exports to Germany. If the Soviet-Finnish war were to be prolonged as a result of supplies being sent to Finland via Sweden, the Russians might take action against Swedish transport facilities. If she did so, Germany might take steps to safeguard her supplies of Swedish iron ore. ‘The Allies would then be faced with an extension of the war, either concealed or open, affecting both Norway and Sweden’. Halifax therefore urged ‘joint examination and . . . a discussion of possible action in Northern Europe, especially in the military sphere’. Daladier agreed, and pointed to information from the exiled German industrialist Fritz Thyssen which suggested that Göring had gone to great lengths to try to improve Germany’s iron ore position. ‘Germany was wholly dependent upon the Swedish supplies’, he declared, ‘and would be brought to

⁴⁵ Bayer ‘British Policy towards the Russo-Finnish Winter War’, p. 64.

her knees if they failed her'. He favoured a diplomatic approach to the Norwegian and Swedish Governments, and handed over to the British party draft instructions which he proposed to issue to his representatives in Oslo and Stockholm. It was agreed that assisting Finland and strengthening Norway and Sweden were priorities for the Allies, and that joint diplomatic action should be taken to bring them about.⁴⁶

Clearly the matter had now taken on some urgency. On their return from France at 4 p.m. that day, Halifax and Cadogan drove directly from Hendon aerodrome to the Foreign Office, where they called a discussion on the question of action against the Narvik traffic.⁴⁷ Doubtless Halifax wanted to be well briefed on the issue before the War Cabinet came to consider it. The first of two long and important War Cabinet discussions took place on the following morning, 22 December.⁴⁸ A significant feature of this discussion is the way in which the Finnish and iron ore questions were already beginning to blur into one. Churchill advocated both pushing Norway and Sweden towards giving greater assistance to Finland and, at the same time, pressing them to help the Allies to prevent supplies of Swedish iron ore from reaching Germany, in return for a promise of Allied support if this action brought reprisals from either Germany or the Soviet Union.. The idea of pressing for greater aid to Finland was accepted without any real discussion; what exercised the War Cabinet more was how to raise the iron ore problem with the two Scandinavian governments. A distinction was made - and adhered to throughout the following months - between the limited objective of stopping ore exports from Narvik, and the larger goal of stopping all Swedish iron ore from reaching Germany. The former could be accomplished by naval action alone; the latter was more complicated. It was possible, if not particularly desirable, to take action against the Narvik traffic without the co-operation

⁴⁶ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 4th Meeting, 19/12/39.

⁴⁷ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 19/12/39. I have been unable to find an account of this meeting in the Foreign Office papers.

⁴⁸ CAB 65/4 WM 122 (39) CA 22/12/39.

of Norway or Sweden by using a force of nine Royal Navy destroyers, operating within Norwegian waters but requiring no land base in Norway. Churchill was in favour of this action going ahead regardless of anything else which might subsequently be done, and simply informing the Norwegians that it would happen. Halifax was more cautious, and emphasised the risk that the Narvik operation - which in itself would not have a decisive effect on German ore imports - might prejudice the major aim of stopping all iron ore exports to Germany by alienating the Norwegians and Swedes, whose co-operation in this was vital. He therefore wanted no action to be taken against the Narvik traffic until the two governments had had a chance to respond to the projected Allied *démarche*. They were in any case unlikely to welcome an Allied guarantee against German or Russian attack, as this would be un-neutral behaviour and therefore might provoke a German or Russian response. After all, Britain and France had hardly set a shining example in the help rendered to Poland, the unfortunate recipient of an earlier guarantee. Nevertheless, Halifax significantly observed that, if the war were to spread to Scandinavia, it might not spread to the Balkans. Germany and the Soviet Union (like Britain and France) would be reluctant to fight a war on both fronts, and it is clear that Halifax regarded Scandinavia as the more favourable theatre of the two, from an Allied point of view. In that sense, provoking action in Scandinavia (and thus avoiding unwanted developments in the Balkans) might actually prove to be a blessing. This was a view shared by many, if not all, of his colleagues. British policy towards Scandinavia needs to be seen in this context: not as an isolated process, but as part of a wider strategy aimed at limiting the war and maximising the meagre resources with which Britain and her allies had to prosecute it.

Chamberlain observed during the course of this War Cabinet discussion that the question of taking action in Scandinavia over German iron ore imports 'was of the utmost importance. It might be one of the turning points in the war'. Whilst he was clearly

tempted by the possibility of ‘dealing a mortal blow to Germany’, he shared Halifax’s reservations about risking all on the Narvik operation. Lord Hankey, however, warned that waiting for all the possible ramifications to be calculated before any action was taken might well mean that the opportunity of causing ‘a serious embarrassment to Germany’ would be lost. Once the ice melted in the spring and the facilities at Luleå were re-opened, the Narvik traffic would cease to be of any great significance until the Baltic once more froze over the following winter. The symbolic aspects of the Narvik operation were therefore also a factor - by being seen to strike a blow against the German war effort, the Allies might salvage some of their tarnished image in the eyes of the world. Perhaps with this in mind, Churchill closed the discussion with the hope that the Narvik plan would go ahead even if Norway and Sweden refused to accept a British and French ‘guarantee’ against the Germans and the Russians. Halifax conceded that this might be possible, and was instructed by the War Cabinet to come up with the ‘most appropriate’ way of approaching the Norwegians and Swedes. The Chiefs of Staff, meanwhile, were asked to look into the question of possible assistance to Norway and Sweden if either country was invaded by Germany or the Soviet Union. With the wheels thus set in motion, the War Cabinet went into a brief Christmas recess.

The War Cabinet meeting ended at 12.30 p.m. Lord Halifax left for Garrowby, his Yorkshire home, at 4 p.m. In the interim, he and Cadogan drafted a telegram to the French Government setting out the strategy agreed upon in the War Cabinet.⁴⁹ The next day, Lords Chatfield and Hankey and the Dominions Secretary, Anthony Eden, called on Cadogan to discuss the matter further. ‘They entirely approve our telegram’, Cadogan noted, ‘but don’t want to go too fast’ (this seems somewhat at odds with Hankey’s desire of the previous day not to miss any opportunities).⁵⁰ Halifax, in a letter to Chamberlain,

⁴⁹ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 22/12/39.

⁵⁰ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 23/12/39.

made much the same point, warning that it was vital to secure French concurrence to any proposed move.⁵¹ This, at least, proved not to be too much of an obstacle: a reply came in from Paris on Christmas Eve agreeing to the proposed course of action.⁵² The next step was to decide what precisely to say to the Norwegian and Swedish Governments. Cadogan composed a draft which he sent by bag to Halifax at Garrowby that same day. On Christmas day itself, the two discussed the matter by telephone,⁵³ and on Boxing Day Halifax came down from Yorkshire to hammer out a policy with his Permanent Under-Secretary. Cadogan urged that it would be pointless to mention the iron ore issue at all to the Norwegians or Swedes unless and until the Allies were clear about what they wanted to do and what they were capable of doing. ‘I’m awfully tempted by the Scandinavian scheme’, Cadogan later recorded, ‘but we must (a) know that we can reasonably hope to do it effectively and (b) give it a reasonable appearance of decency’.⁵⁴ It is arguable whether these criteria were ever met, but preparations continued nonetheless.

From being of marginal interest, Scandinavia had suddenly taken on a new significance for British policy. Churchill wrote to Chamberlain from the Admiralty on Christmas Day (noting, not surprisingly, that ‘Everything is very quiet here’!) to urge that denying Germany Swedish iron ore ‘may be the shortest and surest road to the end’, whilst pointing out that intelligence sources suggested that Germany was ‘becoming increasingly interested in Scandinavia’.⁵⁵ Even Sam Hoare, who by this time seldom spoke out on foreign policy matters, was moved to write to the Prime Minister on the subject (he and Lord Hankey were due to leave for a visit to France on 27 December, and would therefore miss the chance of making their views known in Cabinet). ‘I am more than ever

⁵¹ NC 7/11/32/116 Halifax to Chamberlain 23/12/39.

⁵² ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 24/12/39 (I have been unable to locate this telegram in the Foreign Office records).

⁵³ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 25/12/39.

⁵⁴ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 26/12/39.

⁵⁵ NC 7/9/69 Churchill to Chamberlain 25/12/39.

convinced', he declared, 'that Scandinavia both for its own importance (the iron ore etc) and also for its influence on the other neutrals, particularly the U.S.A. is at the moment the key place in the war'. He favoured bringing Sweden into the war on the Allied side, and, doubting the ability of the British Minister in Stockholm to bring this about, suggested jokingly that in view of his relationship with the aged King Gustav 'I am almost inclined to offer myself . . . in his place'.⁵⁶ However popular such an appointment might have proved in certain circles, it was not to be - although Hoare's subsequent exile to the Madrid Embassy when Churchill came to power suggests that he should not have been so flippant.

The War Cabinet, minus Hoare and Hankey, again subjected the proposals for action in Scandinavia to close analysis on 27 December.⁵⁷ Halifax made it clear that he was not in favour of a 'two-fold communication' to the Swedish and Norwegian Governments - that is, one which both stressed the need for aid to be sent to Finland and also mentioned British concern over the iron ore trade. Chamberlain agreed, and was apparently taken aback by the suggestion that the communication should have any purpose other than to hearten Norway and Sweden. Any comments on the iron ore trade, and German abuse of Norwegian waters, should, he thought, be addressed to the respective governments separately. Even so, Cadogan felt that this was 'mixing vinegar with oil. It could be done, but I am puzzled how to link up the 2 subjects'.⁵⁸ To his relief, the Cabinet decided that, for the time being at least, some distance should be kept between the issues. Before any action was taken, however, Halifax urged that President Roosevelt, as head of the most prominent neutral country, should be informed of the proposals. An attack on the rights of one neutral might be considered to set a precedent, and it was important to disabuse the Americans of this notion. Nevertheless, in this same War Cabinet discussion,

⁵⁶ NC 7/11/32/132 Hoare to Chamberlain 26/12/39. It is not clear whether Hoare is referring to the recently departed minister, Sir Edmund Monson, or to his successor, Sir Victor Mallet, who took up his post at the very beginning of 1940.

⁵⁷ CAB 65/4 WM 123 (39) CA 27/12/39.

plans were already being laid for military action in Norway and Sweden. The Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, General Massy, asked for permission for the War Office to proceed with equipping a military force to send to Narvik (this question was deferred pending the views of the Chiefs of Staff). He also indicated that a team had been assembled to carry out acts of sabotage on the Murmansk railway. The War Cabinet authorised this unit to sail immediately. Chamberlain, however, remained wary of sending a 'volunteer' force of men to fight in Finland, as this brought back memories of the Spanish Civil War and the supposed 'non-intervention' policy adopted by most western powers but adhered to by few. The discussion ended in a plethora of decisions and authorisations which, whilst not committing the government to any action at this stage, certainly opened the way for such action at an early date.

By the end of 1939, British policy towards Scandinavia was clearly moving in the direction of active intervention. This should not, however, be overstated. Nothing was set in stone, and the possibility of taking no action at all, or of taking action elsewhere (such as the Balkans) was still very much alive. Furthermore, doubts persisted about the wisdom of taking action in that part of the world. Prominent amongst the sceptics was Cadogan, who still found it hard to see how aid to Finland and action against Swedish iron ore could be combined. In a minute of 29 December, he set out his fear that conditions now militated against such an operation. So long as the Russians, by their actions in Finland, had appeared to pose a threat to the Swedish iron ore mines, it might have been possible to persuade the Swedes to accept direct assistance. 'Once we had a force in occupation of the mining area, we might then, incidentally, as it were, have controlled the output of the mines'. But there was no longer any such threat, and in those circumstances he could not see how the two issues could be tied up, unless either the Russian threat re-emerged or else

⁵⁸ ACAD 1/8 (Diary 1939) Entry for 27/12/39.

Germany, perhaps in retaliation for the proposed action against the Narvik traffic, were to attack Sweden.⁵⁹ Cadogan consistently remained one of the most pragmatic critics of the plans for action in Scandinavia. Others, perhaps unwilling to face up to the realities of the situation, pressed for action regardless of the circumstances. The eventual triumph of the interventionists, against the wishes of many of those concerned with its foreign policy ramifications, owes much to the circumstances of the 'Phoney War', and the desire for something - anything - to be done to strike at Germany. The longer the inactivity on other fronts continued, the more attractive action in Scandinavia came to appear.

⁵⁹ FO 371/23660 N7869/64/63 Minute by Cadogan 29/12/39.

8. SCANDINAVIA: CRUCIBLE OF THE PHONEY WAR

If the German adventure in Norway is an operation in itself, I like to think that it is suicidal . . . But I think it is a prelude to, and a distraction from, an attack in the west.

Sir Alexander Cadogan, 9 April 1940.¹

Between January and May 1940, Scandinavia assumed a position at the forefront of Britain's wartime strategy, culminating in the dramatic events following the German invasion of Norway and Denmark on 9 April. The impact of the brief military campaign which followed was all the greater because it was the first real clash of arms between the belligerents. For Britain, it was important to demonstrate to the world that she and France were both willing and able to take effective action against Germany. When the crunch came, however, a very different impression was created, and the Allied forces which had been landed in Norway in an attempt to win back key strategic points had to be withdrawn under heavy German attack. The criticisms of British policy, both in Norway and in the war as a whole, reached their peak in the House of Commons on 7-8 May 1940, as a result of which the Chamberlain wartime administration came to a swift and sudden end.

By the beginning of 1940 the Allies had made it a priority to help the Finns to prolong their on-going conflict with the Soviet Union, and thus keep the threat of Soviet action elsewhere (and especially in the Balkans) to a minimum. It had also been deemed important to take action to restrict Germany's iron ore imports from Sweden. The Norwegian and Swedish Governments were to be urged to help the Finns, or at least to help others to help them, by allowing aid to pass through their territory. They were also to

¹ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 9/4/40.

be informed that the situation concerning iron ore exports to Germany was unsatisfactory to the Allies. At the same time, British troops were being prepared for direct action in the area, under the guise of assisting the Finns, which would involve disembarking at Narvik and occupying the Swedish ore fields at Gallivare and their lines of communication. In addition, further landings at the ports of Trondheim, Bergen and Stavanger were also being considered. The extent of these preparations is revealed by a letter from General Massy, the Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff, to the commanders of Britain's Home Forces in early January, in which he announced that

measures are being taken to hold certain troops in readiness for the possibility of immediate operations in Scandinavia. . . . The force will be known as "Stratforce", and it is thought that the earliest time and date of embarkation will be noon on the 17th January. It is possible, however, that the units earmarked for this operation may have to be kept at short notice for an indefinite period.²

In addition to this, serious thought was being given to the possibility of sabotage in Sweden. Cadogan apparently had to restrain Colonel Menzies, the head of M.I. 6 from instigating such operations at the port of Oxelösund, through which a small amount of iron ore was exported across the Baltic to Germany. He must, he was told, await authorisation from a Cabinet Committee (comprising Chamberlain, Halifax, Churchill, Chatfield and Hankey) before proceeding.³ Menzies was apparently following up Churchill's frequent requests for action against the port facilities at Oxelösund - action which the First Lord

² WO 106/2014B Massy to Commander in Chief Home Forces, Northern Command, Eastern Command, Aldershot Command & Southern Command, 6/1/40.

³ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entries for 8/1/40 & 9/1/40.

euphemistically described as ‘neither diplomatic nor military’, and which Colville more accurately termed ‘illegal’.⁴

There was, however, nothing inevitable about the eventual British action in Scandinavia. The force referred to by Massy, for example, was stood down on 13 January, the troops returned to their units, and the operation ‘indefinitely postponed’.⁵ This was a direct result of the reaction of the Norwegian and Swedish Governments to the note which Halifax and the Foreign Office had been preparing over the Christmas period about possible action in Norwegian waters. This note, or *aide-mémoire*, which was kept separate from the communication urging the two governments to help Finland, was delivered to Messrs. Colban and Prytz by Halifax himself on 6 January. It stated that the British Government intended ‘to extend the scope of their naval operations into waters which have . . . become a theatre of operations for the enemy’s naval forces’.⁶ By all accounts, it did not go down too well with the respective representatives. Colban was rather upset by the note, which he considered quite unjustified, and even returned to the Foreign Office the following day to challenge some of its allegations about Norway’s dereliction of duty as a neutral. Prytz was less taken aback, claiming to have expected such a move - although the response in Sweden itself was less understanding.⁷ Halifax told the War Cabinet quite firmly on 9 January that, in view of these responses, it was necessary to reconsider the question of taking action in Scandinavia.⁸ Later that day, a meeting of senior officials in the Foreign Office (including Halifax, Cadogan, Vansittart and Butler) tried to formulate a new policy, but, according to Cadogan, nothing was settled.⁹ The War Cabinet the following morning was similarly indecisive, calling for continued preparations to be made

⁴ For Churchill’s comment, see for example CAB 66/4 WP (39) 162, 16/12/39, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* p. 522; for Colville’s description, see CLVL 1/2 (Diary 1940) entry for 16/12/39.

⁵ WO 106/2014B War Office (S.D. 1) to Brigadier Fraser 13/1/40.

⁶ FO 419/34 Halifax to Dormer No. 12, 6/1/40, enclosing a copy of the note.

⁷ CAB 65/11 WM 6 (40) CA 8/1/40.

⁸ CAB 65/11 WM 7 (40) CA 9/1/40.

for the despatch of troops to Gallivare via Narvik, and possibly to southern Sweden (to act as protection against a possible German retaliatory invasion), but not committing itself to any definite action.¹⁰ On 12 January, however, they decided to call off the plan, for the time being at least. During the course of a sometimes stormy discussion, Chamberlain and Halifax urged that the main objective - denying Germany Swedish iron ore - was wholly dependent on Swedish co-operation, and that the probable Swedish reaction to direct intervention would render such co-operation even more unlikely than it already was. Churchill fought a valiant rearguard action in defence of his pet scheme, but it was to no avail. Instead, it was suggested that an Allied mission, led by Hoare, should go to Sweden in an attempt to win over the Swedish Government to the Allied cause. Churchill was dismissive, observing caustically that 'a flotilla could be sent in the teeth of a protest, but not a Mission'.¹¹ Cadogan, whilst relieved at the cancellation of the proposed action, thought that the idea of a Mission led by Hoare was 'absurd' and 'ridiculous'.¹² Nevertheless, it seemed to be the only option open to the British Government if it was to achieve its objective of cutting Germany's iron ore supplies from Sweden, and thus shortening the war.

This was not, of course, the end of the story. The continuation of the Finnish war, and the enduring belief that economic warfare could exercise a decisive influence over the struggle against Germany, saw to that. Just a week after the decision to put the Narvik scheme on ice, the War Cabinet were once again authorising steps to be taken with a view to intervention in the area. There was now talk of sending two entire divisions to southern Sweden in order to protect her against any German retaliation for the restriction of her iron

⁹ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 9/1/40.

¹⁰ CAB 65/11 WM 8 (40) CA 10/1/40.

¹¹ CAB 65/11 WM 10 (40) CA 12/1/40.

¹² ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 12/1/40.

ore supplies.¹³ This decision came partly as a result of pressure from the French Government, who had submitted an *aide-mémoire* to the British pressing for ‘the adoption by the Allies of a more active and effective policy in the Scandinavian peninsula’. The note concluded that ‘the Allied Governments would be under a heavy responsibility if they let slip the opportunity offered them at present of laying the foundations of an action both preventive and positive in this theatre of operations’.¹⁴ This, and a growing desire to hammer out a more decisive policy, led to the calling of a Supreme War Council Meeting for 5 February, with Scandinavia to be top of the agenda. In the meantime, the War Cabinet (during a discussion in which, as Halifax told Cadogan, ‘the fur flew’) had decided not to send Hoare to Sweden.¹⁵ There was still a desire to help the Finns as much as possible, even if it was only by sending volunteers and the odd aeroplane - gestures which were scarcely likely to alter the balance of the conflict decisively. This too had much to do with the attitude of the Swedish Government, which refused to allow large-scale help to pass through its territory en route to Finland. Before anything effective could be done to help the Finns, therefore, it was necessary to change the Swedish attitude. The Foreign Office seem to have understood this basic truth better than the War Cabinet. Sargent, characteristically seeing through to the heart of the problem, observed that Sweden’s outlook was a product of ‘a blind fear of Germany’, and that ‘nothing but the removal of that fear will restore the Swedes to their senses’. This could best be done

by demonstrating to all Scandinavia that our strength in that part of the world is greater than Germany’s . . . But it is more than doubtful whether we are in a position to give this demonstration; & until we do I fear we will be unable to obtain any collaboration whatever from Sweden.¹⁶

¹³ CAB 65/11 WM 18 (40) CA 19/1/40.

¹⁴ FO 419/34 Halifax to Campbell No. 138, 18/1/40, enclosing a copy of the French note.

¹⁵ CAB 65/11 WM 16 (40) CA 17/1/40 and ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) entry for 17/1/40.

¹⁶ FO 371/24860 N405/124/42 Minute by Sargent, 17/1/40.

Ironically, it was thinking along these lines which lead to an increasingly active Allied policy in the area - with consequences which were the precise opposite of those intended.

The tendency to see the Scandinavian problem as a whole, and to conflate support for Finland with the iron ore issue, remained strong in the run up to the Supreme War Council meeting. The French Government were becoming increasingly enthusiastic about a plan to land forces at the Finnish port of Petsamo, once naval action had cleared the way for this. Alexis Léger, permanent head of the French foreign ministry, told Sir Ronald Campbell that the real intention of this action was 'to make the Germans believe our objective was to lay hands on Swedish iron ore . . . That would compel them to invade Southern Sweden in an attempt to frustrate us. The Swedes would then appeal to us for help. We could at once establish our base at Narvik'.¹⁷ It is not clear, however, that this view was shared by all French advocates of this scheme - most seem to have thought no further than the act of supplying troops to help the Finns. In any case, the Petsamo project found little favour in Britain, and the British representatives set off for France armed with an array of arguments to deploy against its being put into operation.

The fifth meeting of the Supreme War Council, held on 5 February at the French Ministry of War (in deference to a foot injury recently sustained by Daladier), was devoted almost exclusively to the question of action in Scandinavia.¹⁸ The twin objectives remained: helping the Finns in their struggle against the Soviet Union, and denying Germany supplies of Swedish iron ore. 'The ideal', Chamberlain announced, 'therefore would be an operation which combined assistance to Finland with control of the iron ore fields'. To his mind, the Petsamo proposal failed to do this, largely because of the distance between Petsamo and the orefields. It also posed the serious risk of war with the Soviet Union, since the naval action which was a prerequisite to the landing of troops would

¹⁷ FO 371/24799 N1342/9/56 Campbell to Halifax (unnumbered) 2/2/40.

¹⁸ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 5th Meeting 5/2/40.

require direct engagement with Soviet forces. The Narvik operation, however, would use ‘regular divisions . . . in the guise of “volunteers”,’ and would not, therefore, ‘be a Franco-British force in the strict sense’. Thus, Chamberlain reasoned, there would be no direct clash between Allied and Soviet forces, and therefore the Soviet Union would be under no obligation to declare war on Britain and France. Daladier was forced to concede that the Narvik plan was more sensible and convenient than the French proposals, and thus, as Cadogan put it, the British contingent ‘Rode [the] French off their silly Petsamo scheme, and got them to accept our idea’.¹⁹ That said, the successful implementation of the Narvik operation was by no means a foregone conclusion. Chamberlain made it clear that ‘there could be no question of landing a force on the Norwegian coast or carrying it across Swedish territory in the face of opposition from either country’. How was this obstacle to be overcome? The Norwegian and Swedish reaction to the British *aide-mémoire* which raised the possibility of Allied action in Norwegian waters had hardly been encouraging; why should they countenance a much more severe breach of their precious-guarded neutrality?

What Chamberlain proposed was a diplomatic approach to Norway and Sweden which played on their vulnerability to, and fear of, attack by the Soviet Union and Germany. The key was Finland: ‘If she collapsed, Norway and Sweden would be in imminent danger of attack by Russia or . . . by Germany, seeking to insure against further Russian encroachments. It was therefore of vital importance to Norway and Sweden that Finland should not be overwhelmed’. The Narvik scheme had to be presented to those two governments as an operation aimed at helping Finland - and, by implication, protecting Norway and Sweden from the threat of invasion. If Finland could be urged to lodge an appeal to her neighbours asking that the Allied assistance be permitted, a subsequent Allied

¹⁹ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 5/2/40.

appeal for transit facilities would have even greater force. In Chamberlain's opinion, 'the effect of such an approach would be tremendous; and he doubted whether the Scandinavian powers would be able to resist it'. He subsequently brushed aside Daladier's fears that Norway or Sweden might seriously oppose the Allied expedition. Whilst admitting that 'there was a definite risk that had to be faced', he 'could hardly believe' that armed opposition would be mounted. If the Norwegian or Swedish Governments were to take a firm line (Norway could, for instance, destroy the Narvik railway), then the plan could not be implemented - but this was 'a very remote contingency'. Chamberlain's confidence, which on the face of it does not seem entirely justified, apparently rubbed off on Daladier. After a brief adjournment to allow the respective heads of the armed forces to consider the matter, the Council reconvened and decided to push ahead with plans for the landing of troops in Norway, which, Chamberlain urged, should be carried out 'by the third week in March at the latest'. The Petsamo scheme was to be held in reserve should it prove impossible to implement the preferred operation. For a war leader frequently condemned for his reluctance to take any form of military action, Chamberlain had pursued a remarkably resolute line in pressing for action in Scandinavia. He was, it seems, genuinely convinced by the merits of the operation, and argued forcibly, and successfully, for its adoption. Churchill, watching his Prime Minister's performance in silence, must surely have been impressed (his only recorded contribution to the proceedings seems to have been keeping Lord Halifax awake on the train back from the meeting with his stentorian snores).²⁰

In the weeks between the Supreme War Council decision and the Finnish surrender, events gathered pace rapidly. All the time, requests were coming in from the Finns for more and more assistance, in both material and personnel. Whilst it proved impossible to

²⁰ Halifax Papers A7.8.3 (Diary 1940) Entry for 6/2/40.

meet all of these, it was important to be seen to be giving at least some help. Mallet wrote from Stockholm urging that as much aid as possible be sent, on the grounds that by so doing 'we shall put new heart into [the] Swedish Government and earn their respect'. Helping Finland, he argued, was the best way to encourage Sweden to side with the Allies - although he went on to warn that the failure of such assistance to prevent a Russian victory would have serious consequences for Allied prestige.²¹ Thus, small-scale assistance continued to be sent whilst the Narvik operation was being prepared. Sargent noted on 9 February that the first batch of genuine volunteers (as opposed to the 'volunteer force' of regular troops which would sail to Narvik) was ready to leave for Finland - a circumstance that clearly gave him cause for concern. 'It is obviously most important that these volunteers should be a credit to this country', he wrote. 'There is, however, a danger that unless they are under strict discipline they may get out of hand and be more trouble than they are worth. One thing I am afraid of is that Finnish brandy will be too strong for them'.²² His worries were largely unfounded; as Mallet later recalled, they were, on the whole,

fine patriotic fellows, who were considered too old to join our army at thirty. There was, however, one startling exception in the General who had been selected to command the British volunteers. He was not only far too old, but had at one time been the leader of the British Fascists before Mosley . . . The poor man had hardly got to the Finnish front before he collapsed with double pneumonia and was shipped back to Stockholm where he remained for some time, an embarrassment to my Military Attaché, until with great difficulty transport home was arranged for him.²³

²¹ FO 371/24800 N1697/9/56 Mallet to Halifax No. 12 Saving, 8/2/40.

²² FO 371/24800 N1843/9/56 Minute by Sargent, 9/2/40.

²³ MALT (Unpublished memoir by Sir Victor Mallet, Churchill Archives Centre) p. 68.

It quickly became apparent, however, that the time factor was running counter to the Allied plans. The whole scheme rested on the ability of the Finns to continue their valiant struggle against the vastly superior Soviet forces, but the indications were that Finnish resistance was faltering. So serious did the risk appear that Chamberlain wrote directly to Daladier on 15 February, pleading for the despatch of French field guns and ammunition to the Finnish forces. Whilst accepting that the French might need such equipment themselves, he urged that 'the support of Finland is sufficiently important to justify a course which would not otherwise commend itself to you'.²⁴ The French reaction to the worsening Finnish situation was rather different - instead of the despatch of token amounts of military equipment, they pressed for the acceleration of the Narvik operation. However, the War Cabinet had been informed by the Chiefs of Staff that no acceleration in the despatch of troops was possible, and Chamberlain personally told Corbin, the French Ambassador, that this was the case.²⁵ Instead, in order to put heart into the Finns, details of the Allied plans were passed to Marshal Mannerheim, Commander in Chief of the Finnish armed forces, but it was made equally clear to him that the timetable for action which had been fixed at the Supreme War Council meeting could not be brought forward. There was a very real danger that time and events would conspire against the entire, carefully-formulated plan.

Things were given a jolt with the celebrated 'Altmark incident' on the evening of 16 February. The Royal Navy destroyer H.M.S. *Cossack* forced a German supply ship (the *Altmark*), carrying nearly 300 British prisoners, to run aground in Norwegian waters, boarded her, and released the captives - all under the nose of two Norwegian torpedo boats. This action had been ordered by Churchill, having wisely sought the concurrence of Halifax in what was, after all, a serious breach of Norwegian neutrality. Chamberlain later admitted to his sisters: 'There is no question that we did commit a technical offence when

²⁴ FO 371/24801 N1990/9/56 Copy of Chamberlain to Daladier 'Secret and Personal', 15/2/40.

²⁵ CAB 65/11 WM 45 (40) CA, 18/2/40, WM 46 (40) CA, 19/2/40.

we rescued the *Altmark* prisoners. But on general equity we are on such strong ground that the world is with us'.²⁶ As usual, it was the Foreign Office and its representatives which had to take the flak for this audacious piece of opportunism. Halifax, in a very shrewd move, sent for Colban on the day after the incident, and protested to him at the Norwegian 'dereliction of duty in not searching the *Altmark* more carefully' (the Norwegian authorities claimed to have examined the ship and found no evidence of any prisoners).

It was rather funny [Halifax recorded in his diary] because he, no doubt, had the same idea, and as he came into my room held out his hand with an envelope containing the Norwegian protest, I saying, 'I shall look forward to reading this, but meanwhile there are certain things I want to say.'²⁷

The envelope contained a request from the Norwegian Government that all of the liberated prisoners be returned - a suggestion which, Halifax made it quite clear, the British Government would certainly not agree to.²⁸ The last thing that was wanted at this moment was a diplomatic incident with the Norwegians, whose agreement to the landing and transit of troops was a precondition of the Narvik operation being carried out. Fortunately for the British, the Norwegians seem to have been more concerned with being seen to protest at the action (as a good neutral should) than with actually pressing the point with the British Government, and after a few diplomatic salvos from each side, the matter quietly died down.

More significant than the diplomatic fall-out from the *Altmark* incident was its effect on Britain's attitude towards Norwegian territorial waters. The abuse of these waters by German shipping was something that Churchill, in particular, had long complained about. Now, the First Lord seized the opportunity to press for the laying of mines within this stretch of water, which could then be tied in with the action taken against the *Altmark*.

²⁶ NC 18/1/1144 Chamberlain to Hilda, 25/2/40.

²⁷ Halifax Papers A7.8.3 (Diary 1940) Entry for 17/2/40.

‘Norway,’ he pointed out, ‘by her action over the *Altmark*, had given us good grounds for pointing out that we were not prepared to run the risk of similar events in the future . . . By laying a minefield, we should force traffic out into the open sea, and thus relieve the Norwegians of their heavy responsibility’.²⁹ Quite whether the Norwegians would have appreciated his concern is another matter. The Admiralty were given the green light to begin preparations for such an operation (which was given the codename ‘Wilfred’), but a final decision on whether or not to carry it out was deferred. For ten days the matter was referred and discussed, with opinions being sought from, amongst others, the leaders of the opposition parties in the House of Commons, and the governments of the British Dominions (Roosevelt’s views had been sought several weeks earlier by Churchill when the scheme first began to occupy his attention).³⁰ Then, at the War Cabinet meeting on 29 February, Chamberlain put his foot down in emphatic style.

He was . . . not at all convinced that the measure proposed would be opportune at the present moment. It was clear that the action proposed need not be linked up with the *Altmark* incident. German brutality at sea would no doubt continue, and we should get other opportunities for putting our scheme into operation. He had reached the conclusion that it would be advisable to postpone taking the measure.

Churchill was clearly disappointed, but, having been briefed by Chamberlain before the Cabinet meeting, accepted the decision with good grace.³¹ Chamberlain was delighted at his own show of strength, as was the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, who whispered in his ear: ‘Splendid! You are a *real* Prime Minister!’.³²

²⁸ FO 414/34 Halifax to Dormer No. 78, 17/2/40.

²⁹ CAB 65/11 WM 46 (40) CA, 19/2/40.

³⁰ CAB 65/2 WM 98 (39), 29/11/39.

³¹ CAB 65/5 WM 55 (40), 29/2/40.

³² NC 18/1/1145 Chamberlain to Ida, 2/3/40.

The plan to lay mines in Norwegian waters may have been sunk by Chamberlain's executive decision, but preparations for intervention in Scandinavia continued. The following day, the War Cabinet agreed that the Norwegian and Swedish Governments, whilst not yet being asked to allow the passage of forces through their territory, were to be told that such a request was shortly to be made. The intention was to engage in discussions on the matter until such time as the force was ready to depart, at which point 'we could say to them abruptly that our troops were ready, and we intended to come through'. At the same time, in order to maintain Finnish resistance until the force was ready, the Finns were to be told that the Allies were 'whole-heartedly behind the Finns and would do all in their power to support them'.³³ The growing urgency of the situation was made clear by a telegram from Mallet, giving details of the Finnish Foreign Minister's 'complete failure' to induce the Swedish Government to provide further assistance against the Russians. As a result, he understood, Tanner had 'returned to Helsingfors dejected and convinced that Finland has now no alternative but to seek peace on the best terms she can'.³⁴ The situation looked bleaker still when Mallet reported a conversation with Boheman on 3 March, in which the latter 'informed me orally and officially that the Swedish Government will not permit the passage of troops through Swedish territory'.³⁵ This was not, however, the death blow to the Allied scheme which it might at first have appeared. It was made clear at the following day's War Cabinet that all now hinged on the Finns making a direct appeal for Allied intervention. Unless and until such an appeal was made, there was nothing more that could be done.³⁶

As the days went by, it became increasingly apparent that the circumstances in which the expedition could be sent simply would not arise. At the same time, enthusiasm

³³ CAB 65/12 WM 57 (40) CA, 1/3/40.

³⁴ FO 371/24802 N2535/9/56 Mallet to Halifax No. 91, 29/2/40.

³⁵ FO 371/24803 N2667/9/56 Mallet to Halifax No. 99 DIPP, 3/3/40.

³⁶ CAB 65/12 WM 59 (40) CA, 4/3/40.

for the scheme was beginning to ebb away. Lord Hankey wrote a memorandum, which he presented to Chamberlain, in which he emphasised the problem of supplying Finland alone, never mind Norway and Sweden, with adequate military equipment to carry the fight to Russia and Germany. 'Their own resources are totally inadequate in this respect, and will probably soon be bombed out of existence', he warned. 'The fact is that we are not yet ready for a diversion on this scale'. Chamberlain recognised that Hankey's arguments presented 'a formidable case'.³⁷ The practical difficulties of the operation, swept under the carpet in the enthusiasm to push it through, now came to the surface. When Campbell reported Léger's view that Norway and Sweden would 'submit' to the passage of troops through their territory en route to Finland, Fitzroy Maclean of the Foreign Office's Northern Department noted that such hopes were 'largely the result of wishful thinking on the part of the French', whose enthusiasm for drastic action remained undimmed.³⁸ In any case, as Gordon Vereker (who had recently succeeded Thomas Snow as British Minister in Finland) reported, it seemed increasingly likely 'that the Finnish Government have no intention of making any . . . appeal'.³⁹ Without the appeal, the whole operation simply could not proceed.

It is ironic that the most concerted activity surrounding the scheme to send troops to Scandinavia was taking place just before the whole situation changed. On 10 March, Halifax asked Dormer and Mallet for their view of how the Norwegians and Swedes respectively would react to the despatch of a force for Finland via their territory. Would they offer resistance? If so, would it be passive or active? 'I am aware that you are probably unable to answer any of these questions with certainty,' Halifax acknowledged, 'but I should be glad of your views'.⁴⁰ Their answers arrived the next day. Dormer thought

³⁷ Hankey Papers HNKY 10/8 Memorandum by Hankey, comments by Chamberlain, 4/3/40.

³⁸ FO 371/24803 N2726/9/56 Campbell to Halifax No. 33 DIPP, 4/3/40.

³⁹ FO 371/24804 N2830/9/56 Vereker to Halifax No. 176, 5/3/40.

⁴⁰ FO 371/24804 N2025/9/56 Halifax to Mallet No. 107 DIPP, Halifax to Dormer No. 81 DIPP, 10/3/40.

that the Norwegian Government ‘might protest and even make a show of resistance but I think that they would not take serious steps to obstruct or offer active opposition’.⁴¹ Mallet was less certain; the Swedish forces would not fire on the Allied force, he thought, but ‘they would not be likely to disobey orders to obstruct and there are seventy thousand of them between the iron mines and the Finnish frontier so that we should depend on their goodwill. In fact’, he concluded, ‘I can only answer that this plan would be a gamble which success alone would justify’.⁴² On that same day, Chamberlain informed Gripenberg, the Finnish Minister, that he simply was not able to assure the Finnish Government that troops would be sent to help them regardless of the Norwegian and Swedish attitude - all plans had been based on the ‘acquiescence’ of those two governments, and he could not and would not give a promise to waive that requirement.⁴³ The operation still hung in the balance.

The next day, 12 March, the War Cabinet reviewed the instructions which were to be issued to the military commanders of the Allied expeditionary forces.⁴⁴ These cast a slightly different light on the question of Norwegian and Swedish acquiescence, suggesting that a certain amount of resistance could, in fact, be tolerated. Halifax was plainly troubled by the orders, which authorised the commanders to return the fire of Norwegian coastal defences at Narvik, should it be encountered. This represented ‘a use of far greater force than he . . . had ever envisaged. He thought that it would be a profound mistake to use force to this extent’. It was agreed that further thought needed to be given to these instructions, and a meeting was called for later that day. As for the other aspects of the plan, it seems that, even at this late stage, with the departure of the forces imminent, major changes were still being made. For instance, instead of going ahead with the current plan

⁴¹ FO 371/24805 N3106/9/56 Dormer to Halifax No. 100 DIPP, 11/3/40.

⁴² FO 371/24805 N3118/9/56 Mallet to Halifax No. 116 DIPP, 11/3/40.

⁴³ PREM 1/408 Account of a conversation between Chamberlain and Gripenberg, 11/3/40.

⁴⁴ CAB 65/12 WM 66 (40) CA, 12/3/40. A copy (undated) of these instructions can be found in PREM 1/419.

of despatching forces to all of the major ports on Norway's western seaboard - Narvik, Trondheim, Bergen and Stavanger - it was now decided to hold back the forces destined for Bergen and Stavanger until the outcome of the landings at Narvik and Trondheim had been ascertained. The Trondheim force was to sail, but was not to attempt to land until news of a successful landing at Narvik had been received. Such last minute alterations lend weight to Cadogan's stinging assessment the following day that the entire plan had been 'amateurish and half-hatched by a half-baked staff'.⁴⁵

As these preparations were being made, the Finns themselves, rather than issuing the appeal which would set the operation in motion, had sent a mission to Moscow to sue for peace terms. News of this had reached London on 7 March; on 12 March a peace treaty was signed, bringing the Soviet-Finnish war to an end. Geoffrey Roberts has observed that the terms of this treaty were surprisingly favourable to the Finns, and that this was due to a Soviet fear of British and French intervention against them in the conflict.⁴⁶ It seems more likely, however, that they merely wanted to extract themselves from an embarrassing military escapade which they had never really wanted in the first place. Whatever the Russian motives may have been, the fall-out from the peace agreement was extensive, fully justifying the Allied view that this small-scale conflict was regarded by the wider world as symbolic of the 'real' war between Britain and France and Germany. In France, Daladier resigned, to be replaced by his Minister of Finance, Paul Reynaud. In London, searching questions were asked in the House of Commons about Britain's role in the conflict, and whether more could have been done to help the Finns. The most pressing problem, however, was what to do about the plan for sending troops to Scandinavia. Clearly it could no longer be implemented under the guise of 'assistance to Finland'. The War Cabinet sat down to resolve this problem on 14 March, the day after reports of the peace agreement

⁴⁵ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 13/3/40.

⁴⁶ Geoffrey Roberts *The Soviet Union and the Origins of the Second World War*, p. 116.

had been confirmed. Churchill presented them with a stark choice: to continue with the preparations, or to disperse the troops being held in readiness.

On the face of it, this was not a difficult choice: Finland had surrendered, and therefore the pretext for the operation had disappeared. However, the iron ore problem - which was the real reason for wanting to send Allied forces to the area - remained. Churchill maintained that, in these circumstances, the seizure of Narvik might still be justified. Chamberlain, on the other hand, thought that the best way of stopping or reducing the ore exports to Germany was not a show of force, but rather to play on Swedish and Norwegian fears of being dragged into the war. He also resurrected the idea of sending a diplomatic mission to Scandinavia. Halifax summed up the objectives of British policy as being 'to try and strengthen our relations with the Norwegians and the Swedes, and to lead up gradually to the concerting of joint measures for guarding Scandinavia from the Russian menace'. Churchill, seeing the prevailing view running against him, pressed once again for the seizure of Sweden's ore fields, arguing that this offered a good chance of 'shortening the length of the war, and perhaps of obviating the slaughter which would otherwise inevitably ensue on the Western Front'. His pleas were to no avail: it was decided, once confirmation of the Finnish ratification of the peace treaty had been received, to disperse the expeditionary force that had been assembled.⁴⁷ Once again, it appeared that the Scandinavian adventure was over before it had begun.

Having assumed such prominence, however, Scandinavia was unlikely to slip from view overnight, especially in the absence of dramatic events elsewhere in the world. The first priority for Britain was to formulate a policy towards the area in the light of the Finnish surrender. What attitude should now be adopted towards Norway and Sweden? A debate in the Foreign Office on this subject was sparked off by two minutes written by

⁴⁷ CAB 65/12 WM 68 (40) CA, 14/3/40.

Vansittart. 'Sweden and Norway will very soon become a Russo-German sphere unless we take most energetic and immediate measures', he warned. The measures he had in mind centred round Allied involvement in the creation of a Scandinavian bloc designed to protect the 'rump' of Finland from absorption by the Soviet Union. 'It will of course be the first step towards war with Russia,' he noted almost casually, 'and war with Russia is now inevitable if we are to take the offensive anywhere instead of allowing to continue a stalemate by which we are losing steadily and indeed disastrously'.⁴⁸ Others took a slightly different view. Cadogan noted in his diary: 'It's rather silly to talk of encouraging a Scandinavian bloc *now*. Only a display of strength will have any affect on neutrals . . . diplomacy is rather hamstrung by being deprived of the necessary apparatus - military strength. *Words* don't do anything'.⁴⁹ He developed this theme in a minute responding to Vansittart's suggestions.

People are inclined to criticize us for insufficient - or inefficient - "diplomatic activity". But the plain fact is that it is only force that counts. If we had been rearming intensively for 7 years, as the Germans have been doing, our diplomacy w[oul]d be just as effective as theirs.⁵⁰

This is as convincing an assessment of the problems facing British diplomacy as a whole during the 'Phoney War' period as any produced at the time or subsequently. It has particular relevance to the Scandinavian situation because it was here, above all, that the weakness of Allied military resources was to be exposed to the world at large. But if it was not possible to influence the Norwegians and Swedes by promises of Allied support, a different approach was needed. Sargent accordingly set out the lines of a new policy:

Instead . . . of trying to ingratiate ourselves with Norway and Sweden by offering them assistance which they dare not accept, it ought, I submit, to be

⁴⁸ FO 371/24815 N3616/2/63 Minutes by Vansittart, 15/3/40 and 18/3/40.

⁴⁹ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 16/3/40.

our policy to take the line of making the Scandinavian States realise that if they are not careful they will find themselves in conflict with Great Britain and France.⁵¹

In his view, then, it was time for the appeasement of Norwegian and Swedish concerns to end.

A new, tougher, stance was indeed adopted towards Norway and Sweden, but it had as much to do with convincing the rest of the world of Allied prestige as it did with the actual Scandinavian situation. Halifax informed the War Cabinet on 18 March that ‘opinion in many [neutral] countries was feeling a sense of discouragement’ following the Finnish surrender. In the circumstances of the ‘Phoney War’, where image was crucial, it was important to counter such impressions. Corbin had already seen Halifax to urge that action in Norwegian territorial waters, up to and including the occupation of key Norwegian ports, should still be seriously considered, and the members of the War Cabinet were apparently inclined to agree.⁵² The following day, having studied the French proposals, they sat down to consider future action.⁵³ Halifax, opening the discussion, put before his colleagues proposals for four operations, of varying severity, which might help to swing the balance of neutral opinion back in favour of the Allies. These were: action against the Narvik iron ore traffic; action in the Caucasus against Russian oil installations; stirring up trouble in the Balkans; and the use of fluvial mines against German inland waterways (codenamed the ‘Royal Marine’ operation). The second and third options seemed to have the greatest objections at that particular moment, and were not pursued further. Nor were the two that remained without problems. The French Government, whilst enthusiastic for the mining of Norwegian waters, was not keen on the use of mines against

⁵⁰ FO 371/24815 N3616/2/63 Minute by Cadogan, 18/3/40.

⁵¹ FO 371/24815 N3616/2/63 Minute by Sargent, 18/3/40.

⁵² CAB 65/6 WM 71 (40) 18/3/40.

⁵³ CAB 65/6 WM 72 (40) 19/3/40.

German waterways, which the War Cabinet perceived as being the more favourable operation. Clearly, this was a matter for the Supreme War Council to decide, and it was agreed to ask the French for a meeting of that body to resolve the issue. As regards policy towards Norway and Sweden, Halifax advocated the firm line suggested by his Foreign Office officials: British interests should be spelled out to the two governments, and it should be made plain to them that ‘if these vital interests were threatened, we should feel ourselves completely free to deal with the situation in any manner we thought fit’. Whilst Churchill still hankered after an attack on Germany’s iron ore supplies, his colleagues seem to have been solidly behind Halifax’s suggestions.

The Supreme War Council was unable to meet until 28 March. In the meantime, the War Cabinet pressed on with preparing a warning to the Norwegian and Swedish Governments, and the French, now under the leadership of Reynaud, continued to argue for firm action in Norwegian territorial waters. It was at this time that the first warning of what lay in store for Scandinavia reached British ears. Mallet forwarded a report from his air attaché to the effect that, according to Swedish intelligence, there was a possibility that Germany was massing aircraft and shipping for an attack on Norway. On reading this telegram, Collier noted: “I wish I could believe this story. German intervention in Scandinavia is just what we want!”.⁵⁴ This was a common view at the time, and the knowledge of what happened next should not detract from its credibility. The desire to land Allied troops in Scandinavia and capture the Swedish iron ore fields still burned strongly; all that was missing, in the wake of the Finnish surrender, was an opportunity to carry out such an operation without incurring the wrath of Norway, Sweden, and the neutral world in general. German aggression against Norway would provide just such a pretext. This, at least, was the theory. The practice proved to be rather less favourable to Allied interests.

⁵⁴ FO 371/24815 N3602/2/63 Mallet to Halifax No. 140 DIPP, 26/3/40. Minute by Collier, 27/3/40.

On 28 March, the Supreme War Council convened at 10 Downing Street. A War Cabinet meeting the previous day had come down in favour of taking a firm stance with Norway and Sweden, and protesting at alleged ‘un-neutral’ conduct with regard to the iron ore traffic. In addition, they had moved some way towards the French position by regarding such a protest not as an isolated incident, but rather as an essential preliminary to the laying of mines in the waters around Narvik at a later date.⁵⁵ It is not clear when or why this change had taken place, but it certainly made for a more harmonious meeting with Reynaud and the French delegation. Chamberlain first laid before the Council the diplomatic action which the British Government proposed to take with the Norwegian and Swedish Governments, then set out the more active measures which might follow the communication. With regard to the Narvik traffic, he announced, ‘it would be a comparatively simple naval operation to block the route, at any particular moment, with a minefield. This would force the oreships into the open sea, where they would be seized by a British naval squadron’. This was, of course, what Churchill had long been advocating and what Chamberlain had hitherto been reluctant to sanction. In addition, Chamberlain referred to the possibility of stopping iron ore supplies from leaving Luleå when it was operational again in the spring. Having thrown these tempting suggestions at the French, he moved swiftly on to a long exposition of the situation in the Balkans. Chamberlain’s opening monologue, according to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff, lasted some ninety minutes. Ironside described it as ‘most masterly and very well done’, and noted that it ‘took all of the thunder out of Reynaud’s mouth and left him gasping with no electric power left’.⁵⁶ The French leader was left to query only whether it was necessary to give Norway and Sweden advance warning that Allied mine-laying might take place. Chamberlain reassured him that, despite the proposed communication to the two

⁵⁵ CAB 65/6 WM 76 (40) 27/3/40.

governments, it 'was not intended to delay the laying of mines to some later period, but to act as soon after giving the warnings as might be thought desirable'. This so closely accorded with his own wishes that Reynaud could only agree to the proposed course of action and express his satisfaction at the close concordance between British and French views on the matter. A timetable for action, from the sending of the communication to the Norwegian and Swedish Governments through to the actual laying of mines (scheduled to begin on 5 April), was agreed later in the meeting.⁵⁷

The sudden turn-around by Chamberlain on the question of mining Norwegian territorial waters requires an explanation. This is to be found in the politics of Anglo-French co-operation. Both governments were seized by an urgent desire for a show of strength following the Finnish surrender. However, whilst the French saw laying mines in Norwegian waters as a suitable response, the British were far keener on the 'Royal Marine' operation, which struck directly at Germany. The French were opposed to 'Royal Marine' on the grounds that German retaliation was likely, and moreover it was likely to fall on them. Chamberlain therefore used the Narvik mines as a bargaining counter with which to secure French agreement to 'Royal Marine'. Furthermore, the French were apparently still keen to occupy some of the Norwegian ports, and it may have been felt by Chamberlain and his colleagues that conceding the mining of Norwegian waters was enough of a sop to the French to enable them to drop their more far-reaching proposals. Even Churchill had told the War Cabinet that, in the circumstances, he was now 'strongly opposed to' the Allied occupation of Norwegian territory.⁵⁸ Yet, with the French Government weakened by the collapse of Finland and the resignation of Daladier, it made sense from the British point of view to allow Reynaud to take action which might bolster his standing. The laying

⁵⁶ Macleod, Roderick & Kelly, Denis (eds.) *The Ironside Diaries 1937-1940* (London: Constable, 1962) pp. 237-8, entry for 28/3/40.

⁵⁷ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 6th Meeting, 28/3/40.

⁵⁸ CAB 65/6 WM 76 (40) 27/3/40.

of mines in Norwegian territorial waters was a price that had to be paid, both for the sake of the Anglo-French alliance, and in order to get 'Royal Marine' accepted by the French. There was certainly support for it in British circles, it is true, but it was an operation about which Chamberlain in particular had never been enthusiastic. To that extent, the second major British intervention in Scandinavia (after the *Altmark* incident) can be said to have been undertaken somewhat reluctantly.

All did not go smoothly, however, in the days following the Supreme War Council's decision. Reports came in from Paris that the French Government were now wavering over support for 'Royal Marine'. This put in jeopardy the package which the Supreme War Council had agreed to, combining the two operations ('Royal Marine' had been timetabled to begin on 15 April, some ten days after the mining of Norwegian waters was scheduled to take place). Chamberlain saw Corbin on the evening of 31 March, and, according to Cadogan, told him quite firmly 'No mines, no Narvik'.⁵⁹ A tense stand-off developed, as illustrated by Cadogan's account of an encounter with Corbin on 2 April:

He finally asked me outright whether we were expecting his Government to go back on their refusal to allow fluvial mines. I said we were certainly hesitating to indulge in 'Narvik' alone and we were hoping the French would reconsider their attitude. He had evidently been instructed to convey to me the impression that they won't. We shall see. Inactivity will be more embarrassing for Reynaud than for us.⁶⁰

It emerged that the problem lay not with Reynaud but with Daladier (now Minister of Defence and an absentee from the Supreme War Council discussion, apparently on account of his still-impaired mobility), who refused to sanction 'Royal Marine' for fear of German retaliation on the French aircraft industry. His opposition to the scheme aroused a certain

⁵⁹ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 1/4/40.

⁶⁰ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 2/4/40.

amount of personal criticism, for instance from Sir Ronald Campbell, who confessed: 'I had thought better of him. But he is, after all, a peasant and has the peasant's faults, I suppose, as well as his qualities'. Amongst these 'faults', he identified 'vindictiveness towards an enemy [in this case Reynaud] and lack of scruple in getting back on him'.⁶¹ In response to a suggestion from Reynaud, Churchill himself flew to France in an attempt to persuade Daladier to change his mind. However, whilst he was engaged upon this ultimately fruitless mission, the War Cabinet decided to go ahead with the mining of Norwegian waters irrespective of whether or not 'Royal Marine' was carried out. Halifax pointed out that, for all the disadvantages of taking this course, it was vital that Reynaud should not fall from power. Chamberlain agreed that the only alternative, should Daladier maintain his opposition, was to do nothing, which would fly in the face of the image fostered by Reynaud's government as one which was 'formed to secure a more vigorous prosecution of the war'. Whilst the matter was being discussed, Halifax took a telephone call from Churchill which reinforced the impression that Daladier would not back down. It was therefore agreed to inform the French Government that:

notwithstanding the great importance which we had throughout attached to carrying out the Royal Marine Operation at an early date and simultaneously with the proposed Operation in Norwegian Territorial Waters, we were, nevertheless, prepared, as a concession to their wishes, to proceed with the latter alone.⁶²

Thus an internal French dispute had effected what can be regarded as a victory for the French policy of taking strong action in Scandinavia only.

The delay occasioned by the dispute with the French pushed back the timetable for the Scandinavian action. The first stage - delivering a warning to the Norwegian and

⁶¹ FO 800/312 Campbell to Halifax, 7/4/40.

⁶² CAB 65/6 WM 82 (40) 5/4/40.

Swedish Governments about their behaviour as neutrals - was implemented on 5 April (the day when the actual mining had been due to begin). Dormer and Mallet presented the notes to the respective governments that evening.⁶³ Not surprisingly, they did not go down particularly well. Mallet reported that Swedish Foreign Minister Günther's first reaction on reading the note was to comment: 'this brings our two countries very close to war'.⁶⁴ Koht, according to Dormer, was 'very clearly hurt'.⁶⁵ In London, Halifax had 'painful' interviews with Colban and Prytz, and later admitted to feeling 'very sorry for them between the hammer and the anvil'.⁶⁶ The following day, having completed the arrangements for the laying of the mines, Halifax confessed

I have never been very keen on this myself as I believe its practical value is rather over rated, but psychologically - and this war seems to be largely one of psychology - it will make the Germans wonder a bit, and I hope that will outweigh the other effects on Neutral minds.⁶⁷

Certainly, the reaction of the Norwegians and Swedes to the notes made not the slightest difference to the preparations for the mining operation. These went ahead as planned, and at 4.30 a.m. on 8 April, the first mines were laid in Norwegian waters.⁶⁸ Perhaps fortunately, Halifax's fears over the reactions of other neutrals were never to be realised. The very next day, Germany invaded Denmark and Norway, and the Scandinavian situation, now so central to the wider war, was once again turned on its head.

As we have seen, reports of a possible German invasion of Norway had been received from Swedish sources at the end of March. On 3 April, Oliver Stanley, the Secretary of State for War, informed the War Cabinet of 'a somewhat garbled report . . .

⁶³ FO 371/24815 N3973/2/63 Halifax to Dormer No. 109 and Halifax to Mallet No. 131, 4/4/40. See Appendix D for the full text of this note

⁶⁴ FO 371/24815 N3978/2/63 Mallet to Halifax No. 166, 5/4/40.

⁶⁵ FO 371/24815 N3989/2/63 Dormer to Halifax No. 130 DIPP, 5/4/40.

⁶⁶ Halifax Papers A7.8.3 (Diary) Entry for 5/4/40.

⁶⁷ Halifax Papers A7.8.3 (Diary) Entry for 6/4/40.

that the Germans had been collecting a strong force of troops at Rostock with the avowed intention of taking action in Scandinavia'. Churchill, however, told his colleagues that 'he personally doubted whether the Germans would land a force in Scandinavia'.⁶⁹ The risk of German retaliation against Norway was seriously considered in the run-up to the operation, and forces to counter such a move (apparently the same units which had previously been intended for the expeditionary force in support of Finland) were assembled, given the codename 'R.4', and ordered to be held in readiness. Their instructions were essentially the same as for the previous operation: to seize the major Norwegian ports, although this time there was to be no immediate entry into Sweden.⁷⁰ 'If the Germans were going to react at all,' Stanley told the War Cabinet, 'they would probably do so very shortly after we had laid the minefield. We should therefore probably soon know whether the forces to be held in readiness in the United Kingdom could be dispersed'.⁷¹ He was not wrong on this point. On 5 April, Charles Howard Smith, the British Minister in Denmark, passed on a report obtained by the American Minister from a 'neutral source' that Hitler had given 'definite orders to send one division in ten ships moving unostentatiously at night to land at Narvik April 8th occupying Jutland same day but leaving Sweden'. Once again, Collier noted 'I wish I could believe this'.⁷² The next day, the War Cabinet was informed that, according to reports, German troops were massing for action against Holland, Belgium and Denmark (but not, apparently, against Norway).⁷³ With hindsight, then, it can be said that there were clear indications of the impending attack. However, these indications were neither wholly reliable nor unambiguous. Such reports were commonplace throughout the 'Phoney War' period, and clearly it would have been impossible to act on every single one. Moreover, the

⁶⁸ CAB 65/6 WM 84 (40) 8/4/40.

⁶⁹ CAB 65/12 WM 80 (40) CA 3/4/40.

⁷⁰ CAB 65/12 WM 83 (40) CA 6/4/40.

⁷¹ CAB 65/12 WM 82 (40) CA 5/4/40.

⁷² FO 371/24815 N3990/2/63 Howard Smith to Halifax No. 73 DIPP.

⁷³ CAB 65/6 WM 83 (40) 6/4/40.

British felt confident that they were, in fact, extremely well-equipped to deal with any German attack on Norway - to the extent that such a move was regarded by many as a highly desirable development. A charge of complacency might even be levelled. The final outcome, therefore, was all the more humiliating because, unlike Poland (or Finland, for that matter) it was confidently felt that a German attack on Norway could be repelled, and a major defeat inflicted upon the Germans, which might have far-reaching repercussions on the course of the war. It was not to be.

It is fair to say that the Norwegian campaign was won and lost within the first twenty four hours. By seizing the main Norwegian ports and aerodromes before the Allies could respond, the Germans effectively sealed their victory at the very outset. In order to relieve Norway, the German troops would have to be forcibly ejected - a task which proved beyond the capabilities of the Allied forces. Humiliating though this defeat was at a military and strategic level, its significance on the wider war was far greater. It was the first real test of the Allied military capabilities, and it was conducted in the full glare of world attention. At a time when the policies of important neutral countries like Italy and Japan still hung in the balance, it was vital that Allied forces gave a good account of themselves. Having talked a good fight for seven months, it was now time for Britain and France to show the world what they could really do. The stakes were high, and the consequences of failure potentially severe. Unfortunately for the Allies, Norway proved to be a less than ideal showcase, especially once the Germans had seized the initiative. High hopes gave way to damage limitation, and the effect produced was almost exactly the opposite of what had been intended when the possibility of a Scandinavian theatre of war had first been raised.

Although they were prepared, and in some cases positively hoping, for German retaliation to the laying of mines in Norwegian waters, the War Cabinet can scarcely have

expected the Germans to get their retaliation in first. Even before the mine-laying operation was begun, however, reports were arriving of a large German naval force apparently heading for Norway. The Royal Air Force and then the Royal Navy were mobilised; ships sailed from both Scapa and Rosyth on the evening of 7 April in an attempt to intercept and engage the German force. The next day, the cruiser squadron which had been embarking troops at Rosyth in preparation for operation 'R.4', disembarked the troops and sailed off to join the hunt.⁷⁴ But a combination of bad weather and good luck saw the German ships evade their pursuers, and, as Operation *Weserübung* (the German invasion of Denmark and Norway) swung into action in the early hours of 9 April, German forces landed at, and successfully captured, all the major ports on the Norwegian coast (including, to the incredulity of many in Britain, Narvik). It was a devastating blow, and, swift though the British response was, the advantage lay well and truly with the Germans.

It is not necessary to give a blow-by-blow account of the Norwegian campaign itself, as existing works cover this ground more than adequately.⁷⁵ What is missing, however, is an appreciation of the wider impact of the hostilities, and the way they influenced, and were influenced by, external factors in British policy. It seems clear that the intrinsic value of the action itself was secondary to the impact which it had on the course of the war. This needs to be borne in mind when considering the decisions that were taken, and the motives behind them. The first such decision was whether or not Britain should intervene in the conflict which erupted on 9 April 1940. It did not tax the War Cabinet for long; right from the start it was apparently taken for granted that Britain could not stand aside from this conflict as she had done with the Polish and Finnish affairs. Of course, as we have seen, the Norwegian Government had been informed back in September 1939 that Britain would regard an attack on Norway as tantamount to an attack

⁷⁴ CAB 65/6 WM 84 (40) 8/4/40.

on Britain. This was largely due to the fact that the occupation of key strategic points in Norway would give an aggressor air bases from which to launch attacks on areas of mainland Britain (especially the naval bases in the north of Scotland) and naval bases which would allow easy access to the North Sea and Atlantic. But it also owed much to the fact that the Chiefs of Staff were convinced that if hostilities were to occur in and around Norway, Britain, by virtue of her naval strength, would have the whip hand. It therefore represented fertile ground for a satisfying victory against the Germans which the world, and the opposition movements within Germany, could not fail to take account of. There was not even the need to assemble an expeditionary force to send to the battlefield, as such a force was already in place and more or less ready to depart. Nor would there be difficulties in transporting such a force, as unlike Poland and Finland there was a long and inviting stretch of coastline readily available for a landing. Even the fact that the Germans were reported to have landed troops at all the major Norwegian ports did not dampen British enthusiasm to take a hand in events. A War Cabinet meeting held only hours after the invasion had begun decided that a force should be sent to seize Narvik (which was mistakenly thought to have escaped German invasion due to its remoteness), and that naval action against the German forces at Bergen and Trondheim should be followed by military expeditions to recapture the two ports.⁷⁶ Churchill summed up the mood of optimism at the second War Cabinet meeting of that hectic day, observing that ‘we were in a far better position than we had been . . . Our hands were now free, and we could apply our overwhelming sea power on the Norwegian coast’.⁷⁷ Cadogan thought that, unless it presaged an attack on the Western Front, the German action was ‘suicidal’.⁷⁸ Even the ever-cautious Halifax noted of the attack: ‘It is a well-executed bit of brigandage, but I am

⁷⁵ See, for example, Derry *The Campaign in Norway*, Buckley *Norway: The Commandos: Dieppe*, Harvey *Scandinavian Misadventure*.

⁷⁶ CAB 65/6 WM 85 (40) 9/4/40.

⁷⁷ CAB 65/6 WM 86 (40) 9/4/40.

not quite sure that it will be as profitable to Germany as she thinks. It eases our path immensely . . .'.⁷⁹ He told his Cabinet colleagues that, as a result of the invasion, 'our chance of getting to Galivare [sic] was better now than at any time since the beginning of the war'.⁸⁰ German aggression, then, facilitated Allied action in Scandinavia which it would otherwise have been difficult to justify. Having been gifted a pretext to go ahead and do what they had long hankered after (occupation of the Norwegian ports and the Swedish iron ore mines), as well as the opportunity to score some cheap successes over the Germans at sea, the War Cabinet were not about to let the chance pass them by. After all, such a situation might not arise again.

At 12.55 p.m. on 9 April, a telegram was sent to Sir Cecil Dormer authorising him to assure the Norwegian Government of 'full aid' from Britain in their struggle to resist the German invasion.⁸¹ At the same time, Mallet was instructed 'to ascertain at once' the Swedish Government's reaction to the developing situation.⁸² It was hoped, rather forlornly, that the Swedes might throw their weight behind the Norwegians and thus open up a line of communication along the Norwegian-Swedish frontier. Mallet's reply was disappointing, if not entirely unexpected: 'the Swedish Government do not intend to enter into war on behalf of Norway. The reason given was that Norway had no army and was already practically in German hands. Sweden would maintain watchful neutrality and would only fight if attacked'. Even the news of British assistance to the Norwegians would not, he thought, move the Swedes from this position.⁸³ Prytz and Boheman (who had been paying a brief visit to London, and now found himself unable to return to Sweden due to the outbreak of the conflict) chastised the unfortunate Rab Butler over the consequences of

⁷⁸ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 9/4/40.

⁷⁹ Halifax papers A7.8.3 (Diary 1940) Entry for 9/4/40.

⁸⁰ CAB 65/6 WM 86 (40) 9/4/40.

⁸¹ FO 371/24829 N4119/1130/30 Halifax to Dormer No. 125, 9/4/40.

⁸² FO 371/24829 N4119/1130/30 Halifax to Mallet No. 143 DIPP, 9/4/40.

⁸³ FO 371/24829 N4135/1130/30 Mallet to Halifax No. 176 DIPP, 9/4/40.

British interference in Scandinavia. 'The major part of their conversation consisted of a long wail about the British action in laying a minefield, which had let loose war on Scandinavia', Butler recorded. 'Mr Boheman . . . said that we had lost four countries in Scandinavia by our action'. As Butler pointed out to his visitors, this was simply not true: the German attack, which must in any case have been planned well in advance, had been set in motion before the mining of Norwegian territorial waters had taken place. Nevertheless, the Swedes did make one extremely pertinent point: that 'Great Britain would ultimately be judged by the force of any action which she now took'.⁸⁴ This was a consideration which was never far from the minds of those framing British policy towards the conflict in the weeks that followed.

The decision to help the Norwegians in their struggle had not been a difficult one to take. More problematic was the question of how best that help might be rendered. The War Cabinet had seized on the German invasion as a golden opportunity to implement the long-cherished action against the iron ore trade by occupying Narvik and possibly even seizing the Swedish ore fields. This decision had been seconded by an emergency meeting of the Supreme War Council, also on 9 April. Reynaud had emphasised at the very outset of this discussion that 'it was important not to lose sight of the Allies' essential aim of cutting off Germany's supply of iron ore from Scandinavia'. It was eventually resolved that, when deciding on the priority to be accorded to recapturing the Norwegian ports, 'the particular importance of securing the port of Narvik, with a view to subsequent action in Sweden designed to deny German access to the iron ore deposits, should be borne in mind'. However, it was argued by Oliver Stanley that the Allies 'must not be blind to the value of reoccupying Trondhjem [Trondheim] and Bergen', especially in view of the greater value of these ports to the Norwegians themselves.⁸⁵ This question - Narvik or Trondheim - was

⁸⁴ FO 371/24829 N4140/1130/30 Minute by Butler, 9/4/40.

⁸⁵ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 7th Meeting, 9/4/40.

to become the central issue in Allied strategy, and reflected a crucial dilemma: should intervention in Norway aim to help the Norwegians to resist the German invasion, or should it rather be undertaken in order to fulfil the Allied desire to cut the German iron ore supplies?

The day after the German invasion of Norway had begun, more accurate information about the position in the Norwegian ports started to come in. In particular, it now became clear that German forces had indeed managed to land in Narvik. This information did not alter the importance attached to the seizure of that port - indeed, Chamberlain informed the War Cabinet that it was the only possible Allied objective because, unlike the other ports, there was no immediate risk of German reinforcements arriving overland. However, it did have an impact on the distribution of the Allied effort. Instead of simply landing at Narvik, it would have to be forcibly taken, and this would require a substantial force. The Military Co-ordination Committee, now (briefly) under the chairmanship of Churchill following Chatfield's retirement, warned against dissipating the available Allied force by attacking more than one port at once. Narvik should be taken first, and the others then picked off one by one. The War Cabinet agreed to this strategy, not least because it offered the prospect of future action against the Gällivare ore fields.⁸⁶ Others were less convinced. On 11 April Butler talked with Colban, who argued that Narvik was not as important as the British appeared to think, and urged that action should first of all be taken to relieve Trondheim instead.⁸⁷ Boheman made the same point to Gladwyn Jebb, describing Trondheim as 'the key to the situation'.⁸⁸ This was reinforced by a telegram from Mallet, in which he gave the conclusions of a discussion he had held with his French colleagues and the three members of an Anglo-French Mission which had rapidly been despatched there in an attempt to put heart into the Swedes:

⁸⁶ CAB 65/12 WM 87 (40) CA, 10/4/40.

⁸⁷ FO 371/24830 N4572/1130/30 Minute by Butler, 11/4/40.

The Norwegian Government are pinning hopes on our recapture of Trondheim soon. This would also re-open communications between Sweden and Great Britain and hearten the Swedes more than any other operation . . . there is no time to be lost in establishing through traffic from Trondheim. It seems to us that the capture of Narvik will be an isolated operation of little assistance to the general situation and in Swedish eyes it will seem patently directed against their iron ore rather than an attempt to help Norway and Sweden.⁸⁹

Mallet also forwarded a message from Dormer, who had managed to escape from Oslo before German troops took control of the city, and remained in contact with the itinerant Norwegian Government and King. 'I venture to urge that military assistance at Trondheim is the first necessity', he reported. 'Seizure of Narvik would be of little assistance to the Norwegian Government'.⁹⁰ In the light of these messages, the War Cabinet took another look at the question. The main objection to switching priority from Narvik to Trondheim came from Churchill, who warned that an assault on Trondheim, unless carefully planned in advance, 'might only lead to a bloody repulse'. The Narvik operation, he argued, stood a much better chance of success. Nevertheless, he agreed to the matter being reconsidered by the Military Co-ordination Committee, and the War Cabinet conceded that 'landings on the Norwegian coast even on a small scale would have an important political effect and from that point of view were desirable'. Such landings should not, however, divert effort from the Narvik operation. The only problem, as Stanley pointed out, was that the French, whose troops would be needed to participate in any additional landings, were insistent that the Narvik operation should take place as soon as possible.⁹¹

⁸⁸ FO 371/24835 N4643/4125/30 Minute by Jebb, 11/4/40.

⁸⁹ FO 371/24830 N4289/1130/30 Mallet to Halifax No. 208 DIPP, 12/4/40.

⁹⁰ FO 371/24830 N4281/1130/30 Mallet to Halifax No. 205, 12/4/40.

⁹¹ CAB 65/12 WM 90 (40) CA, 12/4/40.

Reynaud was clearly anxious to get things moving with regard to Narvik, and pressed Sir Ronald Campbell for any information that he could give about the operation. This drew stinging criticism from Sargent, who described the French attitude as ‘being based on the completely cynical policy of letting Norway and Sweden hang on so long as the Allies can use this occasion to get control of the Gallivare ironfields’. He went on to raise some crucial points which, in his view, the French were overlooking:

- 1) The disastrous effect on the rest of the world, especially on unfriendly neutrals like Italy and frightened neutrals like the Balkan States, if we do not go to Norway’s assistance effectively. (The occupation of Narvik would in no way assist Norway).
- 2) The disastrous effect on the rest of the world *and on Norway and Sweden* if we are suspected of using the difficulties of Norway and Sweden as an opportunity of advancing our own interests at their expense.⁹²

This followed hard on the heels of a minute by Laurence Collier urging that an attempt to dislodge the German forces from southern Norway, as well as the northern ports, was ‘essential for the future attitude of other neutrals, such as Holland, Belgium and the Balkan States, and still more for that of hesitating and dangerous “non-belligerent” States such as Italy and Japan’.⁹³ The Foreign Office, at least, had not forgotten how important it was to consider the effect on other countries of any action which the government might take in Norway. These arguments were put before the War Cabinet on 13 April; both Halifax and Chamberlain now recognised the importance of Trondheim, and only Churchill pressed for Narvik to remain the top priority. His objections were overridden by his colleagues, and it was agreed that preparations should be made for operations around Trondheim to begin as soon as possible. In a related move, it was decided to change the orders given to the Narvik

⁹² FO 371/24830 N4259/1130/30 Campbell to Halifax No. 105 DIPP, 12/4/40; minute by Sargent, 13/4/40.

⁹³ FO 371/24834 N4352/4125/30 Minute by Collier, 12/4/40.

force: it was not now to proceed into Swedish territory and occupy the iron ore fields once it had secured the port, but was instead to hold itself in readiness for action elsewhere in Norway.⁹⁴ The initial hopes of using the Norwegian situation to facilitate British action against German iron ore imports, whilst not entirely dashed, had given way to a greater sensitivity towards the needs of the beleaguered Norwegians - a development which owed much to the cajoling of the Foreign Office and the British representatives on the spot.

Following the War Cabinet's decision, Halifax was able to pass an up-to-date assessment of Britain's intentions to Victor Mallet in Sweden. The recapture of Trondheim, he wrote, was now to be the Allies' 'first major objective'. However, in order to achieve this it was necessary to establish a naval base in Norway. 'Narvik has been selected for this purpose', he went on, 'and will be attacked shortly. We also anticipate opening up operations in the next few days at various other points, as part of a plan, in which the recapture of Trondheim is the principal objective'.⁹⁵ This information, however, was to be passed to the Swedish Government, and should therefore be seen as a piece of Allied propaganda as much as a statement of intent. If Sweden were to be induced to enter the conflict, she had to be persuaded that the Allies were not simply out for their own ends. Nevertheless, the assessment sent to Mallet does seem to accord with the current thinking on strategy. Narvik, it appears, was no longer an objective in itself, but rather a step towards the larger objective of liberating the major Norwegian ports. Even the French had come round to this way of thinking. Reynaud told Campbell that the War Committee (the French equivalent of the War Cabinet) had decided that Trondheim, not Narvik, was now the vital point, 'and that important Allied forces should be landed there as soon as

⁹⁴ CAB 65/12 WM 91 (40) CA, 13/4/40.

⁹⁵ FO 371/24834 N4328/4125/30 Halifax to Mallet No. 177 DIPP, 13/4/40.

possible'. Narvik, he went on, 'now seemed of less importance'.⁹⁶ In London and Paris, foreign policy arguments were winning the day over strategic and military considerations.

All the evidence points to the recapture of Trondheim being the most profitable operation which the Allies could carry out in the circumstances. It would win support from important neutrals, and in particular the Swedes, in a way that an attack on Narvik alone would not. However, it was important for both military and political reasons that the operation should be carried out quickly, before German reinforcements could arrive by land, and before the Norwegians lost heart completely. A direct naval assault offered the best chance of a quick success, and planning proceeded along these lines. 'It will be an operation of much difficulty and risk', Churchill told the King, 'but we must not fail to profit by success & speed'.⁹⁷ The risk came mainly from the danger of air attacks on the ships disembarking troops for the assault. For the first time in the war, critical military decisions had to be taken, and taken quickly. Should a direct assault on Trondheim (codenamed Operation Hammer) take place, and if so, when?

Appeals for the recapture of Trondheim continued to flood in. The principal British intelligent agent in Norway, Captain Foley (the former Passport Control Officer at the Oslo Embassy) reported a warning by the Norwegian Commander-in-Chief, General Ruge, that he could not maintain his troops indefinitely, and was afraid 'that I shall die while [the Trondheim] plan is growing'.⁹⁸ Nor was this concern confined to those with such a direct interest in proceedings. From as far away as Washington, Lord Lothian wrote to urge that a British recapture of Narvik or Trondheim should be played up as a 'vigorous and aggressive action against Germany's treacherous invasion . . . Americans too are profoundly influenced by success'.⁹⁹ Reynaud struck the same note in a letter to

⁹⁶ FO 371/24834 N4325/4125/30 Campbell to Halifax No. 112 DIPP, 13/4/40.

⁹⁷ Churchill to King George VI, 15/4/40, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* p. 1070.

⁹⁸ FO 371/24835 N4459/4125/30 Message from Passport Control Officer, 15/4/40.

⁹⁹ FO 371/24835 N4917/4125/30 Lothian to Halifax No. 559, 18/4/40.

Chamberlain. 'The battle now in progress in Scandinavia is vital to the development of the war', he wrote; 'its outcome may determine both the fate of Allied prestige and simultaneously the attitude of the Balkan countries [and] that of Italy'.¹⁰⁰ The French were anxious, too, that Allied activity went beyond simply the recapture of Norwegian ports. Cadogan promised Corbin that he would inform the Chiefs of Staff of the French desire to push troops deep into Norway once the ports had been captured, although he assured the Ambassador that 'we did not intend simply to sit down at the port of Trondheim'.¹⁰¹ The pressure for significant military action had never been greater.

The crunch came on 18 April. Up until this point, preparations for a frontal assault on Trondheim had been proceeding quickly, and it had been hoped to carry out the operation on 22 or 23 April. The Chiefs of Staff, however, now underwent a change of heart, considering the frontal assault on Trondheim to be too risky, especially in view of the spectre of Italian belligerence and the need to preserve Britain's naval strength for a possible showdown in the Mediterranean. As we have seen in relation to other questions, the War Cabinet were extremely reluctant to act against the advice of the military authorities. However, in this case, the War Cabinet did not even have the opportunity of discussing the matter - the Chiefs of Staff's views went not to them, but rather to the Military Co-ordination Committee. It was this body, presided over by Churchill, which agreed to abandon the frontal assault on Trondheim in favour of a land-based 'pincer' movement, using troops which had already been landed to the north and south of the port to surround and take it from the rear (these troops had originally be intended to create a diversion and to confuse the enemy). This was deemed less risky than an all-out naval assault with troop landings under enemy fire. However, it would also take much longer to execute. According to Churchill's comments to the Military Co-ordination Committee, the

¹⁰⁰ FO 371/24835 N4916/4195/30 Reynaud to Chamberlain (translation), 18/4/40.

¹⁰¹ FO 371/24830 N4935/1130/30 Minute by Cadogan, 19/4/40.

decision to abandon the frontal assault had been approved by Chamberlain on 19 April.¹⁰² The War Cabinet were informed of the changes, which were presented not as a matter for discussion but as a *fait accompli*, on 20 April. Churchill explained

that a direct assault on Trondheim had been felt to involve undue risks both for the Fleet and for our landing parties. If, in the course of a successful assault, the Fleet were to lose a capital ship or some other important unit as a result of enemy air action, this loss would have to be set against the success of the operation.

However, as Stanley pointed out, the position was such that a land assault might not be possible for another month.¹⁰³ The prospect of helping Norway and gaining the respect of the neutral world by a swift and decisive military strike seemed suddenly to be slipping away.

The change in strategy did not go down well in the Foreign Office. Cadogan, who was not given to writing extensive minutes, put down his thoughts on the matter at great length after dining at home on 20 April. Professing himself ‘a little disturbed’ by what had transpired, he accepted the military grounds for the decision, but was not convinced that these outweighed the political argument against it. What was needed, in his opinion, was ‘quick action’ before the German forces in Trondheim and elsewhere became so entrenched that there would be no getting them out. Moreover, if a month was allowed to pass, Germany might launch the feared western offensive, and then ‘we shall have little leisure, or force, to devote to the Scandinavian campaign’. If, on the other hand, action was taken now, ‘the effect on neutrals in general (and Italy in particular) might be incalculable. It might make all the difference whether Mussolini comes in against us or not’. In wider terms, then, there was not much difference between the risk of a frontal attack and the risk

¹⁰² Paper MC (40) 80, 19/4/40, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* pp. 1092-4.

¹⁰³ CAB 65/12 WM 98 (40) CA, 20/4/40.

of a lengthy delay. 'The loss of a capital ship *might* bring Italy into the war against us', Cadogan went on; 'I am afraid that no decisive success for a month is almost as likely to do so'. Finally, he raised the propaganda issue: the fact that delay would add fuel to the view 'that the slow-moving "pluto-democracies" can't make up their minds, can't act swiftly, and have no "punch". This is what Mussolini, amongst others, thinks'.¹⁰⁴ It would appear, then, that both the Chiefs of Staff and Cadogan viewed the Trondheim operation in the light of possible Italian belligerence. The former were not prepared to risk losing capital ships which would be needed in a war against Italy, whilst the latter feared that not taking this risk would bring war with Italy even closer. There is certainly force in both arguments. The Chiefs of Staff, however, had pressed their views so strongly that, even by the time Cadogan wrote his words of warning, the argument had already been won. There was to be no frontal attack on Trondheim.

No sooner had the decision to change tack in Norway been taken than the situation there began seriously to deteriorate. At 10 a.m. on 20 April, the Allied troops which had been landed at Namsos came under heavy aerial attack. Lacking the capacity to defend themselves, the force suffered heavy losses of equipment and ammunition (though few casualties) under the German bombs, and its commander, General Adrian Carton de Wiart, reported that no more men, and no further supplies for the existing force, could be landed there. Aandalsnes, where the other main contingent of troops had been landed, was also bombed.¹⁰⁵ It was a bitter foretaste of things to come. Against this background of increasing difficulties in Scandinavia, the Supreme War Council met for the eighth time, spreading its discussion over two sessions at the Quai d'Orsay (home of the French Foreign Office) on the afternoon of 22 April and the morning of 23 April. It was there decreed that, in view of the continued importance of the iron ore issue, the Norwegian

¹⁰⁴ FO 371/24830 N5004/1130/30 Minute by Cadogan, 20/4/40.

¹⁰⁵ CAB 65/6 WM 99 (40) 21/4/40.

campaign 'should be prosecuted with the utmost vigour', and that the immediate priorities should be the recapture of Trondheim and Narvik. As Chamberlain pointed out,

the main object was to deny access to the ore mines. At the same time the operations in Scandinavia were in some measure in the eyes of the world, a test of Allied strength. A withdrawal might have the most unfortunate results. The psychological factor must be borne very much in mind.¹⁰⁶

This was all very well in theory, but even as the Supreme War Council reasserted its determination to act decisively in Norway, the situation on the ground continued to deteriorate. The German bombing raids continued, and the Allied ground forces were clearly in difficulties. By 24 April, Churchill was reverting to the idea of a frontal attack on Trondheim, delivering to the War Cabinet what Cadogan described as 'an oration . . . almost on the lines of my minute!'.¹⁰⁷ The First Lord also wrote that day to his First Sea Lord to raise the question of 'a revival in some form or other of Hammer'.¹⁰⁸ In view of the battering which the ground forces were receiving at the hands of the German bombers, and the unlikelihood of their being able to participate in the proposed pincer movement, this now seemed to be the only hope of recapturing Trondheim. There still remained a possibility of taking Narvik, despite repeated postponements of action there on the advice of the commanders on the spot, but this, whilst it might be the first step towards denying the Germans Swedish iron ore, would not fulfil the political desiderata of the Scandinavian operations. The satisfaction which had greeted the German incursion into Norway had evaporated, to be replaced by little short of despair. As Cadogan noted on 25 April, 'we're obviously in a bad fix'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶ CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) Eighth Meeting, First Session, 22/4/40

¹⁰⁷ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 24/4/40.

¹⁰⁸ Churchill to Pound, 24/4/40, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* p. 1130.

¹⁰⁹ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 25/4/40.

On 26 April, the British authorities faced up to the unpleasant truth: that the ground forces in Norway would have to be evacuated. Chamberlain told the Military Co-ordination Committee, of which he had now taken the chair himself, that the Chiefs of Staff had made it 'quite clear that there could be no question of proceeding with Operation Hammer', and that the question was therefore 'whether we should evacuate immediately or whether it would be to our advantage to try and retain some forces in central Norway, from which we could harass the Germans'. If, he went on, evacuation was to take place,

there were important political considerations. A precipitate withdrawal now would have a very bad effect on the neutrals, particularly on Italy. There was also the effect on public opinion in this country to be considered. It would therefore be desirable for the evacuation to be carried out as slowly as possible . . . We should then be able to claim it was a strategical triumph and emphasise that it was all part of our plan for concentrating our efforts at Narvik.

This was a rather forlorn hope, especially given the confidence with which the ejection of German forces from the Norwegian ports had initially been predicted. The Committee concluded that Narvik should once more be the primary objective, and that 'our policy should be the ultimate evacuation of Central Norway'.¹¹⁰ Once again, the War Cabinet were presented with this decision as a *fait accompli*, and were left to reflect upon how best to present the withdrawal to the French Government, to the British public, and to the world.¹¹¹

The opportunity to explain the new situation to the French arose with the calling of a meeting of the Supreme War Council for 27 April. Chamberlain set the tone at the outset by describing the current position as 'very grave', and going on to explain why it was no

¹¹⁰ Minutes of the Military Co-ordination Committee, 26/4/40, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* pp. 1139-42.

longer feasible to make an attempt to recapture Trondheim. At the same time, withdrawal would have unfortunate repercussions elsewhere: neutral states ‘would be discouraged, not only in the Low Countries, but in South-Eastern Europe, and the intentions of Italy might be affected’. Reynaud could only concede the seriousness of the situation, and bemoan the fact that the plans upon which the Allies had staked their prestige ‘had all been based on the technical error of thinking that such operations were possible without adequate base ports and without aerodromes’. The only real question that remained was how to extricate Allied forces from central Norway without losing face in the eyes of the world. One way of achieving this was to press on with the second of the Allied priorities in Norway: the recapture of Narvik. If Narvik could be taken before the southern troops were evacuated, Reynaud argued, the psychological impact of the withdrawal might not be so profound. It might be argued that the French had a clearer grasp of the implications of withdrawal, but that the British better appreciated the realities of the situation. There was little chance of the Narvik operation proceeding, and being successful, in the near future, and in the meantime the Allied troops in central Norway were coming under ever greater attack. Immediate evacuation was more of a necessity than a choice, and the Supreme War Council eventually agreed that it should take place, if not immediately, then as soon as could be managed without undue loss of face. All Allied efforts in Scandinavia were once more to be directed towards recapturing Narvik.¹¹²

On the evening of 27 April, just hours after the Supreme War Council had met, the Military Co-ordination Committee agreed to order the immediate withdrawal of Allied forces from central Norway. Chamberlain admitted to the Committee that he ‘would have preferred to hold on in the Trondheim area a little longer’, but that the position on the

¹¹¹ CAB 65/12 WM 104 (40) CA, 26/4/40.

¹¹² CAB 99/3 SWC (39/40) 10th Meeting, 27/4/40.

ground militated against this.¹¹³ The War Cabinet were informed of this decision the following morning, and once again had to grapple with the problem of how best to present the withdrawal to the world. Halifax pointed out that two questions were bound to be asked of the government: ‘Why have we had to evacuate?’, and ‘How was it that we got into this position, and why did we not realise what was likely to happen?’. No-one suggested how these questions might be answered, even though a parliamentary debate on the issue was bound to follow official confirmation of the withdrawal.¹¹⁴ Thus the scene was set for a showdown in Parliament over the embarrassing failure of Allied troops, under British command, to secure a foothold in Norway - a showdown which would lead directly to the downfall of the Chamberlain wartime administration.

The evacuation of troops from central Norway, which was complete by 2 May, was not quite the end of the story as far as Allied intervention in the area was concerned. Narvik, now reinstated to its former position as the principal target for Allied operations, kept hopes alive for some kind of face-saving success in Norway. This downsizing of Allied objectives was welcome to some of those who had harboured doubts about the extensive operations which had previously been planned. Hankey, for one, professed himself to be ‘delighted’ at the adoption of a new plan which confined operations to northern Norway, and advocated the establishment of a sizeable force there in order to keep the Norwegian theatre open as a ‘running sore’ to the Germans.¹¹⁵ Others were less enthusiastic. On 29 April Reynaud sent a telegram to London - which was given very short shrift - asking that the evacuation be reconsidered.¹¹⁶ Several days later, Dormer (who had himself been evacuated from Norway, along with most of his staff, the Norwegian King, and senior Norwegian Government officials) arrived at the Foreign Office with the

¹¹³ Military Co-ordination Committee minutes, 27/4/40, quoted in Gilbert *At the Admiralty* p. 1150.

¹¹⁴ CAB 65/12 WM 106 (40) CA, 28/4/40.

¹¹⁵ HNKY 10/8 (Hankey Papers) Hankey to Chamberlain and Churchill, 29/4/40.

Norwegian Foreign Minister, Professor Koht, and Minister for Defence, Colonel Ljungberg. 'I gather they're *all* a bit disgruntled - small blame to them, poor darlings', noted Cadogan. 'But', he added trenchantly, 'we're not going to sit quiet too long under their rather offensive reproaches. Considering their complete inefficiency - and treachery - they oughtn't to get off without retort'.¹¹⁷ The Norwegians were twice reassured that the Allies had no intention of abandoning them completely. On 30 April, General Ironside telegraphed General Ruge at the Norwegian Army's Headquarters to report that Britain and France 'are firmly resolved to continue the fight in Norway in support of Norwegian independence. The withdrawal from the Trondheim in no way weakens their determination'.¹¹⁸ On 4 May Halifax authorised Mallet to tell the Norwegian President, Charles Hambro, that 'the Allied Government [sic] are fully determined to put all of their effort into consolidation of northern Norway, with a view to future operations'. Hambro, Mallet reported, 'welcomed [the] assurance but was sceptical if we could hold Narvik when recaptured'.¹¹⁹ Hambro's judgement was later proved to be quite correct. In any case, it is difficult to blame the Norwegians for feeling let down by the Allies - especially as it was largely in response to the threat of Allied intervention in Scandinavia that the Germans had launched their invasion. The Norwegians were not the only ones feeling aggrieved. Boheman complained to Mallet that Sweden was now cut off and powerless to resist any German attack - an example, Mallet observed, of 'the despair which our abandonment of Norway is creating in official circles here'.¹²⁰ Clearly, something needed to be done quickly in order to salvage the Allied reputation.

¹¹⁶ ACAD 1/9 (Cadogan Diary 1940) Entry for 29/4/40. Halifax described this telegram as 'very disquieting', A7.8.3 (Halifax Diary 1940) entry for 29/4/40.

¹¹⁷ ACAD 1/9 (Diary 1940) Entry for 5/5/40.

¹¹⁸ FO 371/24830 N4914/1130/30 Ironside to Ruge, 30/4/40.

¹¹⁹ FO 371/24836 N5395/4125/39 Halifax to Mallet No. 356, 4/5/40 (the reference to 'the Allied Government' was a typographical error - the draft of this telegram, written by Cadogan, has 'the Allied Governments'); Mallet to Halifax No. 482, 6/5/40.

¹²⁰ FO 371/24831 N5394/1130/30 Mallet to Halifax No. 457 DIPP, 3/5/40.

One of the steps taken following the withdrawal was the landing of Allied forces in Iceland. This was approved by the War Cabinet on 6 May, largely out of fear that Germany would beat them to it if they waited for much longer. Charles Howard Smith, formerly the British Minister in Denmark, was charged with leading the diplomatic side of the occupation, accompanied by a battalion of Marines. It was rather a delicate operation: there was talk of asking the Icelandic Government in advance to allow the occupation, but Halifax observed, apparently without any irony, that the principal objection to this was ‘that they would inevitably refuse’. It was decided instead that Howard Smith, on his arrival, should seek out the Icelandic Foreign Minister and inform him that allowing the occupation was the only way in which Iceland’s neutrality could be preserved. He was also to dangle to prospect of trade agreements before the Icelanders which would bring them ‘material advantages’.¹²¹ The occupation force sailed on the morning of 8 May, and was due to arrive in Reykjavik at 5 a.m. on the fateful date of 10 May.¹²²

In Narvik, too, things were coming to a head. The War Cabinet decided on 4 May that it was necessary to reach a ‘definite conclusion’ there within the next week. Lord Cork, the naval commander in charge of the operation, was promised ‘the full support of the War Cabinet in any action he might think fit to take to bring matters to a conclusion in the Narvik area’.¹²³ Again, however, there were tactical disagreements between the commanders on the spot as to the best way of taking the port. The War Cabinet accepted Cork’s view that a direct assault, although not certain to succeed, was the best policy in view of the political necessity for taking Narvik as soon as possible, and authorised him on 8 May to proceed along these lines.¹²⁴ These preparations were in full swing when the German offensive in the west began. History records that Narvik was taken by Allied

¹²¹ CAB 65/7 WM 113 (40) 6/5/40.

¹²² CAB 65/7 WM 115 (40) 8/5/40.

¹²³ CAB 65/7 WM 112 (40) 4/5/40.

¹²⁴ CAB 65/13 WM 115 (40) CA, 8/5/40.

forces on 28 May 1940, only to be evacuated in a matter of days. The evacuation was completed by 8 June, and the German garrison, which had been pushed back to the Swedish frontier by the Allied assault, was left to re-occupy the port which it had so recently abandoned. But by this time, the world's attention was no longer focused on Scandinavia. The spotlight had shifted to the western front, and Scandinavia resumed its position, which it was to retain for the remainder of the war, as a mere side-show to the more dramatic events unfolding elsewhere.

The rush to judge the Norwegian campaign, led by the House of Commons on 7 and 8 May, quickly established the whole operation as a disaster: a result of incompetence, bad planning, and bad leadership. Historians, on the other hand, are no longer quite so condemnatory. British naval successes, especially in the early days of the campaign, are often singled out for their significance, and there can be no doubt that Germany's naval strength, never her greatest asset, was dealt a crippling blow by the Royal Navy. Ironically, however, it was the Navy's failure to intercept and engage the German troop ships bound for the Norwegian ports at the very outset of the invasion which led to most of the subsequent problems. Had the Germans not taken Narvik, Trondheim, Stavanger and Bergen with such ease, things might have been very different: Allied troops and supplies could have poured in through these ports and put real pressure on the German forces advancing from the south. Of course, the bulk of these Allied troops would have to have been transferred from the western front, thus weakening Allied strength there at the very time when Germany planned to invade - but then again, problems in Norway might have led Hitler to think twice about launching the western offensive. In other words, events in Norway had the potential to exercise a significant impact on the future course of the war.

The greatest significance of the campaign, however, lay in the reaction of other countries to it. It was a test of strength between the Allies and Germany, and as such was

taken as a useful guide to the way the wider conflict would develop. This inevitably influenced the way in which countries not directly involved in the conflict would regard the belligerents, and, in some cases, affected their attitude towards possible involvement in the war. As we have seen, it was Italy whose attitude was most likely to be affected, and British policy in the Norwegian campaign was always conducted with one eye on the Italian threat. The most direct example of this is the abandonment of the direct naval assault on Trondheim, largely because the Chiefs of Staff feared losing one or more capital ships which would be needed in the event of Italian belligerence. There was also Japan to consider, again because of the demands which conflict in the Far East would place on British naval forces. The United States, too, had always to be taken into account: the decision to help Norway, once she had been invaded, must have been influenced in part by a concern over the American reaction if Britain stood aside whilst another small country was devoured by Germany. The smaller European neutrals were yet another factor. If Britain and France wanted to influence the policy of these countries, it had to be shown that the Allies were capable of taking strong action against Germany, and, in the long run, defeating her. Neutral co-operation with Allied action against Germany, especially contraband control, depended upon the countries involved having sufficient confidence in the Allies to run the risk of angering Germany. Sweden was a particular case in point: up until the German invasion of Norway, the Swedish government was prepared to assist the Allies by gradually running down supplies of iron ore to Germany. Implicit in this co-operation was the confidence that, if she was faced with German aggression, the Allies would come to Sweden's help. A major part of the original Narvik operation had been the sending of Allied troops into central and southern Sweden to protect her in the event of a German attack. After Norway had been over-run by the Germans, however, Sweden had little choice but to comply with any requests that Germany might make to her. Allied

assistance to Sweden was by then a physical impossibility, and it seems inappropriate to castigate the Swedes for bowing to German wishes after April 1940. If Norway had been held by the Allies, it would almost certainly have been a different story. Such were the stakes for which the Norwegian conflict was fought.

Ultimately, of course, it was the fall of France rather than the fall of Norway which set the seal on the opening phase of the war. However, the knowledge of this should not detract from the significance of events in Scandinavia. Within a few months of the outbreak of war, this relatively unimportant corner of Europe had become the crucible of the entire conflict. This unexpected turn of events was largely a product of the way in which the conflict developed - or failed to develop - in the wake of the British and French declarations of war on Germany. Whilst economic measures remained virtually the only action which the Allies were prepared to take against Germany, it is not difficult to see why Germany's iron ore trade with Sweden became a focus of attention. Attempting to stop this trade was one way of prosecuting the war in the absence of serious hostilities. The Soviet invasion of Finland, as well as drawing the eyes of the world to Scandinavia, offered an opportunity to take action against this trade, and gave rise to strategic plans which soon built up their own momentum. Even after the conclusion of the Soviet-Finnish conflict, this momentum remained, fuelled by a lack of alternative ways of hitting at Germany, and a general desire to act more decisively in a war in which the Allies seemed to have lost the initiative - if, that is, they had ever had it. It was Hitler, however, who seized the initiative in Scandinavia. The German invasion was a consequence of the increasing, and quite open, Allied interest in Scandinavia. Having gained the upper hand by an opening move which combined both luck and strategic brilliance, it was a relatively simple matter for the Germans to hold onto their gains. Even the overwhelming naval superiority of the Allies could not offset the advantages which the German action had

secured. For all the finger-pointing and laying of blame that took place subsequently, the simple truth is that Britain and France had little choice except to come to the aid of Norway, but little chance of actually getting the Germans out. Chamberlain, for one, seems to have grasped this stark truth, writing to his sister on 4 May:

Looking back I do not see how we could have done anything but what we did. . . . My own mind, and this is the view of some of the best experts, inclines to the conclusion that even if we had been able to capture Trondjem [Trondheim] our success would only have been temporary. . . . It seems likely in the end that after having spent an enormous effort we should have had to retire and then how much greater would have been the loss of prestige.¹²⁵

Halifax made much the same point in his diary on 3 May, noting that, despite the unfortunate effect on the neutrals, withdrawal was the only sensible option. ‘This war is not going to be won by prestige, but by actual achievement,’ he observed.¹²⁶ It was, indeed, the lack of both prestige and achievement, in the Norwegian campaign and in the war as a whole, which brought about the downfall of the Chamberlain wartime administration just a few days later.

¹²⁵ NC 18/1/1153 Chamberlain to Hilda, 4/5/40.

¹²⁶ Halifax Papers A7.8.4 (Diary 1940) Entry for 3/5/40.

9. CONCLUSION

Speaking as a professional historian, I am positively convinced that posterity will recognise in you one of the greatest and wisest of our statesmen in the whole history of British foreign policy . . .

Canon Charles Smyth to Chamberlain, 13 May 1940¹

The verdict of history is never easy to anticipate. Future events have a habit of shaping our view of the past in ways that can be quite unpredictable. Heroes can become villains, the wise can be made to look foolish, and the innocent can be saddled with guilt for events which they did not live to see. Had Canon Smyth reserved judgement for a month or two, he might not have been so sure about Neville Chamberlain's place in British history. On the other hand, had he been writing some thirty or forty years later, he would have found many in the historical profession who would have agreed at least partly with his rather fulsome assessment. All such judgements must, by their very nature, be both tentative and transient. There is a lot to be said for avoiding them altogether: history should seek to explain the past, not to judge it. This conclusion, therefore, is an attempt to bring together the strands of the study in order to produce a coherent explanation of British foreign policy between 3 September 1939 and 10 May 1940.

The first, and most important, point to make is that British policy in this period was faced with severe constraints, imposed by the circumstances of the time. Unless this is understood, the policies themselves cannot be understood. Britain was at war: a war which it was ill-equipped to prosecute. The scale of the conflict, both actual and potential, meant that it was beyond the capabilities of Britain's existing resources, and those of her allies at

¹ NC 7/11/33/161 Canon Charles Smyth (Corpus Christi College, Cambridge) to Chamberlain, 13/5/40.

the time, to push for a quick military conclusion. Laying the blame for this state of affairs at the feet of Chamberlain's own government, or the governments of his predecessors, serves little purpose. It is easy to say, with the benefit of hindsight, that more should have been done to equip the country for war. In order to be fully prepared for a conflict in 1939, however, steps would have to have been taken many years earlier, when support for the massive rearmament programme which would have been necessary is unlikely to have existed. Nor was it in the interests of any British Government to be seen, less than twenty years after the end of the 'war to end all wars', to be preparing for another such conflict. The events of 1914 - 1918 had redefined the concept of war, and developments in aerial warfare since that time had made the prospect of a future conflict even more terrifying. It is, then, difficult to blame any government for wishing to avoid involvement in another war (a fact which also helps to explain the behaviour of many neutral countries once the conflict had actually broken out).

Faced with the circumstances of September 1939, British foreign policy was forced into a conciliatory attitude towards certain countries, especially those with whom her relations were not good. The classic examples of this are Japan and Italy. Both had reason to resent British influence in their own part of the world, and would have been only too happy to increase their own power at the expense of the British Empire. As well as giving an added incentive to Britain not to risk a showdown with Germany until her prospects for success were more favourable, this meant that Italy and Japan had to be treated with kid gloves in order to prevent them from throwing in their lots with Germany against Britain and France. Japan was the more complicated problem. For a start, it would be much harder to repel a Japanese attack on British interests than an Italian one. The distances involved were far greater, and the alliance with France, which might have proved invaluable in a conflict against Italy, was practically worthless against Japan. The key players in the Far

East, apart from Britain and Japan, were the United States, the Soviet Union, and China. China, weakened by internal divisions, was already in the grip of a conflict with Japan. The Soviet Union, which had no great love for the Japanese, was concentrating her attention on the west, and had actually withdrawn from the on-going territorial disputes with the Japanese over Manchuria on the outbreak of the European conflict. She was also, for the time being at least, an associate of Germany - Japan's nominal ally. The United States, whilst implacably opposed to Japan's quest for a 'new order' in East Asia, could not be relied upon to pull the British chestnuts out of the fire should hostilities break out in the area. Faced with these realities, Britain had little option but to delay any showdown with the Japanese until the circumstances were considerably more favourable. The British policy, which was one of trying to reduce tension by resolving outstanding disputes with the Japanese, was a recognition of this. Unfortunately, the biggest such dispute was over British support for the Chinese Government, and this support could not be compromised without causing a rift with the Americans. Far-reaching improvements in Anglo-Japanese relations, whilst highly desirable, were therefore out of the reach of the Chamberlain wartime administration. This meant that a big enough event could undo all the good work done by Sir Robert Craigie to smooth things over with the Japanese in the opening months of the European war. Short of securing a military alliance with the United States against future Japanese aggression (which at that time was highly unlikely), it is difficult to see what more could have been done. Certainly things could have been handled a lot worse, although, as the *Asama Maru* incident indicated, it is doubtful whether the moderate Japanese Government then in power would have gone to war with Britain without severe provocation. For the time being, at least, war was in neither country's best interests.

Italy presented many of the same problems as Japan, and similar tactics were followed to reduce the risk of a flare-up in the Mediterranean. There were never any

illusions about how Mussolini would react to the developing conflict. If things went well for Germany, he would be likely to bring Italy into the war on the German side in order to take a share in the spoils. If, on the other hand, the Allies looked like winning, Italian neutrality would probably be assured. It was even thought possible that Italy might switch sides and join the Allies. Her behaviour in the First World War could not be ignored, and whatever degree of affection might have existed between Mussolini and Hitler, the Duce was first and foremost an opportunist. Moreover, the latter part of 1939 witnessed a barely-disguised disillusionment throughout Italy with the Germans. Sir Percy Loraine made good use of this in his dealings with Count Ciano, although he was perceptive enough to realise that it was Mussolini who would ultimately dictate the course which Italy followed, and that a serious Allied setback against Germany would swiftly negate any improvement in relations which diplomacy might achieve. As well as smoothing things over generally with Italy, therefore, it was British policy to convince Italians in general, and Mussolini in particular, that Germany could not and would not win the war. This proved to be easier said than done. After Hitler had met Mussolini at the Brenner Pass in March 1940, it became clear that Britain was at a distinct disadvantage so far as influencing the Duce was concerned. The despatch of glowing reports of British naval successes in the early days of the Norwegian campaign was a spirited but ultimately futile attempt to counter the flow of German military propaganda into Rome. Whilst Hitler retained a direct line to Mussolini, the Allies had to make do with a far less effective means of transmitting information. The only thing that would really have made the Duce sit up and take notice was an outright defeat of the German forces in Scandinavia - something which proved to be beyond the capabilities of the Allies. As it was, the battering which the Allied forces in Norway suffered at German hands brought the prospect of Italian belligerence ever closer, and there was nothing that British diplomacy could do about it.

The Soviet Union posed slightly different problems. She did not represent a direct threat to British interests in the same way that Italy and Japan did. Only India was really in the firing line, and the risk of a Soviet attack on the 'jewel in the crown' seemed remote. Indeed, it was an open question just how hostile towards Britain the Soviet Union actually was. The Nazi-Soviet Pact raised as many questions as it answered about Soviet policy. What mattered more was how much help the Russians would give to Germany's war effort. Initially, it was hoped that the Germans and the Russians would fall out before too long, and whilst this possibility remained it made sense not to antagonise the Soviets - this was the thinking behind the British decision not to protest in Moscow at the Soviet incursion into Poland. It was important that Britain should be able to exploit any breach between Germany and Russia, and this meant keeping diplomatic channels open (much to the discomfort of Sir William Seeds in Moscow). This tactic was pursued in tandem with attempts to secure economic agreements between Britain and the Soviet Union, which was seen as the best way, in the circumstances, of improving political relations.

The Soviet invasion of Finland placed Anglo-Soviet relations in cold storage for the duration of the subsequent conflict. When the thaw set in following the Finnish surrender, Britain's position had undergone a marked shift. British plans to intervene militarily in the Finnish conflict and the scheme for attacking Russian oil installations in the Caucasus reflect a more robust stance towards the Soviet Union, whose intervention in the war was no longer viewed with any great concern. Indeed, if Russian belligerence meant that Germany would receive less material help from her Soviet ally, such a development might actually prove advantageous to Britain. Nevertheless, British attempts to re-start trade negotiations following the Finnish surrender indicate that hopes of creating a closer Anglo-Soviet relationship had not entirely been abandoned. The key consideration, as with the abortive Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance talks in August 1939, was Germany. British policy

towards the Soviet Union, like British policy towards Italy and Japan, was determined primarily by the state of war which existed between Britain and Germany. Because Britain's fear of war with the Soviets was considerably less than her fear of war with either Italy or Japan, she was better able to enforce economic measures against Germany, such as contraband control, where Russian interests were involved. Whereas it was British policy to avoid any serious rift with the Japanese and Italians, the maintenance of an uneasy calm in Anglo-Soviet relations owed much to chance. Who can say what would have happened if the Soviet-Finnish war had not ended when it did, and if, as a consequence, the plan to send aid to the Finns via Norway and Sweden had been put into operation? The fact that the troops sent to Finland would have been 'volunteers' rather than regular British troops meant that war with the Soviet Union would not be an inevitable consequence of the plan. It was, however, a possibility. The bombing of Baku might have produced the same outcome. The results of Anglo-Soviet hostilities can only be speculated upon, but it might have made things very interesting when Germany decided to launch her attack on Russia in 1941.

Since there was no reason - and certainly no desire - to think that the Germans would be able to achieve any significant breakthrough on the Western Front, it was thought that the really decisive action in the war would probably take place, if at all, in other theatres. On the outbreak of war, it seemed likely that the Balkans would be the next part of Europe to be drawn into the conflict, and steps were taken to meet this eventuality. Britain worked strenuously to secure firstly a treaty with Turkey, and secondly a unified bloc of Balkan states. Whilst the French increasingly came to regard the Balkans as a preferable theatre of war to their own territory, and pressed for the despatch of an Allied expeditionary force to Salonika, British policy was firmly aimed at keeping the war out of the Balkans. An unlikely ally was found in the shape of Italy, who also wanted the Balkans

to remain neutral - if only until she felt strong enough to take action there herself. The division of Poland between the Germans and the Russians seemed to offer some protection against a German sweep into Roumania, but Soviet expansionism elsewhere had raised the threat of a Russian attack on Bessarabia, and possibly beyond, or else a combined German-Soviet offensive in the Balkans. Italian neutrality was certainly a favourable development so far as Balkan security was concerned, but also an unreliable one, since Mussolini might at any moment decide to open his account in the war with a strike against, for instance, the Dalmatian coast. This raised the spectre of war with Italy, which is not what Britain wanted at all. When the danger of an Italian offensive in the Balkans suddenly emerged in April 1940, Britain and France decided that an Allied intervention in that area would be conditional upon the attitude of the Balkan states themselves. If they were unable or unwilling to resist aggression, or to act together to do so, Britain and France were reluctant to intervene. Much of the thinking behind this came down to military insufficiency, and the pessimistic attitude of the British Chiefs of Staff about what could actually be achieved militarily in the Balkan region. As the launchpad for a future assault on Germany when resources permitted, say in a year or two's time, the Balkans held a certain appeal for the Allies. For the duration of the Phoney War, however, it made sense to keep them neutral.

Scandinavia did not get off so lightly. The Soviet invasion of Finland opened the door for a more active form of economic warfare against Germany, with Swedish iron ore deposits as the target. It was a combination of accessibility and opportunity - oil supplies from southern Europe were deemed at least as important to the German war effort as the Swedish iron ore, but they were much harder to get to. Tempted by the prospect of striking a blow at the Germans - and the Russians - the War Cabinet spent the early part of 1940 contemplating plans for intervention in Scandinavia. The stumbling block was the attitude of Norway and Sweden. In their eagerness to act, the War Cabinet paid too little attention

to the prospect of the Scandinavian governments refusing to co-operate in Allied plans. Given that these plans involved the occupation of Norwegian ports and Swedish territory, such nonchalance by the British was a little careless. The fact that the scheme for intervention in Scandinavia was still pursued, in a scaled-down form, after the Finnish surrender indicates just how desperate the British Government were to take action - any action - which might convince the world that they were serious about prosecuting the war against Germany. Unfortunately, they gave too much away, and Germany was able to foil British plans by launching an invasion of Denmark and Norway. Instead of taking the initiative, the British were once again reduced to reacting as best they could to a German act of aggression.

The importance of Britain's reaction to the German attack on Denmark and Norway was immense. Having talked a good fight for seven months, the Allies now had to opportunity to show what they could do. A major reverse for Germany might have forced Hitler to rethink his plans for attacking in the west, as well as giving encouragement to pro-Allied neutrals, and causing Italy, Japan and the Soviet Union to reconsider their position. Unfortunately for the British, the opposite occurred, and the Allied withdrawals further shook neutral confidence about the ability of the Allies to offer them effective help in an emergency. In the Balkans, for example, promises of Allied intervention in the event of German, Soviet or Italian aggression formed the linchpin of Britain's strategy. However, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Finland, and now Denmark and Norway had now all been savaged by the aggressor states whilst the democracies offered little or no effective assistance. This, at any rate, was the perception. In the face of such one-sided developments, it was difficult to imagine vulnerable neutral countries going out of their way to help the Allies to put economic pressure on their enemies, let alone entering the war on the Allied side. If the Italians, for instance, had still entertained any doubts as to which

horse to back, the Norwegian campaign must have gone a long way towards resolving them. To this extent, British policy in Scandinavia can only be regarded as a public relations disaster.

One thing which emerges clearly from this study is that Phoney War period was fundamentally and radically different from the periods which preceded and followed it. Before the German western offensive took place and France fell, nobody ever imagined that things would turn out quite so disastrously. Throughout most of the Phoney War, a sense of satisfaction with the way in which the conflict was going pervaded the War Cabinet. The longer Germany delayed making a decisive strike, the better prepared the Allies would be to repel it. This was what Chamberlain meant when, on 4 April 1940, he publicly referred to Hitler as having ‘missed the bus’ in not attacking Britain and France earlier.² Repeated invasion scares which came to nothing had convinced him that Hitler did not have the confidence, the resources, or the support to launch a major western offensive. In the absence of such an offensive, the future course of the war remained a mystery. There was no certainty that there would be any major clash of arms between the belligerents. If there was such an attack, the 1914 - 1918 conflict seemed to suggest that it would not be immediately decisive. There was certainly no thought of France being swiftly over-run by the Germans. Halifax had told his War Cabinet colleagues in December 1939 that ‘if the French Government wanted to make peace, we should not be able to carry on the war by ourselves’.³ British strategy was therefore based upon the assumption that the Anglo-French alliance would form the bedrock of a future victory against Germany. So confident was Chamberlain that the two powers between them could hold Germany that he wrote to his sisters: ‘Heaven knows I don’t want the Americans to fight for us - we should

² NC 4/5/66 Notes for a speech to the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, 4/4/40.

³ CAB 65/2 WM 107 (39) 7/12/39.

have to pay too dearly for that if they had a right to be in on the peace terms'.⁴ Britain would, of course, have welcomed American assistance in a Far Eastern conflict, but as yet such a conflict was not at the forefront of Chamberlain's mind. Indeed, the Prime Minister, like many historians, is open to accusations of an overly 'Euro-centric' view of the conflict. Whilst it is true that the actual belligerents were, at the time, confined to Europe, it seems clear from this study that the war had a global dimension right from the very start. Even if Chamberlain was reluctant to dwell upon the wider context of the struggle, Halifax and the Foreign Office were well aware of the problems caused by the global political situation, and British policy was framed with these problems constantly in mind.

By taking such a wide-ranging approach to British foreign policy in this study, it has been possible to place the events and the policies of the Phoney War period into a more historically accurate context than has previously been attempted. It is only by looking at the larger picture that individual policies can be understood. As we have seen, this interdependence could take complex and surprising forms. The limited resources with which Britain had to fight the war against Germany forced her into attempts to improve her relations with countries which might be tempted to throw their weight behind Hitler. These attempts were beset by difficulties, and consequently the results were far from spectacular. They were, however, necessary. To castigate the British Government for continuing to 'appease' Italy and Japan during the Phoney War is to miss the point: 'appeasement' was, in the circumstances, the only sensible approach to take towards these countries. Even the Soviet Union could not entirely be forsaken, although her behaviour in the early months of the war made it virtually impossible to prevent relations from deteriorating. By 1940, Britain had practically given up on her as a future ally, but even then was only prepared to consider hostile action against her if it would have an effect on the German war effort.

⁴ NC 18/1/1140 Chamberlain to Ida, 27/1/40. He was complaining of American objections to the British examination of their mail.

In the case of Scandinavia and the Balkans, the explanation for British policy is also to be found elsewhere. The Balkan states looked set to become a future theatre of war, and it was therefore necessary to prepare the ground for Allied intervention as effectively as possible. The key determinants of future developments in the area were Germany, Italy and the Soviet Union. Despite the instability of the Balkans, however, the British Government were reluctant to make any firm commitment in advance to send troops to the region. This meant that, had an invasion taken place, the Allied response would have been held up whilst the necessary consultations took place. If the example of Norway is anything to go by, this would have allowed the invading power, be it Germany, Russia or Italy, to obtain a secure foothold from which it would have been difficult to dislodge them. This caution was largely down to the fact that sending troops to the Balkans would reduce Allied strength on the Western Front. Again, it was a case of trying to juggle the limited resources which the Allies then had at their disposal.

Policy towards Scandinavia can largely be explained in terms of the way in which the war developed in its early months. In the continuing absence of large-scale military offensives, the economic war gathered more and more importance, since it represented the only way of actively prosecuting the war against Germany. Preventing Swedish iron ore from reaching Germany came to be seen as a way of shortening the conflict, and plans for achieving this were pursued with zeal. These plans backfired when Hitler, alarmed by British revelations about their preparations for intervening in the area if the Soviet-Finnish war had continued, took the initiative and ordered the seizure of Denmark and Norway. The Allies had little option but to come to the aid of the Norwegians, with unfortunate consequences for themselves and their reputation. In a sense, they were the architects of their own misfortune, having previously viewed the prospect of hostilities in Scandinavia with enthusiasm. Taking no action at all against the Germans, however, might have been

just as damaging for Allied prestige. The Finnish surrender to Soviet forces was regarded, rightly or wrongly, as a setback for the Allies. This pushed Britain and France in the direction of taking some form of positive action, in order to dispel the notion that they were incapable of taking the initiative. The mining of Norwegian territorial waters and the 'Royal Marine' plan for the mining of German inland waterways were pushed through in an attempt to counter this impression of Allied weakness. Following the German aggression in Norway, the British and French Governments were in no doubt that military intervention, however hazardous, was the right course of action to take. Abandoning another innocent neutral country to a foreign invader would have reduced Allied prestige still further. It helped, of course, that the prospects of Allied military success in Norway appeared good. The Norwegian campaign was a battle which the War Cabinet were confident they could win. Even if southern Norway was beyond help, they felt certain that the Germans could swiftly be ejected from the main ports further to the north. Events were to prove otherwise.

The German offensive which began on 10 May 1940 changed the course of the war completely. It is fitting, therefore, that its advent coincided with the fall of the Chamberlain wartime administration. The eight months of the Phoney War - that 'preliminary stage' which Chamberlain had confidently predicted would not occur - are a fascinating and thought-provoking period of history. By looking in detail at British foreign policy as a whole during these months, this study has thrown new light on British thinking at the beginning of the Second World War. It has been shown how, hamstrung by limited military resources and over-stretched in terms of her global responsibilities, Britain had little choice but to try to limit the conflict, both in terms of the number of countries and the amount of territory involved, and also with regard to the way that the war was fought. Large-scale military activity on a number of fronts was clearly out of the question. British

diplomacy, meanwhile, was left with the problem of dissuading potential enemies from following the German lead. There were a number of ways in which this could be done. One was to convince the world that Britain and France, by virtue of their combined strength, would win the war. In the absence of serious hostilities, it was possible to press this line without fear of contradiction on the battlefield. Another way was to emphasise that an Allied victory would be in everybody's best interests, and a German victory in the interests of no-one but the Germans. Winning over new recruits to the Allied side, even from amongst the ranks of Germany's pre-war friends and allies, was a long-term goal which it was important not to prejudice. In the short term, this meant improving relations with countries which would pose a serious threat to British interests if they turned hostile. Initially these countries were Italy, Japan, and the Soviet Union, but the Russians were later dropped from the list and virtually given up to the German side. The methods which were employed varied, but common tactics were attempts to reach economic agreements, concessions in the implementation of economic warfare, and political 'sops' such as recognition of Italian sovereignty over Albania. Territorial concessions, to be implemented following the successful conclusion of the war, were not ruled out, although it never reached the stage where concrete offers were made to the countries concerned. Such 'appeasement', like the appeasement of Germany before the war broke out, was clearly a product of the circumstances of the time. It is all very well to preach, as Churchill did after the war, that appeasement should only be practised from a position of strength, but in reality it is only when a country is weak that it *needs* to appease. In terms of fighting a world war on several different fronts simultaneously, Britain certainly was weak in September 1939. Indeed, it is open to question whether she could ever have faced such a prospect without trepidation: never before had her power been challenged on such a global scale. Chamberlain's policy of avoiding war as far as possible, and then, once it had broken

out, of limiting it to a European conflict, fought without the need for large-scale offensives, can certainly be said to have been in line with the British national interest.

From the evidence revealed by this study, it is difficult to escape the conclusion that British policy during the Phoney War was determined mainly by the actions of other states. Her destiny was, to a large extent, in the hands of others. It would be unfair to lay the blame for this state of affairs solely at the door of Britain's pre-war political leaders. In the final analysis, it was the calculated aggression of a German dictator which forced Britain into war. Regardless of the rights or wrongs of Britain's pre-war foreign policy, for men like Chamberlain and Halifax to lead the country into another conflict, and for the general population to accept that conflict without serious complaint, suggests that by September 1939 there was no real alternative to war with Germany. Once at war, Chamberlain and his colleagues had to face up to Britain's weaknesses and frame their policy accordingly. The cautious approach which they adopted, and which the Foreign Office and the British Representatives abroad implemented, was borne out of necessity as much as choice. The eight months of the Phoney War cannot be said to represent a glorious episode in British history, but the foreign policy followed by the Chamberlain Wartime Administration was, with the exception of some of the Scandinavian decisions, necessary, sensible, and right. It was, above all, a policy dictated by difficult circumstances: unpalatable - even humiliating - to some, but a prudent policy nevertheless.

APPENDIX A
SELECTED DIPLOMATIC REPRESENTATIVES, SEPTEMBER 1939 - MAY 1940

Country (Location of Embassy/Mission):	British Representative:	Representative in Britain:
Bulgaria (Sophia)	George Rendel	Nicolas Momtchiloff
China (Chungking)	Sir Archibald Clark Kerr	Dr Quo Tai-Chi
Denmark (Copenhagen)	Charles Howard Smith (Mission closed 9 April 1940)	Count Eduard Reventlow
Finland (Helsingfors)	Thomas Snow, Gordon Vereker (from 25/2/40)	Georg Gripenberg
France (Paris)	Sir Eric Phipps, Sir Ronald H. Campbell (from 1/11/39)	Charles Corbin
Greece (Athens)	Sir Charles Michael Palairt	Charalambos Simopoulos
Hungary (Budapest)	Owen O'Malley	George de Barcza
Italy (Rome)	Sir Percy Loraine	Giuseppe Bastianini
Japan (Tokyo)	Sir Robert Craigie	Shigemitsu Mamoru
Netherlands (The Hague)	Sir Neville Bland	Jonkheer Michiels van Verduynen
Norway (Oslo to 9/4/40, then itinerant)	Sir Cecil Dormer (evacuated 29/4/40)	Eric Colban
Poland (Government in Exile, Angers)	Sir Howard Kennard	Count Edward Raczynski
Roumania (Bucharest)	Sir Reginald Hoare	Viorel Virgil Tilea
Sweden (Stockholm)	Sir Edmund Monson, Victor Mallet (from 16/1/40)	Bjorn Prytz
Turkey (Angora)	Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Huggesen	Dr Tevfik Rushdi Aras
U.S.A. (Washington)	Lord Lothian	Joseph Kennedy
U.S.S.R. (Moscow)	Sir William Seeds (on leave from 2/1/40)	Ivan Maisky
The Holy See (The Vatican)	Francis D'Arcy Osborne	Archbishop Pascal Robinson (Dublin)
Yugoslavia (Belgrade)	Sir R.H. Campbell, Ronald I. Campbell (from 13/12/39)	Ivan Soubbotich

APPENDIX B
SELECTED INDIVIDUALS MENTIONED IN THE TEXT

i) Members of the War Cabinet:

Prime Minister: Neville Chamberlain

Chancellor of the Exchequer: Sir John Simon

Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs: Lord Halifax

Lord Privy Seal: Sir Samuel Hoare (to 3 April 1940), Sir Kingsley Wood

Minister for Co-ordination of Defence: Lord Chatfield (post abolished 3 April 1940)

Secretary of State for War: Leslie Hore-Belisha (to 5 January 1940), Oliver Stanley

First Lord of the Admiralty: Winston Churchill

Secretary of State for Air: Sir Kingsley Wood (to 3 April 1940), Sir Samuel Hoare

Minister without Portfolio: Lord Hankey

ii) Other Ministers and Senior Government Officials:

Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs: Anthony Eden

Home Secretary: Sir John Anderson

Minister for Economic Warfare: Ronald H. Cross

Minister for Information: Lord Macmillan (to 5 January 1940), Sir John Reith

Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs: R. A. Butler

Minister of Supply: Leslie Burgin

Lord Chancellor: Sir Thomas Inskip

President of the Board of Trade: Oliver Stanley (to 5 January 1940), Sir Andrew Duncan

Chief Industrial Advisor: Sir Horace Wilson

Attorney General: Sir Donald Somervell

Master of the Rolls: Sir Wilfred Greene

iii) Members of the Foreign Office:

Permanent Under-Secretary of State: Sir Alexander Cadogan

Deputy Under-Secretary of State: Sir Orme Sargent

Assistant Under-Secretary of State: William Strang

Chief Diplomatic Advisor: Sir Robert Vansittart

Southern Department: Philip Nichols (Head), Sir Andrew Noble, Herbert Bagallay, Reginald Bowker, Phillip Broad

Northern Department: Laurence Collier (Head), Daniel Lascelles, Fitzroy Maclean, Edward Coote, John Addis, Sir Colville Barclay

Central Department: Ivone Kirkpatrick (Head), Frank Roberts, Roger Makins, Michael Williams

Far Eastern Department: Sir George Mounsey (Head, 1939), Robert G. Howe (Head, 1940), Howard Ashley Clarke, Maberly Dening, Sir George Sansom, Sir John Brenan, Arthur Scott

American Department: John Balfour, David Scott, John Perowne, Berkeley Gage

Legal Advisor: William Malkin

Private Secretary to Permanent Under Secretary of State: Hubert Miles Gladwyn Jebb

iv) Military:

Chief of the Air Staff: Air Marshal Sir Cyril Newall

First Sea Lord and Chief of the Naval Staff: Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound

Chief of the Imperial General Staff: General Sir Edmund Ironside
Deputy Chief of the Air Staff: Air Marshal R.E.C. Peirse
Deputy Chief of the Imperial General Staff: General H.R.S. Massy
Deputy Chief of the Naval Staff: Rear Admiral T.S.V. Phillips
Director of Naval Intelligence: Admiral J.H. Godfrey
Military Secretary to the War Cabinet: Major-General H.L. Ismay
Commander-in-Chief, British Expeditionary Force (France): General Lord Gort
Commander-in-Chief, Operation Rupert (Narvik): Admiral of the Fleet the Earl of Cork and Orrery
Commander-in-Chief, Allied Forces in Central Norway: General Adrian Carton de Wiart
Commander-in-Chief, The Nore: Admiral Sir Reginald Plunkett-Ernlé-Earle-Drax
Head of the Secret Intelligence Service (M.I.6): Admiral Sir Hugh Sinclair (died 4 November 1939), Colonel Stewart Menzies

v) Miscellaneous:

Secretary to the War Cabinet: Sir Edward Bridges
Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister: Arthur Rucker
Private Secretary to the Prime Minister: Cecil Syers
Assistant Private Secretary to the Prime Minister: John Colville
Ministry of Information: Charles Peake, E.H. Carr, Lord Perth
Treasury: S.D. ('Sigi') Waley
Archbishop of Canterbury: Cosmo Gordon Lang

APPENDIX C
MEETINGS OF THE SUPREME WAR COUNCIL
3 SEPTEMBER 1939 - 10 MAY 1940

Date:	Location:	British Representatives:
12 September 1939	Abbeville	Chamberlain, Chatfield
22 September 1939	Hove	Chamberlain, Halifax, Chatfield
17 November 1939	London	Chamberlain, Halifax, Chatfield, Wood
19 December 1939	Paris	Chamberlain, Halifax, Chatfield
5 February 1940	Paris	Chamberlain, Halifax, Churchill, Stanley, Wood
28 March 1940	London	Chamberlain, Halifax, Churchill, Stanley, Wood
9 April 1940	London	Chamberlain, Halifax, Churchill, Stanley, Hoare
22 April 1940	Paris	Chamberlain, Churchill
27 April 1940	London	Chamberlain, Halifax, Churchill, Stanley, Hoare

The British records classify a meeting between Chamberlain, Halifax, Churchill, Hoare, Stanley and the French Ambassador in London on 26 April 1940 as a Supreme War Council meeting, but in view of the absence of the French Prime Minister, I have not included this meeting in the above list.

A further seven meetings were held subsequently, the last one being on 13 June 1940.

Source: CAB 99/3 Minutes of the Supreme War Council, 1939 - 1940.

APPENDIX D
TEXT OF THE BRITISH NOTE TO NORWAY AND SWEDEN, 5 APRIL 1940

‘I have the honour to inform you that His Majesty’s Government, having considered, in consultation with the French Government, the circumstances attending the termination of the war between the Soviet Union and Finland, and the attitude adopted by the Norwegian/Swedish Government at that time, feel obliged to draw the attention of the Norwegian/Swedish Government to the following considerations.

The events of the last three months have shown that, irrespective of the wishes of the Swedish and Norwegian peoples, the German Government are not prepared to allow the Swedish and Norwegian Governments that liberty of action in foreign affairs to which they are entitled. His Majesty’s Government sympathise with the difficult position in which these two governments are placed as a result of German threats and pressure; but while deploring this state of affairs, they are bound to draw therefrom the inevitable conclusion that the two governments are not, in present circumstances, entirely free agents. Moreover, apart from the actual policy which the Swedish and Norwegian Governments may be compelled to follow, the Allied Governments can no longer afford to acquiesce in the present state of affairs whereby Germany draws from Sweden and Norway resources vital to her prosecution of the war, and enjoys facilities in those countries which place the Allies at a dangerous disadvantage. They feel therefore that the time has come to notify the Norwegian/Swedish Government frankly of certain vital interests and requirements which the Allied Governments intend to assert and defend by whatever measures they may think necessary.

The vital interests and requirements which the Allied Governments wish to bring to the notice of the Norwegian/Swedish Government are the following:

(a) The Allied Governments cannot acquiesce in any further attack on Finland by either the Soviet or the German Government. In the event therefore of such an attack taking place, any refusal by the Norwegian/Swedish Government to facilitate the efforts of the Allied Governments to come to the assistance of Finland in whatever manner they may think fit, and still more any attempt to prevent such assistance, would be considered by the Allied Governments as endangering their vital interests.

(b) Any exclusive political agreement which Norway/Sweden may enter into with Germany would be considered by the Allied Governments as an unfriendly act, even though it were ostensibly intended for the defence of Finland. Any Scandinavian alliance which provided for the acceptance of aid from Germany, and which thus brought the Scandinavian countries into special political relationship with her, would be considered as directed against the Allies.

(c) Any attempt by the Soviet Government to obtain from Norway a footing on the Atlantic seaboard would be contrary to the vital interests of the Allied Governments.

(d) The Allied Governments would have to take appropriate measures to safeguard their interests if the Norwegian/Swedish Government were to refuse, withdraw or curtail facilities in matters of commerce and shipping which the Allied Governments consider essential for the prosecution of the war, and which it is not unreasonable for a neutral government to concede.

(e) Further, the Allies, seeing that they are waging war for aims which are as much in the interests of the smaller States as in their own, cannot allow the course of the war to be influenced against them by advantages derived by Germany from Sweden or from Norway. They therefore give notice that they reserve the right to take such measures as they may think necessary to hinder or prevent Germany from obtaining in those countries resources or

facilities which, for the purpose of the war, would be to her advantage or to the disadvantage of the Allies.

The German Government are already violating the rights of Norway/Sweden whenever they feel they can do so with impunity, and the Norwegian/Swedish Government are unable to secure redress. The shipping of Norway and Sweden and other neutral countries is attacked and destroyed almost daily by German submarines, mines and aircraft, in defiance of international law and with deliberate disregard for the loss of life involved. The Allies will certainly never follow this example of inhumanity and violence, and if and when the successful prosecution of the war requires them to take special measures, the Norwegian/Swedish Government will realise why they do so. It will be to establish principles which the Scandinavian peoples and Governments would themselves wish to see prevail, and in defence of the rights and indeed the existence of the smaller states of Europe. These objects can only be obtained by the victory of the Allied cause and the Allied Governments feel confident that this fact will be duly appreciated in Norway/Sweden.'

Source: FO 371/24815 N3973/2/63 Halifax to Dormer No. 109, Halifax to Mallet No. 131, 4/4/40.

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN FOOTNOTES

All dates in footnotes are given in the form: dd/mm/yy - so, for example, 3 September 1939 appears as 3/9/39, and 10 May 1940 as 10/5/40.

Official papers are prefixed by the following abbreviations:

CAB	Cabinet Office (War Cabinet)
FO	Foreign Office
WO	War Office
DO	Dominions Office
PREM	Prime Minister's Office
INF	Ministry of Information
T	Treasury

CAB 65 is the classmark for the Minutes of the War Cabinet. References to War Cabinet meetings are given thus:

CAB 65/2 WM 70 (39) 4/11/39

where CAB 65/2 is the document reference, WM 70 (39) refers to the 70th meeting of the War Cabinet in 1939, and 4/11/39 gives the date of the meeting (4 November 1939).

Highly secret War Cabinet discussions were recorded in Confidential Annexes to the War Cabinet Minutes, and these are denoted by the abbreviation CA, for example:

CAB 65/12 WM 82 (40) CA 5/4/40

is the confidential annex to the 82nd War Cabinet meeting of 1940, held on 5 May 1940.

The main Foreign Office archive is found in FO 371 - the classmark for 'General Correspondence'. References for documents in this classmark are given as follows:

FO 371/24815 N3990/2/63

where FO 371/24815 is the piece number, N refers to the Foreign Office department in which the file originated (in this case, the Northern Department), and 3990/2/63 is the file number (a file can contain any number of telegrams, letters, minutes, etc. all relating to a particular subject). The Foreign Office departments referred to in this study, and the prefix of their files, are as follows:

C	Central Department
N	Northern Department
R	Southern Department
F	Far Eastern Department
A	American Department

In the case of material taken from the Foreign Office Confidential Print, the file reference is unnecessary and therefore is not given. Diplomatic correspondence between the Foreign Office and the British Representatives abroad is cited as follows:

Vereker to Halifax No. 176, 5/3/40

The convention was that such correspondence was addressed to or from the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs (Lord Halifax). In this example, the communication came from Gordon Vereker, the British Minister in Finland, and was the 176th communication which had been sent from the Finnish Mission to the Foreign Office in that year (1940). Sometimes, the number of the communication is followed by a code denoting special treatment, such as 'Saving', 'Tour', 'Arfar' and 'DIPP'. A list of British Diplomatic Representatives is included in Appendix A. In the absence of the British Minister or Ambassador, communications were addressed to or from the *chargé d'affaires*.

Information from private papers is referenced using the prefix and number code given to the collection by the archive where it is held, as follows:

NC	Neville Chamberlain
ACAD	Sir Alexander Cadogan
CHAR	Winston Churchill
HNKY	Lord Hankey
VNST	Sir Robert Vansittart
STRN	Sir William Strang
HOBE	Leslie Hore-Belisha
DRAX	Admiral Sir Reginald Drax
CLVL	John Colville
KNAT	Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen
PHPP	Sir Eric Phipps
INKP	Sir Thomas Inskip
MALT	Sir Victor Mallet

However, for collections where there is no distinctive prefix I have given the name of the collection, e.g. 'Halifax Papers', 'R. A. Butler Papers', 'Lothian Papers', thus:

Halifax Papers A7.8.4 (Diary 1940) Entry for 3/5/40

Chamberlain's weekly letters to his sisters are cited as 'Chamberlain to Hilda' or 'Chamberlain to Ida'. Hilda and Ida Chamberlain lived together and both read each letter, but because they took it in turns to reply, Chamberlain addressed his letters to them alternately.

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Butler Papers, Trinity College, Cambridge
Lothian Papers, Scottish Record Office, Edinburgh
Cadogan Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Vansittart Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Inskip Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Phipps Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Drax Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Christie Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Colville Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Mallet Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Knatchbull-Hugessen Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
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Pound Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Spears Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Strang Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge
Grigg Papers, Churchill College, Cambridge

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Birmingham University Library (microfilms):
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Public Record Office, Kew:

PREM 1, PREM 4 Prime Minister's Papers
CAB 21 Cabinet Office Papers
CAB 104 Cabinet Office Papers (supplementary)
CAB 99/3 Supreme War Council Minutes
CAB 127/10 Ismay Papers
T273-4 Bridges Papers
FO 1011 Loraine Papers
INF 1 Ministry of Information Papers
DO 114 Dominions Office Papers
DO 121 Dominions Office Papers
DO 126 Dominions Office Papers
DO 130 Dominions Office Papers

WO 106 War Office Papers
FO 371 Foreign Office General Correspondence
FO 407 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 408 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 417 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 418 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 419 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 420 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 424 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 425 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 434 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 436 Foreign Office Confidential Print
FO 438 Foreign Office Confidential Print
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