

RALEIGH LECTURE ON HISTORY

'WE MUST HOPE FOR THE BEST AND
PREPARE FOR THE WORST': THE PRIME
MINISTER, THE CABINET AND HITLER'S
GERMANY, 1937-1939

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IN NOVEMBER 1918 the spokesman of the Coalition Government in the House of Lords moved that His Majesty be congratulated upon the conclusion of the Armistice. Lord Curzon's earnestness and magniloquence fitted an occasion when memories of supreme sacrifices blended with the springing of hope. 'The world's great age begins anew', he cried, remembering Shelley's greeting of another dawn of freedom a hundred years before,

The golden years return;
The earth doth like a snake renew
Her winter weeds outworn:
Heaven smiles, and faiths and empires gleam,
Like wrecks of a dissolving dream.¹

In the nightmare just past, the British Empire had lost over a million dead, with nearly two and a half million wounded; about one-seventh of all those who had died, and nearly a fifth of the injured. The national debt had multiplied tenfold in four years. At least the future of British interests looked secure as far as human eye could see. Yet the young man born in the summer of 1919, as the peace treaty was signed, celebrated his coming to manhood as France capitulated to a Germany which had already seized much of Europe and stood in alliance with Italy and Spain, powers found on the other side of the balance in the previous struggle. Here is surely the swiftest reversal of fortune recorded in modern times. The milestones on the path are readily discerned: the detachment of the United States from the great

¹ For a description of the occasion see H. Nicolson, *Curzon: The Last Phase* (London, 1934), pp. 1-3.

international issues, the isolation of Russia, the crumbling of goodwill between Britain and France, the restlessness of Italy, the deepening hostility of Japan.

These are the external signs. Beneath them lay for the British something more serious: a sense of security bred by the completeness of victory; a peace settlement based in theory upon high principle but in practice of more mixed origins; a gulf between the stated principles of foreign policy and the realities of international life. Sir Eyre Crowe once remarked: 'Political and strategical preparedness must go hand in hand. Failure of such harmony must lead either to military disaster or political retreat.'² The events in the Far East after 1931, the Abyssinian war in 1935, the Rhineland crisis in the following spring, all demonstrated this truth. In terms of the old diplomacy, much might be said for the attempt to buy off Italy and concentrate against Germany; in terms of the Covenant, nothing could be said. Less than three months after the withdrawal of the Hoare-Laval proposals, the British showed that they had neither the will nor the forces to uphold the old obligation reaffirmed in a new form at Locarno.

The scale of the Great War provoked a continuing interest in its causes and a set of judgements about them which exercised a profound influence upon individuals and upon the climate in which they made decisions. Because secret alliances had bred suspicion and committed whole peoples to war without their knowledge, open covenants must in future be openly arrived at. Because the operation of alliances was believed to have converted a Balkan squabble into a calamity, entangling engagements must be forgone. Because the scale of the disaster had been immeasurable, only the clearest call could justify recourse to war in future, and new rules of investigation, conciliation, and international order must prevail. The balance of power having failed so signally to preserve peace, it must be replaced by an imbalance, arrayed upon the side of the Covenant. Because great armaments were held to lead inevitably to war, a doctrine to which Lord Grey himself gave tongue,³ anything resembling the pre-war arms race must be avoided. Politicians and diplomats must strain

² Cited in a memorandum of Lord Halifax, 18 March 1938, appendix I to the 26th meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet, FPC 26 (38), Cab. 27/623, Public Record Office, London [P.R.O.]; for minutes and memoranda of the Cabinet and several of its committees, I have used the microfilm copies in the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

³ Lord Grey of Fallodon, *Twenty Five Years* (London, 1925), i, 91-2.

to escape the situation of July 1914, when each step provoked a counter-step, and statesmen found themselves the helpless victims of military timetables.

A Chancellor of the Exchequer persuasive in counsel, telling in debate, well-informed, strong in the executive qualities, will play a large role in any government. Chamberlain had those characteristics, the effect of which was magnified by the declining health of MacDonald and Baldwin. For the first half of his tenure as Chancellor in the 1930s, Chamberlain starved the armed forces, as Churchill had done but in less dangerous circumstances, between 1924 and 1929. It is unlikely that any Chancellor would have spent much more between 1931 and 1935. All the same, Chamberlain understood well that the possession of armed strength is of the essence of diplomacy, and for the belatedness of British rearmament a high price was to be paid. Chamberlain had been convinced throughout that Britain did not have the resources to fight Germany and Japan together, and equally clear that of the two potential enemies, Germany mattered the more.⁴ Nevertheless, Britain's pledges to send a battle fleet to the Far East in case of a major Japanese threat had been repeatedly given and were renewed as late as the Imperial Conference of May 1937.

In forming a judgement about Germany, ministers had a stream of telegrams and despatches from Berlin, brooding but not entirely without hope in the days of Sir Horace Rumbold, depressing but witty in the days of Sir Eric Phipps, more volatile in the time of Sir Nevile Henderson. British missions in other countries contributed to the view formed of Germany within Whitehall; the staff of the Foreign Office would hear from those who had visited Germany; many unofficial contacts flourished; Sir Robert Vansittart operated what amounted to a private intelligence service. We must take into account also the newspapers; the information gathered by the three service departments, each of which ran its own intelligence organization; the Secret Intelligence Service and its domestic counterpart, MI5; other agencies of the British government, including the Industrial Intelligence Centre, the Board of Trade, and the Treasury.

We may doubt whether all these sources of information

⁴ See, for example, Neville Chamberlain's diary, 6 June 1934; for permission to print material from the Chamberlain papers I am indebted to the University of Birmingham, where the papers are held.

counted for more than the assumptions about Germany commonly made amongst those brought up in the later Victorian era. As Churchill used to remark, no one who had gone through the first war could forget the experience: not only the slaughter and slime, but the fact that it had taken half the world more than four years to bring Germany down, and then by the narrowest of margins.⁵ That Germany had the discipline, organization, martial tradition, industrial capacity, and interior lines to produce a formidable fighting machine was a basic ingredient of British thinking in the 1930s. Moreover, belief in the foundations of Versailles had ebbed, not least because of the activities of professional historians. For better or worse, Germany had not been partitioned and she remained in essentials the strongest state in Europe, at least to the west of Russia. Defeat and Versailles left her with a sense of grievance exploited constantly by the Nazi Party and felt by many Germans outside its ranks. Few British ministers or officials had any instinctive sympathy with the French, who seemed pedantic in their insistence on the fine print of the treaty and anxious to use the Covenant simply for their own ends. Hitler had known how to exploit these suspicions and weaknesses. Without penalty, Germany had left the Disarmament Conference, reintroduced conscription, re-created the Luftwaffe, secured acceptance of the Anglo-German Naval Treaty, and profited from Mussolini's determination to attack Abyssinia, an opportunity which had in its turn been created by the powers' preoccupation with Germany. The Treaty of Locarno itself had rested on the assumption that the relations between the guarantors, Britain and Italy, would remain harmonious.

Just before German troops re-entered the Rhineland, the Cabinet had determined on a programme of rearmament which left far behind the plans of 1934 and 1935. However, no one knew better than the senior ministers that some years must elapse before even the worst deficiencies were put right. It is unlikely that even if Britain had possessed greater strength on land and at sea in March 1936, she would have been willing to run any large risk to turn Germany out of the Rhineland, for that course would have required stern convictions about the sanctity of treaties and the nature of German policy. Chamberlain emphasized to Flandin in mid-March 1936, that British public opinion would not

⁵ W. S. Churchill, *The Second World War* (Reprint Society edn., London, 1948), i, 23.

support the Cabinet in sanctions of any kind, whereas the French Foreign Minister took the view that if a firm front were maintained, Germany would yield without war. 'We cannot accept this', says Chamberlain's diary, 'as a reliable estimate of a mad dictator's reactions.'⁶

But was Hitler mad? If so, what form did his madness take? Was he half-mad, someone with whom normal business could be done from time to time, but who might be pushed over the brink if not tactfully handled? Was he simply a great loss to the stage, capable of every dissimulation, a leader with a taste for the spectacular and theatrical? These were questions not easily answered at the time. With vastly fuller information than any government could have possessed in the 1930s, we are still debating them. Was *Mein Kampf* to be believed in its entirety? If so, there might be a certain consolation for the British, for the book repeatedly insisted upon the importance of Anglo-German friendship and Hitler's determination to secure it. If Hitler were irrational and the dominant force in the making of German policy, could Germany be deterred by any means available to the British? For years before the war, ministers in London enunciated, and none more than Chamberlain, what we should now call the doctrine of unacceptable damage: either Britain must be able to inflict damage on a scale which would deter Germany from going to war—this was the essential purpose of the earlier phase of air expansion, with its emphasis upon the bomber—or the defensive forces must be able to cause such loss to an aggressor that the prize would clearly not be worth the game. This conception of deterrence assumes that on the other side of the hill will stand a man or a government weighing, calculating, balancing the probabilities. Whether any such description could apply to the German government under Hitler was always problematical.

Where might allies be found? No strong partner was readily available in the Middle East or the Mediterranean except France, and she was so heavily preoccupied with the peril from Germany, and then with the hostility of Italy across one border and Spain across the other, that she could spare little by way of resources or attention for other parts of the world. Tied to commitments which after the reoccupation of the Rhineland she could fulfil only at the cost of outright war, France had no desire to fight Germany. Nor had any other state. Baldwin once told

⁶ N. Chamberlain's diary, 12 March 1936.

Eden that he wanted better relations with Hitler than with Mussolini; as well he might, for Germany was much the stronger power, and Mussolini's capacity for mischief would have been severely limited if Britain could make terms with Berlin. 'How?' asked Eden. 'I have no idea, that is your job.'⁷ Even Sir Robert Vansittart had come back from his visit to Berlin in August 1936 with some hope that agreement with Germany might be reached;⁸ but within a few months it had become clear that the search for a treaty to replace Locarno would fail, and the Spanish Civil War bade fair to poison relations between all the European powers. Eden remarked that 1937 might prove the critical year because of Germany's declining economic prospects, but could not tell whether Germany would follow a policy of co-operation or foreign adventure.⁹ With the cost of rearmament rising and the political prospects lowering, Chamberlain—who hoped that the precarious internal situation of Germany might impose restraints on Hitler¹⁰—judged that Britain had not the resources to produce all the munitions she would need in war, act as the arsenal of an alliance, sustain a navy arming to what was virtually the two-power standard and a fast expanding Royal Air Force, as well as the kind of army which Britain had put into the field during the First World War. He wished to aim for a well-equipped force of four divisions, with an additional mobile division and reserves to maintain an army of that size in the field, which would suffice for the defence of the Empire but equally be available in Europe. The Chief of the Imperial General Staff remarked that if that were Britain's policy, 'on the outbreak of war, the French will retire to their fortifications and the Belgians to theirs, leaving a gap through which the Germans will pour, and seize the Channel ports'. With unwonted freedom, Chamberlain retorted: 'Tell that to the Marines. That is what might happen if we don't warn the French. If we do, they cannot afford to leave a gap or their own rear will be turned.'¹¹

⁷ The Earl of Avon, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing The Dictators* (London, 1962), p. 374.

⁸ For Vansittart's report see W. N. Medlicott and D. Dakin (eds.), *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, series II, vol. xvii, appendix I (HMSO, London, 1979); the series is hereafter cited as B.D.

⁹ Eden spoke in this sense at the Cabinet on 13 January 1937; Cab. 1 (37) 2, Cab. 23/87, P.R.O.

¹⁰ N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 16 January 1937.

¹¹ N. Chamberlain's diary, 25 October 1936; cf. the entry for 24 December 1936.

Perhaps the memory of the trenches mattered as much as the cost in the decisions taken in the first months of 1937. Like Eden, Chamberlain in his last months as Chancellor favoured a renewed attempt to reach tolerable terms with Germany and Italy. In both countries there were forces anxious to restore good relations with Britain and thereby alleviate economic difficulties; and Britain's rearmament, Chamberlain argued, had reinforced their position. Moreover, any British government which turned down an opportunity to talk would incur a very heavy responsibility.¹² In that phase, Eden believed there were greater dangers to peace from Italy than from Germany.¹³ He accepted the view that Hitler's intentions towards Britain were more friendly than those of the radical elements of the Nazi Party, and could even find a point of agreement with Dr Goebbels, that the British government would sooner see an axis between Berlin and Rome than between Berlin and Moscow.¹⁴ To find the material for a bargain, now that the Rhineland had gone, was another matter, upon which opinion within the Foreign Office and the Diplomatic Service divided. Sir Orme Sargent, celebrated for the subterranean nature of his proceedings and known to everyone as 'Moley', observed that Hitler might well be restrained from a fresh adventure if offered concrete evidence that co-operation between Germany and Britain could be achieved: but that would mean discussion of colonial questions, and Sargent's reasoning was not far removed from that of, say, Chamberlain and Halifax. The same official was seeking ways of strengthening the hands of Hitler and Ribbentrop so that they might resist the arguments of adventurers in the Nazi Party who were said to count either on the collapse of France or on the involvement of France and Britain in a conflict with Italy over the Spanish Civil War, so that Germany might seize the opportunity to launch an attack on Austria or Czechoslovakia. (Let us notice in passing that this is almost to the letter what Hitler said in the Hossbach meeting seven months later; the mistaken judgement, by no means confined to Sargent, lay in the separation of Hitler from the allegedly more zealous and radical elements in Germany.)

¹² Memorandum by N. Chamberlain, 2 April 1937, B.D., series II, vol. xviii, 555.

¹³ Defence Plans (Policy) Sub-Committee, 19 April 1937, DP (P), 1st meeting, Cab. 16/181, P.R.O.

¹⁴ Minute by A. Eden, 15 April 1937, on a Foreign Office minute by R. Leeper, C 2947/3/18, FO 371/20710, P.R.O. I am indebted to Dr G. Waddington of the University of Leeds for this and the following reference.

Sargent judged, though the Foreign Secretary described his mood as very defeatist, that the obstacles to German expansion in central Europe were not sufficiently solid to prevent it. The Assistant Under-Secretary, Cadogan, noted that both main parties in Germany seemed bent on expansion and conquest and the overthrow of every other country, with Great Britain perhaps first; the only difference seemed to be that the Reichswehr wanted to go slow and the Party wanted to go quick. Thus 'I should have thought that an early breach of the peace, with our rearmament only just started, was the greater danger of the two.' Against this Eden wrote, 'Yes'. Cadogan then developed the line of argument which he had previously advanced, which he was to press repeatedly as Permanent Under-Secretary, and upon which there was a clear difference of view between him and Vansittart. In rough summary, the argument amounted to this: if calamity were imminent, time must be bought to make Britain more secure. Meanwhile, could not something be done to encourage moderate forces in Germany, and deprive extremists of the pretext for an explosion? If, as was widely said, Hitler desired not to break with Britain, could not something be made of the fact? If time could be bought, might not dissatisfaction with the Nazi regime develop? Even if war seemed certain to come sooner or later, was there not the clearest obligation to put it off as long as possible? As he asked rather plaintively, 'Are there *no* sensible or moderate people in Germany?' . . . The chances may be extremely slender, but we seem to have reached a point where we should grasp at anything.¹⁵ Eden and Chamberlain, who were jointly responsible for Cadogan's succession to Vansittart at the end of that year, shared a good deal of this reasoning.

During 1937 comparative quietude reigned in Anglo-German affairs. The British had hoped to discuss matters with the experienced Foreign Minister, Neurath; but another crisis in the Spanish tragedy provided the reason or pretext for the cancellation of Neurath's visit. The retiring Prime Minister, Baldwin, had consistently evaded proposals that he should discuss great matters directly with Hitler. Others who did visit the Führer had come away with the clearest impressions: Lloyd George concluded that Hitler was arming only for defence, that he was the greatest German of his age and wanted the friendship of the

¹⁵ Minutes by Sargent, 27 April, Cadogan, 28 April, and Eden, 3 May, 1937, on a Foreign Office minute by R. Leeper recording an interview with M. Van Maasdijk, C 2947/3/18, FO 371/20710, P.R.O.

British,¹⁶ while Mr Mackenzie King detected a liquid quality about Hitler's eyes which indicated deep sympathy, and found himself irresistibly reminded of Joan of Arc.¹⁷ Mr Churchill avoided any such encounter, but observed in an article published in the autumn of that year: 'One may dislike Hitler's system and yet admire his patriotic achievement. If our country were defeated I hope we should find a champion as indomitable to restore our courage and lead us back to our place among the nations.'¹⁸

On one point no leading minister or Chief of Staff stood in doubt: that only in a long war would Britain's economic power, the strangling effect of the blockade, the full help of the Dominions, and perhaps at last the resources of the USA, come into play. Britain must thus be able to resist a knock-out blow in the early stages; and there the shadow of the bomber, the belief that Germany might launch a devastating attack which would destroy civilized life and terrorize the population of great cities, loomed large. We know now that many of the calculations were exaggerated, as were the numerical strengths of Germany's forces in the air and on land. The British did not realize how little trained had the Luftwaffe been in such techniques of bombing; though even if that point had been established beyond dispute in 1937 or 1938, it is doubtful whether any British Government would have depended too heavily upon it. The stakes were so great, and the margin seemed too small. What the British feared was that the German air force might be in a position to do to these islands what the Allied air forces inflicted upon Germany from 1943. In short, the worst fears were anticipated by several years, though the inhabitants of London and Coventry had no cause even in 1940 to be dismissive about German air power.

In the summer of 1937 British representatives in most European capitals had not feared an immediate German move. The Minister in Prague, however, foresaw that it would be more profitable for Germany to tackle Austria before Czechoslovakia, because success in Austria should be easier, and once that country could be used as an instrument of German policy the Czech fortress would be almost surrounded. The Ambassador in Paris, Sir Eric Phipps, recently translated from Berlin, said that he found competent observers generally sceptical about the help

¹⁶ T. Jones, *A Diary with Letters* (London, 1954), p. 269.

¹⁷ Diary of W. L. Mackenzie King, 26 June 1937; microfilm copy in the Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.

¹⁸ W. S. Churchill, *Step by Step* (Odhams edn, London, 1949), p. 158.

which the French armies could afford to Czechoslovakia.¹⁹ 'I know you won't mind if I take more interest in foreign policy than S.B.', Chamberlain had said to Eden in May.²⁰ The two were then on cordial terms; and whatever the inclinations of the new Prime Minister, he would have been compelled to take a close interest in foreign affairs. As King George V, who carried common sense to the point of genius, once remarked to another Foreign Secretary, 'The Prime Minister is responsible for everything you do.'²¹ The crises in Spain, the Mediterranean, the Middle East and the Far East, all swelling in the summer and autumn of 1937, were bound to bring painful reappraisals of British policy. Despite what he described as the incredible insolence and licence of the controlled press in Germany and Italy, Chamberlain then had the impression that neither government wished for war—a remark made in the context of the Spanish issue, which dominated Parliament and the press to a degree which a later generation finds it hard to credit. The same letter remarks, 'If only we could get on terms with the Germans, I would not care a rap for Musso'.²² Nevertheless, Italy was plainly the weaker power of the Axis; Britain could exert stronger leverage in dealing with her than with Germany; and Hitler showed no signs of coming to terms. As Cadogan minuted on a Foreign Office paper, in which Hitler had been described as a 'passionate lunatic', 'If he is really past humouring, a strait-jacket is the best thing, but I don't know that we are in a position to resort to this remedy.'²³

Let us concede that Hitler was an opponent of the first order. The nature of the tyranny; Hitler's inaccessibility and inscrutability; his utter want of scruple; his capacity to dominate and mesmerize; the fact that a good part of his foreign policy was approved by circles far outside the Nazi party, including many who were in other respects his natural opponents; his deep wells of will-power; his detection and exploitation of his opponents' weaknesses, material and psychological—all this made Germany under Hitler an adversary far more formidable than Italy or Japan. 'Genius is a will-o-the-wisp', Hitler himself remarked not

¹⁹ The opinions are collected in a memorandum by Eden, 29 July 1937, FP (36) 36, Cab. 27/626, P.R.O.

²⁰ Earl of Avon, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

²¹ This was said by King George V to Lord Curzon in 1923; N. Chamberlain's diary, 1 June 1923.

²² N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 4 July 1937.

²³ Minute by Cadogan, 23 June 1937, B.D., series II, vol. xviii, 907.

long before the end, 'if it lacks a solid foundation of perseverance and fanatical tenacity.'²⁴ We sometimes write about 'the German problem' as if such issues arise from the realm of mathematics and are capable of 'solution' after long reflection. Had Hitler died young or been assassinated, of both of which possibilities Chamberlain was aware, 'the German problem' would not have gone away; but from a British and French point of view, Germany under another leader—perhaps Goering or Himmler—would have been a less threatening proposition.

Within a few months differences of emphasis and purpose were apparent between Eden and Chamberlain. To the former, sincerely devoted to the Covenant and realizing that the emasculated League would provide the essence of an Anglo-French alliance with a cover of high respectability, the notion of making concessions to Mussolini stuck in the gorge; but he had better hopes of conversations with Germany, and certainly no conviction that war between Britain and Germany was inevitable or imminent. Remarks were made by members of the Cabinet to the effect that Britain's policy must be dictated by the state of her defences and it was sometimes added that her position, particularly at sea, was worse than in 1914. Eden contested this view; but as he had to admit: 'There remains, of course, Japan . . .' On the top of this letter, the Prime Minister wrote: 'The proposition that our foreign policy must be, if not dictated, at least limited, by the state of the national defence, remains true.'²⁵ The Chiefs of Staff constantly argued, with the support of almost everyone in the Cabinet, that Britain had no prospect of raising forces which could safeguard her interests against Germany, Italy, and Japan together.

Foreign policy must therefore be adjusted to minimize the number of enemies. The Foreign Secretary would not have quarrelled with this as a statement of intent, but remarked that the aims of the three powers were in varying degrees inimical to British interests; a surrender to one might provide the signal for concerted action by all three to extort further sacrifices. Eden recommended the toleration for the time being of the armed truce in the hope that the divergences of interest on the part of the three aggressive powers would maintain some kind of equilibrium.²⁶ But this was a policy which the facts, as they developed

²⁴ Cited in W. Carr, *Hitler* (London, 1978), p. 83.

²⁵ Eden to Chamberlain, 9 September, and minute by the latter, 10 September 1937, Premier 1/210, P.R.O.

²⁶ Memorandum by Eden, 26 November 1937, FO 371/20702, P.R.O.

in the next few months, hardly permitted the British to follow. Hitler in particular was not likely to settle international differences as they arose, and allow Britain so to manage affairs that the equilibrium of Europe was roughly maintained while British armed strength was built up; on the contrary, he was acutely aware of this aspect of timing, and had every intention of extracting as much as he could, by war or the credible threat of it.

Of course, Hitler spoke very differently to the British at the time. He and Goering stated repeatedly to Lord Halifax in November 1937 that they had no intention of making war. Remarking cautiously 'I think we may take this as correct at any rate for the present', Chamberlain assessed German ambitions as the domination of Austria without an actual union, the securing of larger rights for the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia, and the domination of eastern Europe.²⁷ Hitler and other German leaders said that the main issue lying between Britain and Germany was the colonial question. It was a subject which no one in London would have chosen to tackle on the merits; but Chamberlain doubtless felt that if the British paid no attention to a stated grievance, their responsibility before history would be heavy and they would in any event provide Hitler with material for another complaint about their indifference to his offers of friendship.

Chamberlain, Eden, and Halifax were of one mind that there could be no colonial concession unless Germany made her contribution to a general settlement, which meant a binding promise not to use force in central or eastern Europe. Eden told the Cabinet of his great satisfaction at the way in which Halifax had dealt with every point in his conversations with Hitler.²⁸ No difference of substance arose between Eden and Chamberlain in the settling of the British terms. Nor did events in that winter allow them to consider the issues in isolation; the collapse of the Brussels conference, and the attacks by the Japanese on British and American ships in the Yangtse, followed soon after the outbreak of submarine piracy in the Mediterranean. The Prime Minister remarked that with the two dictators in a thoroughly nasty temper in Europe, Britain could not risk a quarrel with Japan.²⁹ He decided with reluctance that Britain could not

²⁷ N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 26 November 1937.

²⁸ B.D., series II, vol. xix, 572-5.

²⁹ N. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 9 October 1937.

afford to move a large fleet of capital ships to Singapore, since that would take away Britain's strongest bargaining counter for the conversations with Italy, which had been agreed upon in principle during the late summer, but postponed.³⁰ In January 1938 Eden defined the crucial issues of that year as Anglo-American co-operation, the chances of asserting 'white race authority' in the Far East, and relations with Germany. 'To all this Mussolini is really secondary', he wrote.³¹ When he discussed strategic questions again with the Prime Minister, Chamberlain said that the apprehensions of the Chiefs of Staff arose from the conviction that Britain would be called upon alone to face three potential enemies, whereas Eden was convinced that no such situation existed or could arise 'unless we gravely mishandle the international situation in the near future'. He explained his reasoning: France would be bound to support Britain, and he did not believe that if the two powers were attacked by the other three, they would be left entirely alone. 'But is it in truth at all probable that this Tokyo-Rome-Berlin combination will hold together so strongly as to come into a war against us?' Eden asked. His argument went further; he believed that the Chiefs of Staff wished to reorientate Britain's foreign policy and clamber on the band-wagon with the dictators, even if that process meant parting company with France and estranging relations with the United States:

I believe, moreover, that there is a tendency among some of our colleagues to underestimate the strength of France . . . I am myself convinced . . . and others better qualified than I to express an opinion share that conviction, that the French army is absolutely sound, and surely, if we had to choose between France and Italy as an ally, we could not hesitate for a moment. As you know, I entirely agree that we must make every effort to come to terms with Germany. The Italian conversations are rather a different matter . . .³²

Here were assumptions which neither the Prime Minister nor the Chiefs of Staff shared. Chamberlain then believed the French army to be good, though he later came to different conclusions; he lamented French weakness, however, in other ingredients of international strength—the instability of French governments,

³⁰ D. N. Dilks (ed.), *The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan* (London, 1971), p. 33; hereafter cited as Cadogan.

³¹ A. Eden to N. Chamberlain, 9 January 1938, B.D., series II, vol. xix, 722–

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³² Eden to N. Chamberlain, 31 January 1938, Premier 1/276, P.R.O.

the frailty of the French economy, the country's lamentable weakness in the air. He felt less confident than the Foreign Secretary that Britain and France could hold out against the likely enemies, or that Berlin, Rome and Tokyo would not act together. Nor is there any sign that Chamberlain shared the view that the Chiefs of Staff wished to clamber on the band-wagon with the dictators. Neither he nor they, so far as we can tell from the documents, conceived of a choice between France and Italy as allies. They were aware that, as Chamberlain expressed it, 'Until we are fully rearmed, our position must be one of great anxiety . . . we must adjust our foreign policy to our circumstances, and even bear with patience and good humour actions which we should like to treat in a very different fashion.'³³

Instructions which Eden sent to the Ambassador in Berlin for the opening of talks with Germany embodied a suggestion of Chamberlain that a new regime of colonial government, in an area of Africa roughly equivalent to the Congo Basin, should be established. Germany would have a place there as a partner on the same terms as other powers including Britain; the Prime Minister refused in preparing for these negotiations to tell Germany precisely what territory she would receive, until he saw what Germany would give as part of a general settlement in Europe,³⁴ just as he had turned down the suggestion from the Foreign Secretary that Britain should concede *de jure* recognition of Italy's conquest of Abyssinia before proceeding to the conversations with Mussolini. Eden's despatch states that Britain did not regard the frontiers of central and eastern Europe as rigid and unchangeable for all time, although she could not 'condone any change in the international status of a country achieved by force against the will of its inhabitants, or any forcible interference in its internal affairs'.³⁵

This was what Halifax had said to Hitler. Plainly, the Foreign Secretary still had hopes of a satisfactory solution of Germany's controversies with Czechoslovakia. He defined in these terms the results which Britain desired from the conversations:

³³ N. Chamberlain to Mrs F. Morton Prince, 16 January 1938; I am indebted to Mr Stephen Lloyd and the University of Birmingham for a copy of the full text, much of which is cited by K. Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (London, 1946), pp. 322-4.

³⁴ See, for example, his remarks at the 21st meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, 24 January 1938, Cab. 27/623, P.R.O.

³⁵ Memorandum by Eden, 10 February 1938, F.P. (36) 51, Cab. 27/626, P.R.O.

- (a) an improvement in Anglo-German relations;
- (b) a substantial step towards appeasement in Europe; and
- (c) at least the expectation that Germany would refrain from intervention against us should we be attacked in the Mediterranean or the Far East.³⁶

Ironically enough, these instructions for Henderson to approach Hitler were despatched on the very day when Schuschnigg was being bullied, indeed threatened with invasion, at Berchtesgaden.

The breach with Eden, which came a week later, was connected in part with the Prime Minister's handling of Roosevelt's initiative in the previous month and with a disbelief on Eden's part in the usefulness of conversations with Mussolini. At the crucial Cabinet of 19 February, twenty members were present; fourteen supported the Prime Minister unreservedly, before they knew there was any question of Eden's departure; four came down on balance on Chamberlain's side of the argument, but with some qualification or reserve. It was not a case of serious disagreement about Germany, except in the sense that Chamberlain believed that Britain must try her utmost to divide Mussolini from Hitler and play upon the conflicts of interest between them. Eden himself had recorded, earlier that month, an impression that the Italian government was becoming very anxious indeed about the general situation, not least because of the changes of February 1938 in the German government, whereby Hitler assumed control of the armed forces and Ribbentrop became Foreign Minister, changes which might prejudice Italy's position in respect of Austria.³⁷ This was closely in line with the view of Chamberlain, who correctly foresaw many events of the coming months—'The last shred of Austrian independence would be lost, the Balkan countries would feel compelled to turn towards their powerful neighbours, Czechoslovakia would be swallowed, France would either have to submit to German domination or fight, in which case we should almost certainly be drawn in'³⁸—and hoped that some of the dangers might be averted if Britain could at last open talks with Italy. We can scarcely deny the accuracy of the forecast; whether talks with Italy offered any chance of escape is a matter for debate.

³⁶ Ibid.; for the final instructions see F.P. (36) 52.

³⁷ See Eden's account of his conversation with Count Grandi, the Italian Ambassador, of 4 February 1938, given to the 23rd meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, 5 February, Cab. 27/623, P.R.O.

³⁸ N. Chamberlain's diary, 19 February 1938.

The process of assuaging grievances rested upon a mixture of motives: to preserve peace if possible was a moral imperative, no doubt; to be seen to strive earnestly, so that a fresh generation might be spared the horrors of war, formed part of the Government's domestic strategy, while the arguments for gaining time, if war could not in the end be avoided, were obvious enough to ministers, civil servants and fighting men, but could not be advertised. In these lights we should regard the long negotiations for a treaty with the United States, which the British pursued as much for the political as the economic effects; the Anglo-Irish talks, not without their effects in America, culminating in the treaty of 1938; the Anglo-Italian agreement of the same spring; and the prolonged pursuit of a settlement in Palestine.

At the end of 1937 Ribbentrop had drawn up papers which showed that he well understood how British anxieties about the emergence of a powerful Germany were compounded by the threats in the Mediterranean and the Far East. Concluding correctly that even those who advocated understanding between Britain and Germany, in which group he included the British government, were not prepared to concede a free hand in central Europe, and that the British would require concessions if they made a colonial settlement, Ribbentrop remarked pithily that everything would turn on the answer to one question: could the maximum of concessions which Chamberlain and his colleagues were willing to make be reconciled with the minimum which Germany would require? He judged this could not be done. Given German demands of 1938 and 1939, he was undoubtedly right, as he was in the belief that the British would face a war with Germany if they thought they could win it. This was close to what Chamberlain said to French ministers in London at the end of April 1938. The rest of Ribbentrop's analysis followed and its force is undeniable; Germany should exploit her relations with Italy and Japan, and if Britain could be confronted with the prospect of fighting in three theatres she would be unlikely to risk her whole position for a contest over central Europe, even though the outcome of that contest should leave Germany materially strengthened. Ribbentrop surmised, much as Hitler had already done in the Hossbach meeting, that if Britain stayed aloof from a central European conflict, her abstention would probably bring with it the neutrality of France. He was mistaken in thinking that Chamberlain realized there was no possible basis for agreement with Germany.³⁹

³⁹ Ribbentrop to Hitler and Neurath, 28 December 1937, printed in A. von Ribbentrop, *Der Kriegsschuld des Widerstandes* (Leoni, 1974), pp. 61-74;

Only in early March did Hitler consent to receive the British Ambassador. He threatened war if Britain should oppose German efforts to reach a just settlement with countries of the same nationality or with large German populations, in other words Austria and Czechoslovakia. The Ambassador could find no common basis for reasonable discussion. 'The ordinary rules of the game seem to have no meaning for him and some of the statements which he makes and which, to give him his due, I am sure that he believes himself to be true, leave one aghast . . . no perversion of the truth seems too great for him to accept as the gospel of Hitler and of Germany.'⁴⁰ With Hitler's virtual rejection of the proposal for a new colonial regime in Africa, and the Anschluss a few days later, any hope of a general settlement with Germany was gone. Vansittart, now Chief Diplomatic Adviser, urged that Britain should speak much more firmly to Germany. His successor as Permanent Under-Secretary, Cadogan, said to him when the news arrived of the German ultimatum to Austria, 'It is easy to be brave in speech: will you fight?' 'No', Vansittart replied. 'Then what's it all about?' responded Cadogan. 'To me it seems a most cowardly thing to do to urge a small man to fight a big if you won't help the former.'⁴¹

An acceleration of the defence programmes was announced while ministers considered whether Britain should try to form a grand alliance against Germany, a proposal which at first blush both Chamberlain and Halifax favoured. Cadogan and the head of the Central Department at the Foreign Office did not; nor did the Chiefs of Staff. They may well have underestimated the strength of the Czechoslovak forces. There we cannot tell; some observers believed that the internal strains in Czechoslovakia would prevent a prolonged defence; some, like the British Military Attaché at Prague, maintained a high opinion of the Czech Army; the Chiefs of Staff had no doubt that the fortifications were effectively turned by the seizure of Austria, as the British Minister in Prague had predicted. This factor weighed heavily with Chamberlain and no doubt with other ministers. Many of the reasons for rejecting a guarantee to Czechoslovakia were military. Certainly the British, with their tiny army, were in no position to defend Czechoslovakia itself; and the Minister at Prague, who made no secret of his distaste for the Nazi regime,

Ribbentrop to Hitler, 2 January 1938, *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, series D, vol. i, no. 93.

⁴⁰ Henderson to Halifax, 4 March 1938: B.D., series II, vol. xix, 991-2.

⁴¹ Cadogan, p. 60.

advised that the Czechoslovak state could not be maintained in its existing form and would not be recreated in that form even if a successful war were fought. The President of the Board of Trade, Oliver Stanley, was the only member of the Cabinet who argued seriously for a conditional guarantee to France, though even he acknowledged that no assistance which Britain and France could give to Czechoslovakia would prevent the country from being overrun. Halifax considered the argument carefully and then came down against it, observing: 'The French are never ready to face up to realities; they delight in vain words and protestations.'⁴²

The Prime Minister remarked at this time that the seizure of the whole of Czechoslovakia would not be in accordance with Hitler's stated policy of including all Germans in the Reich, but not other nationalities; it seemed more likely, as Newton had suggested, that Germany would absorb the Sudeten German territory and reduce the rest of Czechoslovakia to dependent neutrality. At the same meeting, the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs told his colleagues that on this issue the Commonwealth might well break in pieces. Halifax and Chamberlain were agreed that Britain could not afford to see France overrun, but feared that the effect of a guarantee would be to embolden France and Czechoslovakia.⁴³ It was therefore part of British policy to keep them, as well as Germany, guessing. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary had uttered stern warnings to Ribbentrop about Germany's conduct, and Chamberlain told the Cabinet mournfully that the new German Foreign Minister seemed not so much hostile as stupid, vain, and incapable of understanding what was said to him.⁴⁴ The Chiefs of Staff repeated their familiar arguments, warning the Cabinet that the possibility of British association with allies, many of whom would be of doubtful military value, might actually bring about a definite military alliance between Germany, Italy and Japan.⁴⁵

⁴² 27th meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, 21 March 1938, Cab. 27/623, P.R.O.

⁴³ 26th meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, 18 March 1938, Cab. 27/623, P.R.O.

⁴⁴ Conclusions of the Cabinet's meeting of 12 March 1938, Cab. 23/92, P.R.O.

⁴⁵ Report by the Chiefs of Staff sub-committee, 'Military Implications of German Aggression against Czechoslovakia', 21 March 1938, Cab. 27/627, P.R.O.

It is not hard to see why the British pursued the Anglo-Italian agreement, signed in April but not to be brought into effect until the Spanish issue should have ceased to be a threat to the peace of Europe. The French Prime Minister took a gloomier view of Hitler's intentions than did the British, but ruled out any question of a preventive war, the very idea of which, he said, he regarded as criminal. Chamberlain told Daladier that he thought a time might come when a gamble on the issue of peace or war could be risked with less anxiety; for the moment, Britain and France had to ask themselves, for they could count on no effective support from other powers, whether they were sufficiently powerful to make victory certain. In conformity with the military advice which the Cabinet had received, Chamberlain thought not.⁴⁶

In sum, neither the Prime Minister nor the Cabinet at large felt sure that German ambitions were proved so boundless as to call for war or the threat of it. Thus the British effort to pin Germany down continued. Cadogan again pressed this policy. 'German demands, like mushrooms, grow in the dark', he wrote to the Foreign Secretary;⁴⁷ Halifax repeated this to the French ministers with acceptance, and did not himself believe that Germany, if she secured hegemony over central Europe, would then pick a quarrel with France and Britain; on the other hand, the more closely Britain associated herself with France and Russia, the more likely was Germany to believe in encirclement.⁴⁸ Here sounded another echo of the years before 1914. In fairness to Halifax, we ought to add that he soon altered these opinions. British policy, the Prime Minister remarked, was not one of dividing Europe into two opposing blocs, a danger against which Eden had repeatedly spoken. Chamberlain admitted that he was following a dual policy: to deter war in the short run by force of arms, and to remove the causes of war in the longer run by patient examination of grievances. Moreover, the Government had a clear duty to strain every nerve in conciliation.⁴⁹

By stages, the stakes were raised during the summer of 1938. In the crisis of May the British did no more than repeat that they

⁴⁶ E. L. Woodward and R. d'O. Butler (eds.), *Documents on British Foreign Policy*, series III, vol. I (HMSO, London, 1949), 225.

⁴⁷ Cadogan, p. 69.

⁴⁸ See Halifax's remarks at the 26th meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, 18 March 1938, Cab. 27/623, P.R.O.

⁴⁹ N. Chamberlain, *In Search of Peace* (London, 1939), pp. 169-77, 212, 238-9.

might or might not be involved in a war arising from a dispute in central Europe; but they were widely credited with having warned Hitler, and Germany's supposed decision to back down was ascribed by many to British firmness. Newspapers everywhere gave credit to the British government, to Hitler's fury. Chamberlain was aware of that risk, did his best to minimize it, and was confident that the German government had made all plans for an invasion of Czechoslovakia.⁵⁰ There British information was almost certainly mistaken. Meanwhile, Ribbentrop had spoken to the British Ambassador much as Hitler did in early March; if war came, Germany would move as one man at whatever cost.

The despatch of Lord Runciman as an investigator and mediator marked another stage. Chamberlain had already been contemplating with deep reluctance the prospect that Britain might have to guarantee a reduced Czechoslovakia. Well might the head of SIS say during that summer that it was peculiarly difficult to interpret intelligence from Germany;⁵¹ and about other countries, for example, France, Italy, Japan, and Russia, Britain was even more poorly informed. By August 1938 nevertheless, much disquieting information had reached London. Many of those who provided it begged for a British commitment or declaration. Most British informants said that Hitler was determined on force; an alternative view was favoured by the Ambassador in Berlin, that Hitler was determined to have everything ready but had not yet made up his mind. The question thus arose with renewed force: should Britain announce that a German invasion of Czechoslovakia would bring her into war? In other words, should a central European issue be converted automatically into a European contest? And would a declaration be effective? The Foreign Secretary told fellow ministers that he did not believe that the Nazi regime could be destroyed as the result of action taken by another country, while the Prime Minister remarked that since Hitler lived withdrawn from his ministers and in a state of exaltation, he might well take the view that a British statement was bluff.⁵²

⁵⁰ N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 28 May 1938; for a report of Hitler's statement that the attitude of the press in this crisis put him on the side of the war party see B.D., series III, vol. iv, appendix I, ii.

⁵¹ F. H. Hinsley and others, *British Intelligence in the Second World War* (HMSO, London, 1979), i, 56.

⁵² Record of a meeting of ministers, 30 August 1938, Cab. 23/94, P.R.O.

Chamberlain had already conceived the idea of visiting Hitler. He hoped the expedient would not prove necessary; but the Ambassador in Berlin believed that even if Hitler had decided to invade Czechoslovakia, the proposal for a visit by the British Prime Minister might cause him to cancel the plan. The vital element would be surprise. Chamberlain had in mind from the beginning that if he did visit Hitler, the opportunity might extend beyond the Czechoslovak crisis to bring about a complete change in the international situation.⁵³

One of Chamberlain's letters in early September asks, 'Is it not positively horrible to think that the fate of hundreds of millions depends on one man and he is half mad?'⁵⁴ The Foreign Secretary told the Cabinet a few days later that he thought Hitler possibly or even probably mad; but any prospect of bringing him back to a sane outlook would be lost if the British involved him in a public humiliation. Halifax did not believe that if the Führer had taken a definite decision to attack Czechoslovakia, Britain could prevent it.⁵⁵ Within the Cabinet, the main critics of British policy as it developed during September 1938 were Lord Winter- ton, Oliver Stanley, on one or two occasions Walter Elliot, and Duff Cooper. Foreign affairs in Chamberlain's time were discussed with great thoroughness, in the Cabinet and the Foreign Policy Committee. The minutes of the latter not infrequently run to twenty or twenty-five typed pages for a single meeting. Every member of the Cabinet supported Chamberlain's decision to visit Hitler, though Duff Cooper remarked that the choice was not between war and a plebiscite, but between war now and war later. Unlike most of his fellow ministers, he was confident that 'If we went to war we should win'. Intelligence had been received from several quarters of a decision to invade Czechoslovakia; some informants suggested 18 or 19 September, others 25 September. Plainly, the collapse of French morale played a large part in Chamberlain's decision. The Foreign Minister Bonnet seemed convinced that if war came the great cities of France and England would be laid in ruins, while Daladier said that at all costs Germany must be prevented from invading Czechoslovakia, because in that case France would be faced with her obligations. As the minutes of the Cabinet drily remark,

⁵³ N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 11 September 1938.

⁵⁴ N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 3 September 1938.

⁵⁵ Conclusions of the Cabinet's meeting of 12 September 1938, Cab. 23/95, P.R.O.

Chamberlain 'thought that this language was significant.'⁵⁶ We must hail this as a fine example of English understatement.

In his meetings with Hitler Chamberlain was trying to do, but under duress, what the British had so often aspired to achieve; to cause Germany to state her terms. Once more, Hitler brazenly threatened a war. Chamberlain told him pointedly that there were many people who thought he wished to dismember Czechoslovakia, to which Hitler retorted that he sought racial unity and did not want a lot of Czechs. The Prime Minister adjured him not to believe that in no circumstances would Britain fight.⁵⁷ In these first talks, he detected no signs of insanity, though many of excitement, and was impressed by the power of the man and his determination. At that stage Chamberlain believed Hitler's objectives to be limited to the seizure of the Sudetenland,⁵⁸ for it was clear that the principle of self-determination would mean no less. Chamberlain did not exaggerate when he told Hitler at their second meeting that to secure French and Czech acceptance of that principle, he had taken his political life into his hands. Again Hitler stated that the rest of Czechoslovakia did not interest Germany. The Führer had by then raised his demands largely. After expressing his dismay, Chamberlain asked for a clear statement of German terms in writing. When eventually it came, the Prime Minister characterized it as an ultimatum. 'No', Hitler replied, 'at the top it says "memorandum".' Chamberlain replied that he took more notice of the contents than of the title. When Hitler remarked that he would much prefer a good understanding with England to a good military frontier with Czechoslovakia, Chamberlain commented that he would not obtain friendship with England if he resorted to force, but would if he agreed to achieve his aims by peaceful means.⁵⁹

Chamberlain believed Hitler anxious to secure British friendship and felt that he had established some influence with him; he favoured, immediately on his return from Godesberg, acceptance of the German terms. But the Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, horrified to learn that Halifax's first view was the same as the Prime Minister's, argued vigorously with his master; Halifax accordingly spoke against acceptance of the Godesberg terms at the Cabinet the next day; and the British

⁵⁶ Conclusions of the Cabinet's meeting of 14 September 1938, Cab. 23/95, P.R.O.

⁵⁷ B.D., series III, vol. II, 338-40.

⁵⁸ Conclusions of the Cabinet's meeting of 17 September 1938, Cab. 23/95.

⁵⁹ B.D., series III, vol. II, 467-71.

government decided in that sense.⁶⁰ This was the stage at which Britain's policy towards Germany took a further step down the path to war. We still do not know all the reasons. The Prime Minister is said to have been heartened by General Gamelin, though there was nothing in the latter's observations in London which promised an effective French offensive against Germany. Perhaps by this stage Chamberlain was convinced that Hitler's aims went beyond the annexation of the Sudetenland. After all, Hitler was being offered more than he had originally demanded at Berchtesgaden and nevertheless seemed to be on the verge of going to war. On 26 September the British government at last said that if France became involved in war in consequence of a German invasion of Czechoslovakia, Britain would join France. Later that day, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary received the High Commissioners of the Dominions at Number 10. 'I gathered', the Canadian High Commissioner wrote in his diary that night,

that he [Chamberlain] had reluctantly come to the conclusion that Hitler's profession of limited objectives was not sincere and that his ambitions were far wider than the boundaries of [the] Sudetenland.

Chamberlain is however as anxious as any of us not to allow a matter of method to be the cause of a world war, but he has an inflexible sense of principle and he feels a principle is now at stake. Is it quite as clear as that?⁶¹

When the British warning was delivered, Hitler immediately placed the responsibility upon his enemies and threatened that if his terms were not accepted, he would destroy Czechoslovakia. Not for nothing, he remarked ominously, had he spent four and a half billion marks on fortifications in the West.⁶² All the same, the British heard that evening, 27 September, that the German army would not occupy an area beyond that which Czechoslovakia had already agreed to cede, and Germany would join in an international guarantee of the remainder of Czechoslovakia. For his part, Chamberlain firmly put the onus on Hitler:

I cannot believe that you will take the responsibility of starting a world war which may end civilisation, for the sake of a few days' delay in settling this longstanding problem.⁶³

⁶⁰ Cadogan, pp. 103-6.

⁶¹ V. Massey, *What's Past is Prologue* (Toronto, 1963), pp. 260-1.

⁶² B.D., series III, vol. II, 565-7.

⁶³ Chamberlain read this message to Parliament on 28 September, after giving the terms of the warning delivered by Wilson; N. Chamberlain, *In Search of Peace*, pp. 298-9.

The terms of Munich looked a good deal better than those of Godesberg, and on paper they were. The Anglo-German declaration which Chamberlain read out represented an attempt to bind Hitler to peaceful methods of settling international disputes, and to carry methods of conciliation beyond the immediate crisis. It has been well remarked that Chamberlain would have made a more ingenious use of the language of the 1870s if he had called himself the honest broker instead of promising peace with honour.⁶⁴ He promptly regretted that term, and 'Peace in our time'. Duff Cooper alone resigned from the Cabinet. To him it seemed a matter of honour as well as policy. It followed that Britain should have fought whether she were defeated or not; and at one moment, the evening when the terms of Hitler's ultimatum from Godesberg were known, we find the same note in Cadogan's diary: 'I *know* we and they [the French] are in no condition to fight: but I'd rather be beat than dishonoured.'⁶⁵ Fear of war formed a powerful ingredient in British policy, but not its only determinant; otherwise the warning given to Hitler on 27 September would not have been uttered. Sir Nevile Henderson, Halifax, Cadogan, and Chamberlain all judged that Hitler was not bluffing. Nor can we now say with confidence that he was. At least some of the German generals considered that their forces would probably suffice for a conquest of Czechoslovakia, though not for a war on two fronts.⁶⁶ Hitler himself believed that time was not working to Germany's advantage.⁶⁷ He was reported to be furious at being balked of a triumphal entry into Prague and only a few weeks before his death said that by surrendering, the west had made it difficult for him to begin a war at the time of Munich; nevertheless, he should have started it, and would have won swiftly.⁶⁸

By bringing the crisis to a head, Hitler had again ensured that the initiative lay in Germany's hands. Buoyed up by the enthusiastic reception which he had received in Germany and acclaim at home, Chamberlain had to tread delicately. He hoped that governments and peoples which had peered into the abyss would realize the peril, and dismissed as a policy of despair the notion of making immediate military alliances or the hope that the demo-

⁶⁴ W. N. Medlicott, 'Neville Chamberlain', *History Today* (1952), p. 348.

⁶⁵ Cadogan, p. 104.

⁶⁶ R. J. O'Neill, *The German Army and the Nazi Party* (London, 1966), p. 158.

⁶⁷ W. Carr, *Arms, Autarky and Aggression* (London, 1972), p. 59.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

cracies would be allowed to start a war at the moment which suited them. Nor could this be described as collective security: 'It appears to me to contain all the things which the party opposite used to denounce before the War—entangling alliances, balance of power, and power politics.' Later in the same speech, he remarked that he did believe that they might yet secure 'peace for our time'; but experience had shown 'only too clearly that weakness in armed strength means weakness in diplomacy . . .'⁶⁹ To the well-stocked mind of the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon, the situation suggested a quotation from Shelley less robust than that which had occurred to Lord Curzon:

to hope till hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates⁷⁰

It was as Chamberlain's car threaded a way through the cheering throng from the airport to Downing Street on his return from Munich that he remarked to Halifax, 'All this will be over in three months', by which he meant the wild demonstrations; and a little later, 'Edward, we must hope for the best and prepare for the worst.' For a few weeks, some last gleams of light touched the landscape of Europe. British policy inevitably meant another surge of spending on arms. As the press gave publicity to it, Chamberlain remarked privately, 'Nothing could be more unfortunate when I am trying to represent that we are only perfecting our defences.'⁷¹ That does not mean that all the talk of peace was a smokescreen, and Chamberlain was justified in denying, shortly before the outbreak of war, allegations of Goering that he had merely regarded Munich as a forced settlement which must not be repeated.⁷²

Within the Foreign Office, Halifax and Cadogan were at one in believing that Britain could not act as the policeman of Europe and uphold what remained of the Versailles settlement. In other words, German political and economic dominance of central and eastern Europe must be accepted. For a time, even the French Ambassador in Berlin, who had not been celebrated for

⁶⁹ Parliamentary Debates, 5th series, House of Commons, vol. 339, cols. 549, 551.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, col. 350; the quotation comes from the closing stanza of *Prometheus Unbound*.

⁷¹ N. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 6 November 1938.

⁷² B.D., series III, vol. vi, 752.

optimism, believed in Hitler's genuine desire for pacification and anxiety to avoid a European war.⁷³

However, Hitler himself did nothing to reinforce the British desire for collaboration with Germany, or the position of those who had risked so much upon it. From divers sources, the British were learning of the change which had come over German policy in later 1937 and with increasing momentum in 1938. While the German people might well wish for peace, the Foreign Secretary told a meeting of ministers in mid-November 1938, it was by no means certain that the same was true of 'the crazy persons who had managed to secure control of the country'. All the leading ministers, including Chamberlain, agreed that Britain should do everything she could to encourage the German moderates. Not for the first time, he drew the conclusion that Britain must attack the Axis at its weaker end, for confidential talk with Mussolini might make him feel that British friendship would give him greater freedom of manoeuvre 'and help him, if he so desired, to escape from the German toils'. Chamberlain had also seized the significance of broadcasting, noting that despite all the efforts of the Nazis to keep them in the dark during September, the German people had realized that facing them was not a mere joy-ride into Czechoslovakia but a European war. By plain implication, Chamberlain ascribed this transformation in part to what he called the excellent propaganda broadcast in German during the Munich crisis by Radio Luxembourg.⁷⁴ He did not say that this had been organized in great secrecy by the British Government itself, as were other broadcasts of the same kind between Munich and the war.⁷⁵

With the aid of many papers which have come to light since 1945, we see clearly the grounds for deep apprehension about German intentions, though the British never had what is beyond price, a steady flow of authentic documents. Even excellent information, of which they had plenty, becomes blunted in its effect if mixed up with that which, equally well-intentioned and plausible, proves to be wrong; and even well-placed informants had to concede that Hitler was remote and changeable in opinion. Prominent members of the German opposition, of whom Dr Goerdeler was the best known to the British, spoke of a

⁷³ Sir E. Phipps to Halifax, 24 October 1938, FO 800/311, P.R.O.

⁷⁴ 32nd meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, 14 November 1938, Cab. 27/62, P.R.O.

⁷⁵ W. J. West, *Truth Betrayed* (London, 1987), *passim*, but see especially pp. 104-5, 111-12, 116-18.

revolt in which Hitler would be swept aside by the Army. When Cadogan looked at the programme which Goerdeler and his coadjutors put forward, it became clear that the British could hardly support what appeared to resemble *Mein Kampf* only too closely. For example, Germany would in effect take the Polish Corridor as well as colonial territory, and absorb a British loan of between £400 and £500,000,000. When Chamberlain was consulted, he said that he would not send a message encouraging the conspirators.⁷⁶ The risks were too obvious; and as in the previous summer, almost all those in Germany who made contact with the British either prayed for an open threat of war or in some instances stated that not until Germany had fought unsuccessfully could Hitler be dislodged. All the objections which had weighed with the Chiefs of Staff and the Cabinet for years thus retained their force. The information available to the Foreign Office at Christmas 1938 indicated a Germany controlled by one man whose will was supreme, himself a blend of fanatic, madman, and clear-visioned realist, embittered and exasperated at the British, incalculable even to his intimates, capable of throwing the German machine in any direction at short notice.⁷⁷ If this diagnosis were anywhere near the mark, those called upon to construct and sustain British foreign policy needed qualities of clairvoyance as well as resolution. The point is admirably caught in a minute of the Permanent Under-Secretary, written at the turn of the year: 'We cannot guess what Hitler will decide—much less can we guess at the probable outcome of his decision. We can only prepare for the worst shocks.'⁷⁸

These were the unpromising circumstances in which Chamberlain and Halifax visited Rome at Mussolini's invitation. Rumours of a German move in the direction of the Ukraine had been common currency in Europe for weeks. The Prime Minister told Mussolini of the general suspicion that Hitler had it in mind to make a further move in the near future, whether to east or west. Germany's armed military forces, he remarked, were so strong as to make it impossible for any power or combination to defeat her. Hitler could not want further

⁷⁶ Cadogan, pp. 128–9; cf. P. Ludlow, 'Britain and the Third Reich' in H. Bull (ed.), *The Challenge of the Third Reich* (Oxford, 1986), p. 146.

⁷⁷ The material is summarized in a memorandum by G. Jebb, 19 January 1939, Cab. 27/627, P.R.O.

⁷⁸ Minute by Cadogan, 6 January 1939, on Ogilvie-Forbes to Halifax, 29 December 1938, FO 371/22960, P.R.O.

armaments for defensive purposes. The Foreign Minister of Italy drew the understandable but mistaken conclusions that if the British could see the future clearly they would be ready for any sacrifice, and that in league with Germany and Japan, Italy could take all she wanted. Chamberlain reminded Mussolini that the democracies had been ready to fight in the previous September and it would be a 'terrible tragedy' if aggression took place under some misapprehension about the reactions of Britain and France.⁷⁹ This was language in code, and Chamberlain's remarks about the dangers of contemptuous propaganda in the German press were a polite way of indicating that Mussolini himself, as well as Hitler; might do well to take note.

The Russian government seems to have been genuinely convinced that as a logical part of the policy of appeasement, Chamberlain and Daladier were encouraging Hitler to move eastwards against the Ukraine and then, when that failed to happen, were trying to provoke a clash between Germany and Russia. In other words, Litvinov and Stalin believed that the West was trying to do what many suspected Russia of wishing to do, to see opponents beat themselves to a standstill. Litvinov said that the Russian government had learned from an unimpeachable source that when in Rome, Chamberlain had left the impression that England intended to support German aspirations in the Ukraine. In fact, Chamberlain had not said anything of the kind, though he had declined to state in advance whether a German move to the east would automatically bring Britain into a European war. He had also remarked that Russia could not be an enemy feared by Germany, for she was too weak to take the offensive against Germany though she might put up a very good defence against attack.⁸⁰ The Russian government had almost certainly been supplied with a skilfully forged or rewritten version of the minutes of the meeting.

Mussolini said emphatically that he wished to stand by the Anglo-Italian agreement, which had been ratified in the previous November, and that he believed Hitler desired a long period of peace. The German Ambassador in London told Chamberlain the same thing.⁸¹ The British were well aware of Germany's acute economic difficulties; through interception of

⁷⁹ B.D., series III, vol. III, 529, 524; M. Muggeridge (ed.), *Ciano's Diary 1939-1943* (London, 1947), p. 10.

⁸⁰ M. Toscano, *Designs in Diplomacy* (Baltimore, 1970), pp. 51-61.

⁸¹ N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 28 January 1939.

diplomatic traffic, they also knew that German attempts to persuade Japan to enter into a military alliance had met no ready response in Tokyo. There was little cheerful news otherwise. The Chancellor of the Exchequer told the Cabinet that British gold reserves had declined by £150,000,000 between the Anschluss and Munich; that settlement had not stemmed the flow. And Sir John Simon remarked that recent conditions had been painfully reminiscent of those obtaining in Britain immediately before the crash of 1931.⁸² From Paris came the news, not surprising but in contradiction of what had hitherto been said, that France wanted a British army on a scale which would do something to redress the balance between her and Germany.⁸³ Worst of all, a flood of further reports from Germany united in saying that Hitler was barely sane, consumed with hatred of Britain and capable of ordering an immediate air attack upon any European country. It was thought at one moment that London might be bombed without declaration of war; or that Hitler might move east in order to turn the more strongly on the west; or deal with the west first, so as to gain a free hand in the east.⁸⁴ Well might Lord Halifax remark to the Foreign Policy Committee that he felt they were 'all moving in an atmosphere much like the atmosphere with which a child might be surrounded, in which all things were both possible and impossible, but where there were no rational guiding rules'.⁸⁵ To be sure, there were elements in Germany which favoured peace and they might prevail; but if Hitler disregarded the advice tendered by experts, to curtail spending on public works and arms, he would be forced during 1939 to explode in some direction.⁸⁶ This was the context in which the government decided to accelerate the rearmament programme yet again, to treat a German attack on Holland or Switzerland as an occasion for war, to announce that any threat to France from whatever quarter (a warning intended to apply not only to Germany but to Italy, for the British knew that

⁸² Simon read out to the Cabinet, but did not circulate, a paper prepared in the Treasury, giving these glum tidings: Cab. 2 (39) 1, Cab. 23/97, P.R.O.

⁸³ For an interesting comment see the entry of 11 January 1939, in the diary of Sir Thomas Inskip: Inskip papers 1/2, Churchill College, Cambridge.

⁸⁴ Memorandum by Halifax, 'Possible German Intentions', 19 January 1939, covering memoranda by Cadogan, Jebb, Vansittart, and Strang, FP (36) 74 and 75, Cab. 27/627, P.R.O.

⁸⁵ 35th meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, 23 January 1939, Cab. 27/624, P.R.O.

⁸⁶ Statement by Halifax to the Cabinet, 25 January 1939, Cab. 2 (39) 2, Cab. 23/37, P.R.O.

Mussolini had expressed his willingness in principle to agree to a military alliance with Germany and Japan) must bring forth immediate British support; and in which it was decided, for the first time in modern British history, to build up a continental army in peace time.

If Germany were planning another coup in the near future, Chamberlain reasoned, it would be of great help to her if Italy were involved in acute controversy or perhaps war with France; that would ensure that Italy entered the war on Germany's side. He drew the conclusion that the sooner the war in Spain ended, the greater the chance of an improvement in Franco-Italian relations.⁸⁷ As for the Low Countries, a curious inversion of argument had come about within the British government. The Chiefs of Staff had to admit that the outcome of a crisis more serious than any the Empire had faced might depend on the intervention of other powers, especially the United States. Nevertheless, for Britain to do nothing while Germany invaded Holland 'would have such moral and other repercussions as would seriously undermine our position in the eyes of the Dominions and the world in general. We might thus be deprived of support in a subsequent struggle between Germany and the British Empire.'⁸⁸

Though the Chiefs of Staff did not say in so many words that Britain must intervene, they judged that a German invasion of Holland must be regarded as a direct challenge to British security. Thus the argument about the Dominions of the previous year, that if Britain went to war over the Sudeten German issue the Commonwealth might well break in pieces, was now almost reversed; if Britain did not show that she could stand up to a German challenge nearer home, the Dominions 'would conclude that our sun had set'. All the leading ministers agreed that a failure to intervene would undermine Britain's position in the world and only mean a later contest with fewer friends and in worse circumstances.⁸⁹

And there, for a month or so, matters rested. Despite all the alarms, Chamberlain began to feel that at last 'we are getting on top of the Dictators', partly because Hitler had missed the bus in the previous September (Chamberlain was fond of this

⁸⁷ 35th meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, 23 January 1939, Cab. 27/624, P.R.O.

⁸⁸ Paper by the Chiefs of Staff, FP (36) 77, considered at the 36th meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, 26 January 1939, Cab. 27/624, P.R.O.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

expression and used it with unhappy results in the spring of 1940), partly because the people of Germany had looked at war very close and decided they did not like it, partly because of Germany's lamentable economic situation, which did not seem a position from which to start a deathly struggle, partly because Roosevelt seemed to be saying something disagreeable to the dictatorships:

These points all add to the weight on the peace side of the balance and they are sufficiently heavy to enable me to take that 'firmer line' in public which some of my critics have applauded without apparently understanding the connection between diplomacy and strategic strength which nevertheless has always been stressed by the wisest diplomats and statesmen in the past.⁹⁰

The British Ambassador in Berlin, returning to his post in February, reported in optimistic terms; Sir Robert Vansittart criticized Henderson's views fiercely and feared that the Ambassador, poorly informed of what was really happening in Germany, would mislead the Government as he had done in the previous summer;⁹¹ the Permanent Under-Secretary did his best to balance between the two and remarked gloomily that he was not sure which was the sillier.⁹²

On 21 February, Chamberlain asked Parliament for authority to double British borrowing for defence. The sum to be spent in the financial year 1939-40 was placed at £580,000,000, but turned out to be considerably more; in fact, it was about equal to the entire British national debt of 1914. The Leader of the Labour Party complained about the immense sums required for such a programme and lamented that Parliament was being shown 'no ending to the piling up of these insensate armaments'. By contrast, Mr Churchill spoke of the bloodless war and said everyone hoped and prayed it would remain so, and that after an interval, real peace would emerge. Chamberlain himself would hardly have put the point differently. Neither believed that a great war was inevitable. Churchill described the Prime Minister's declaration of complete solidarity with France as a major deterrent against violent action and remarked that since every-

⁹⁰ N. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 5 February 1939.

⁹¹ Minute by Vansittart, 17 February 1939, FO 800/315, P.R.O., commenting on Henderson to Halifax, 15 February 1939, B.D., series III, vol. IV, App. I, i.

⁹² Cadogan, p. 151.

one knew Chamberlain to be a tireless worker for peace, the declaration was stripped of any suspicion that it might be part of an aggressive design.⁹³ An article which Mr Churchill published in the second week of March paid tribute to the way in which the Treasury had been managed in the 1930s, which made enormous rearmament possible without serious embarrassment to British credit. Though he judged that the tendency in Europe still ran towards a climax at no distant date, it seemed likely that a breakdown of civilization would be avoided in 1939.⁹⁴ It chanced that secret intelligence received in the Foreign Office in later February had been of a relatively optimistic kind,⁹⁵ and no doubt Chamberlain was basing himself upon that when he made incautious remarks about the prospects for peace. Halifax sent a pointed note of protest; the Prime Minister apologized for failure to consult him; neither realized what was about to happen in the remainder of Czechoslovakia. Nor did Churchill, who said on 10 March that in the sphere of foreign policy he found much to approve in the Government's attitude.⁹⁶ Within a day or two, Hitler gave vigorous assistance to that chemical dissolution of Czechoslovakia which had once been the object of German policy. Five days later, the German army entered Prague.

There is a sense in which the remaining six months of armed truce form scarcely more than a coda. The march into Prague, if it did not extinguish all hope, reduced it sharply; to prepare for the worst became a more urgent preoccupation than ever. Hitler was seen to have thrown away the assurances to which Chamberlain had tried to tie him six months before, to the effect that the Sudetenland was the last of his territorial demands and that he wanted no Czechs; and the British, though by no means confident of their armed strength, certainly felt themselves better placed than they had been in 1938. They would nevertheless have liked to postpone the issue until 1940 or 1941, and it took no genius to guess that by the same calculation, Hitler might hasten matters on.

The decisions to plan for a continental army, and go to war if Germany invaded Holland or Switzerland, form a bridge

⁹³ Parl. Deb., 5th series, House of Commons, vol. 344, cols. 237, 248, 254.

⁹⁴ W. S. Churchill, 'Is it Peace?' 9 March 1939, in *Step by Step*, pp. 322-5.

⁹⁵ For an example see B.D., series III, vol. iv, 160-1.

⁹⁶ R. Rhodes James (ed.), *Winston S. Churchill: His Complete Speeches* (London, 1974), pp. 6071-2.

between Britain's hesitant step towards a central European commitment in 1938, and the guarantee to Poland at the end of March 1939. In mid-February and again shortly before the German seizure of Bohemia, the Russian Foreign Minister had shown himself convinced that Britain and France were deliberately directing Germany to the east, and even thought that they might offer Germany active assistance in that direction.⁹⁷ The central point of this argument was soon proved baseless; what is significant is that Litvinov, far better placed than Stalin or Molotov to judge the intentions of the West, should have held these convictions so firmly. Well before Prague, the usual hostile fusillades in the controlled press of Germany and Russia had died down. On 10 March Stalin had indicated plainly that the way might be open for improved relations. Reverting to the language of the late nineteenth century, he had announced that Russia would not pull the chestnuts out of the fire for the imperialist powers. This speech, Ribbentrop remarked to Molotov and Stalin as they all drank to the Nazi-Soviet pact in the Kremlin on the eve of the war, had been well understood in Germany.⁹⁸

The realignments in central Europe undoubtedly brought Germany an accession of material and manpower. Much of the argument turns on the value to be placed upon the Czech army and fortifications, and those assets, in their turn, would have been of prime importance in a general war only if France had been willing to mount a serious offensive against Germany from the west. It is unlikely that this would have happened in 1938 or 1939, and certainly the British, lacking a continental army, had no basis upon which to direct French strategy or, for that matter, to negotiate convincingly with Russia. Against that must be weighed the undoubted stiffening of British resolve. A country's capacity to fight a long war is not measured only by the number of tanks or aircraft or soldiers, or even by indices of industrial production. Attitudes within Parliament, the willingness of the trade unions to collaborate in rearmament, the ability of the Government to introduce conscription in peace time—all were directly affected by the events of March 1939 and the feeling that Britain had gone to, or beyond, the limits of concession in 1938.

As we seek to clarify and compress, we often impose distortions upon events as they happened, amidst muddle and confusion and

⁹⁷ Ministry for Foreign Affairs of the USSR, *Soviet Peace Efforts on the Eve of World War II*, Part I (Moscow, 1973), pp. 213-14, 232-3, cf. 259-60.

⁹⁸ *Documents on German Foreign Policy*, series D, vol. vii, 228.

misjudgement. All the same, there is a consistency between the Prime Minister's statements of September 1938 and the actions of the British government in 1939. Chamberlain had stated, in his hastily prepared broadcast of 27 September 1938: 'If I were convinced that any nation had made up its mind to dominate the world by fear of its force, I should feel that it must be resisted . . .';⁹⁹ and his speech at Birmingham on 17 March 1939 was intended as a challenge to Germany on that issue. If Germany took another step towards the domination of Europe, she would be accepting the challenge.¹⁰⁰ This was said at the Cabinet on 18 March and the difficulties of finding solid materials for a coalition were plain. For a few days thereafter, Rumania seemed a more likely victim than Poland, though neither was in the least anxious to be associated in a declaration, still less a military alliance, with Russia. Chamberlain's remark to Mussolini about Russia's inability to mount an offensive campaign outside her own borders reflected the military advice which the British government had consistently received from the Embassy in Moscow and the Chiefs of Staff. All serious financial constraints upon rearmament had by now been abandoned; immediately after Prague and before the guarantee to Poland, the British government in effect withdrew the promise that a fleet of capital ships would go to Singapore in case of a major threat in the Far East, regardless of circumstances in Europe and the Mediterranean;¹⁰¹ and plausible but wrong information from several sources indicated that a German attack on Poland might be imminent. The statement which the Prime Minister made on 31 March was a guarantee not of every yard of Poland's boundary with Germany, but against an assault against her independence provided that she resisted.¹⁰² He was right to describe this as marking a new epoch in Britain's foreign policy,¹⁰³ words which would have been doubly justified if uttered three or four weeks later, by which time guarantees had been given to Rumania, Greece, and Turkey. It was ironical that Neville Chamberlain of all people should proclaim the guarantee, for it was his half-brother Austen who had declared so firmly that the Polish

⁹⁹ N. Chamberlain, *In Search of Peace*, p. 276.

¹⁰⁰ Conclusions of the Cabinet's meeting of 18 March 1939, Cab. 12 (39), Cab. 23/98, P.R.O.

¹⁰¹ Chamberlain to Lyons, Prime Minister of Australia, 20 March 1939, Premier 1/309, P.R.O.

¹⁰² N. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, c. 2 April 1939.

¹⁰³ Parl. Deb., 5th series, House of Commons, vol. 345, col. 2482.

corridor was not worth the bones of a single British grenadier. Only twelve months had passed since the Foreign Policy Committee had said the same thing about Czechoslovakia.

This act intended as a deterrent seems to have produced exactly the opposite effect upon Hitler. We are told by a bystander that when he received news of the guarantee, he crashed down his fist and cried, 'I'll make them a hell's broth'.¹⁰⁴ It is often judged that the guarantee placed British and French policy in Russian hands, and that the chief reason for the breakdown of the negotiations in Moscow that summer lay in a warranted Russian suspicion of the British and French. Such arguments hold elements of contradiction. If the pledge to Poland were credited by other powers, it showed beyond dispute that there was no question of trying to deflect Germany to the east or encourage an advance there; on the contrary, since a strong German attack upon Russia could come only through Poland, Britain and France would be committed to war. Alternatively, if the pledged word of Britain and France were not taken seriously by Russia, the negotiations in Moscow would presumably have failed anyway. The further argument that Britain's policy thus fell more or less into Russian hands has a corollary; when Russia decided to make terms with Germany, the British should have wriggled out of their commitment. Since neither Chamberlain nor anyone else in the British government at high level had counted upon Russian military help in the execution of the guarantee, lack of such help did nothing to undermine the arguments for honouring it. There is yet another line of criticism, namely that the guarantee gave Russia the excuse not to defend herself against Germany; this was written at an unknown date, by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, Mr R. A. Butler.¹⁰⁵

The guarantee to Poland was welcomed by the leaders of all parties, and in most organs of the British press. In private, Chamberlain remarked, 'The government has so handled matters that when the moment came to take the plunge there was not a dissenting voice. This shows the immense importance of correct timing, a factor which is frequently left out of account by critics who say, "Ah! At long last you are doing what I always said you

¹⁰⁴ Cited by W. Carr, *Arms, Autarky and Aggression*, p. 109.

¹⁰⁵ Manuscript note by R. A. Butler on page 3 of an undated memorandum by him (but from internal evidence written in the summer of 1939): RAB G10, 28, Butler papers, Trinity College, Cambridge.

ought to do.”¹⁰⁶ The introduction of limited conscription a few weeks later, intended to give reassurance to the French and others, and a signal to potential aggressors, was not seriously opposed by the trade unions, although the Labour Party in Parliament voted against it and Mr Attlee spoke vigorously against the notion that Britain’s new commitments in Europe required a larger army.¹⁰⁷

While the government refused to denounce the Anglo-Italian Agreement, despite the Italian seizure of Albania, the guarantees given to Greece and Turkey were directed against Italy rather than Germany, and the British served curt notice in April that if, as rumour had it, Italian ships should bombard Corfu, Britain and Italy would be at war.¹⁰⁸ As for relations with Russia, wide variations of opinion became apparent within the government. Chamberlain’s view changed little during the summer; he saw no evidence that Stalin’s purposes were the same as Britain’s, or that Russia had any sympathy for the democracies. He realized only too well Russia’s simultaneous exposure to Germany and Japan, and believed Stalin would be delighted if other people were to fight those two countries. Calculating the balance of power between the parties, Chamberlain believed that every month that passed made war more unlikely.¹⁰⁹ The British government did its best to convince Hitler directly that the guarantee to Poland meant what it said. Of course, this was hard for the British to do after the events of 1938 but much harder for the French, who had had a plain commitment to Czechoslovakia. By a series of somewhat grudging concessions, the British moved nearer and nearer to the Russian position. By late May the pendulum of opinion within the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet inclined to an alliance or its equivalent. Chamberlain acknowledged that the conclusion of the pact between the three powers would be of enormous psychological importance,¹¹⁰ but remained sceptical about the amount of military help which Russia could give beyond her own borders. However, he acknowledged that his colleagues in the Cabinet were so desperately anxious for agreement and so nervous of the consequences of failure in the negotiation at Moscow that he had to tread very

¹⁰⁶ N. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, c. 2 April 1939.

¹⁰⁷ Parl. Deb., 5th series, House of Commons, vol. 347, col. 146.

¹⁰⁸ Cadogan, p. 171.

¹⁰⁹ N. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 29 April 1939.

¹¹⁰ Lord Citrine, *Men and Work* (London, 1964), p. 371.

warily.¹¹¹ The best chance for peace, said no less an authority than Herr von Weizsäcker, would be for England to maintain a solid front, 'un silence menaçant'. Otherwise Ribbentrop would again succeed with his thesis that the British would not march. He recommended that the British should keep the door to negotiation ajar, but only just.¹¹² This is closely in line with the policy which the British government tried to follow. The Ambassador in Rome, a little later in the summer, recommended much the same policy in his sphere: 'For the time being, and in any case till the balance of armed strength has turned visibly against the Axis powers, it is best for you to maintain your *silence menaçant* in London, and me my *silence souriant* in Rome.' 'A very sensible letter', Chamberlain minuted.¹¹³

It was arranged that a very large British fleet should exercise in the North Sea throughout August and September. Though the negotiations in Moscow dragged on—somewhat to British bewilderment, for every time they thought they had conceded Molotov's point, he pressed another—the British Government did its best to see that its policy towards Germany was conveyed directly to Hitler, for neither the Ambassador in Berlin nor the ministers in London believed that Ribbentrop would report accurately what he was told. The Prime Minister in mid-July described the purpose of the government as being to frighten Hitler, or rather convince him that it would not pay Germany to use force:

In fact I have little doubt that Hitler knows quite well that we mean business. The only question to which he is not sure of the answer is whether we mean to attack him as soon as we are strong enough. If he thought we did, he would naturally argue that he had better have the war when it suits him than wait until it suits us. But in various ways I am trying to get the truth conveyed to the only quarter where it matters . . . I doubt if any solution, short of war, is practicable at present.¹¹⁴

'Hitler is not the man to be intimidated by an Anglo-Soviet Agreement.'¹¹⁵ 'The Russians . . . have no offensive strength and

¹¹¹ N. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 2 July 1939.

¹¹² This advice was tendered to Carl Burckhardt, League of Nations High Commissioner in Danzig, at the end of May or beginning of June 1939, B.D., series III, vol. vi, 43.

¹¹³ B.D., series III, vol. vi, 556.

¹¹⁴ N. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 15 July 1939.

¹¹⁵ Cited in Henderson to Halifax, 20 June 1939, B.D., series III, vol. vi, 710-11.

will not pull chestnuts out of the fire for others. A country does not kill off its officers if it intends to fight a war.¹¹⁶ Each of those remarks, the first of which comes from Weizsäcker and the second from Hitler himself, might have been made by Chamberlain or Halifax or Cadogan. The Prime Minister still believed that Russian help would fail in extremity and confessed that he would have liked to take a stronger line all through but could not have carried the Cabinet.¹¹⁷ While the Japanese had still declined to join a binding military alliance with their partners of the Axis, the situation in China became so serious in the midsummer of 1939 that war over Tiensin seemed almost as probable as war over Danzig. Neither could be considered in isolation from the other; hence Chamberlain's remark: 'It is maddening to have to hold our hands in the face of such humiliations, but we cannot ignore the terrible risks of putting such temptations in Hitler's way.'¹¹⁸ This referred to the possible despatch of most of the Royal Navy's capital ships to the Far East. The same tangle of risks explains a good deal of Britain's policy in the Mediterranean.

Although Chamberlain saw no sign that the British would have offensive forces sufficient for a victory over Germany, he still hoped to put off and eventually avert war by the possession of forces strong enough to make it impossible for Germany to win 'except at such a cost as to make it not worthwhile . . . but the time for talk has not come yet because the Germans have not yet realised that they cannot get what they want by force'.¹¹⁹ In respect of high policy, there was no difference of substance between Chamberlain, Halifax, and Cadogan in that summer. The government tried to maintain discreet contact with Germany, so that those who wished to see an understanding should not be discouraged. Those who had direct access to Goering or Hitler were treated with some care. To one of them, Mr Wenner-Gren, Chamberlain explained that Goering's suggestions for discussion all appeared to involve concessions to Germany. As usual, no claims were stated definitely:

I said that this seemed to me an unsatisfactory method of procedure which involved all give on our side and all take on his. Indeed, it would

¹¹⁶ This was said to Burckhardt on 11 August 1939, B.D., series III, vol. vi, 692.

¹¹⁷ N. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 15 July 1939.

¹¹⁸ N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 25 June 1939.

¹¹⁹ N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 23 July 1939.

appear that the only thing Göring contemplated offering to us in return for our concessions was a series of fresh assurances, but since Hitler had already broken his word and brushed aside the assurances which he had given on numerous occasions, of what value could fresh assurances be?¹²⁰

The German suggestions had embraced a twenty-five year pact of peace, with a vague suggestion that disarmament should be discussed when other questions had been resolved. At intervals during the 1930s, and even in the summer of 1940, Hitler proposed that Germany should in effect be left to go her own way in Europe, while Britain found her destiny in the Empire. Ribbentrop used to say much the same, and occasionally even suggested that Germany should defend the British Empire. When asked in the summer of 1939 'Against whom?' he 'made an impatient gesture'.¹²¹ The essence of British policy towards Germany remained the same until the end of August: to convince Hitler that the guarantee to Poland would be honoured; to convince Germany that the chances of winning a war without exhausting her resources were too remote to make it worthwhile; and with the counterpart that Germany must have a chance of getting fair and reasonable consideration if she would abandon the use of force. Chamberlain was convinced that the Communists would be the only beneficiaries if Hitler tore Europe apart.¹²²

The full depravity of Hitler and his regime was not sufficiently understood by British ministers. It was understood by very few anywhere. Neither Chamberlain nor his leading colleagues would have claimed to foresee what was to happen to the Jews and many others after 1940. It is also true that British attempts to regain the initiative in foreign policy were constantly overtaken by Hitler; it was a contest in which he had many weapons not available to parliamentary democracies and in the playing of which he excelled. Germany entered the lists in Moscow with offers of a kind which the British and French could not emulate. When news of the impending signature of the Nazi-Soviet pact reached London, ancestral memories of 1914 welled up.

¹²⁰ Chamberlain's record of a conversation with Mr Wenner-Gren, 6 June 1939, B.D., series III, vol. vi, 737.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹²² He made this clear on more than one occasion to Lord Home (then, as Lord Dunglass, Chamberlain's Parliamentary Private Secretary), to whom I am indebted for the information.

Chamberlain sent a letter to Hitler, repeating his conviction that war would be the greatest calamity that could occur, desired neither by the German people nor by the British. Repeating what he had said to Hitler face to face in September 1938, the Prime Minister went on:

It has been alleged that if His Majesty's Government had made their position more clear in 1914, the great catastrophe would have been avoided. . . . (they) are resolved that on this occasion there shall be no such tragic misunderstanding.¹²³

In the last week of fragile peace, the exchanges with Germany were taken seriously in London; the argument remained that Britain too was anxious for an understanding if the policy of force were given up. Chamberlain did not believe that Hitler had been merely prevaricating, for there was good evidence that orders for the invasion of Poland on 25 August had been given and cancelled at the last moment:

With such an extraordinary creature one can only speculate. But I believe he did seriously contemplate an agreement with us and that he worked seriously at proposals (subsequently broadcast) which to his one-track mind seemed almost fabulously generous. But at the last moment some brainstorm took possession of him—maybe Ribbentrop stirred it up—and once he had set his machine in motion he could not stop it. That, as I have always recognised, is the frightful danger of such terrific weapons being in the hands of a paranoiac.¹²⁴

The burden of responsibility resting on a Prime Minister is great in normal times, but greater in time of war or threatened war. No Prime Minister, however powerful, could under the system of Cabinet government carry through a policy leading to war without the support of most senior ministers. Nevertheless, those colleagues will pay close attention to the view of any competent and respected Prime Minister, and certainly did so with Chamberlain. In short, his responsibility was different in degree from that of other members of the Cabinet, a fact of which he was conscious, and different in kind from that of people who bore no official responsibility.

The British Ambassador in Germany felt sure that if anybody could have convinced Hitler of Britain's determination to come

¹²³ B.D., series III, vol. VII, 127–8.

¹²⁴ N. Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain, 10 September 1939.

to Poland's help, he had done that on 23 August. He had found Hitler raving and ranting; but according to Weizsäcker, it was all an act and no sooner had Henderson gone out of the door than Hitler slapped his thigh, laughed and said, 'Chamberlain won't survive that conversation: his Cabinet will fall this evening'.¹²⁵ The same authority and other German sources give us a picture of a Führer contradicting himself and changing plans from one day or even hour to the next, in a style which made any policy of deterrence a doubtful proposition unless it could be exercised from a position of overwhelming strength. Perhaps, as many have said, Hitler went to war believing that Chamberlain's letter and the announcement of the treaty with Poland three days later were mere bluff. But there is a remark of his recorded from those days which gives us another explanation—'All my life I have played for all or nothing'¹²⁶—and earlier in August he had said to Burckhardt, *fortissimo*, 'If the slightest incident happens now I shall crush the Poles without warning in such a way that no trace of Poland can be found afterwards. I shall strike like lightning with the full force of a mechanised army, of which the Poles have no conception.' His interlocutor, a man of letters and knowledge, replied, 'I am listening. I know that that will mean a general war.' Hitler rejoined, 'So be it. If I have to wage war, I would rather do it today than tomorrow.'¹²⁷

War meant the collapse of many hopes. But no state ever spent huge sums on arms for deterrence alone, and the Britain of the later 1930s provides no exception. If the arms deterred, well and good; if not, they were there to be used. We can calculate at least approximate figures for the percentage of gross national product devoted to military expenditure. In 1935 the figures had been France 6 per cent, Germany 8 per cent, Great Britain 3 per cent, the United States 1 per cent; in 1936 the proportions had risen to France 6 per cent, Germany 13 per cent, Great Britain 4 per cent, the United States 1 per cent; in the following year, the French figure was 7 per cent and the British 6 per cent, but the German 13 per cent; in the year of Munich, the French expenditure stood

¹²⁵ E. von Weizsäcker, *Memoirs of Ernst von Weizsäcker* (London, 1951), p. 203.

¹²⁶ L. Hill, 'Three Crises' in *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 3, no. 1, p. 138.

¹²⁷ B.D., series III, vol. vi, 692.

at 8 per cent, the British at about the same level, and Germany's at 17 per cent; by the following year, 1939, France's figure had soared to 23 per cent, Germany's stood at about the same level, and Britain's at 21 per cent, with the United States remaining at 1 per cent; and by 1940, when Germany was spending 38 per cent of her gross national product on military purposes, Britain was spending 46 per cent and the United States 2 per cent. Admittedly, such figures require many qualifications. We may say with confidence, however, that in the years 1935 to 1938, Germany devoted a greater proportion of her gross national product to military expenditure than did Britain or France; that the three countries devoted much the same proportions in 1939, and Britain the highest in 1940.¹²⁸ The populations of Britain and France added together were roughly equal to those of Greater Germany (including Austria and most of Czechoslovakia) in 1939. The combined gross national products of Britain and France amounted to more than that of Germany. Such a measure takes no account of reserves of gold or foreign exchange, and much depends upon the ability of a state to command the nation's other resources. We may judge that only comparable powers would have enabled Britain and France to match German military strength in the later 1930s. Nevertheless, by 1939-40 Britain's effort was of unparalleled scale, and could not have been sustained had the USA been unwilling to lend assistance in increasing measure from the end of 1940. That was not a contingency upon which any British government could have counted much earlier. Whether far larger sums could have been borrowed by the British government for defence without creating a high inflation is much disputed. Even J. M. Keynes, a sharp critic of the caution of Britain's financial policy in the early 1930s, thought the government's balance between taxation and borrowing for rearmament to be roughly right.¹²⁹

It is hardly possible to conceive of a British government which could have confronted the continuous crisis of those years without blunders and misapprehensions. Even as doughty an advocate as Chamberlain would not have denied mistakes.

¹²⁸ G. Peden, 'Democracy, Dictatorship and Public Opinion: Some Economic Aspects of Foreign Policy' in *Opinion Publique et Politique Extérieure* (École Française de Rome, 1984). I am indebted to Dr Peden for minor corrections of the figures there given, and for a helpful commentary upon the issues.

¹²⁹ G. Peden, 'Keynes, the Economics of Rearmament, and Appeasement' in W. J. Mommsen and L. Kettenacker (eds.), *The Fascist Challenge and the Policy of Appeasement* (London, 1983), pp. 142-54.

Churchill, joining the government in his old office at the Admiralty, records that as Parliament met on that Sunday morning when war was declared, he felt uplifted above the ordinary run of human affairs and overcome by a strong sense of calm. 'In this solemn hour' he said,

it is a consolation to recall and dwell upon our repeated efforts for peace. All have been ill-starred, but all have been faithful and sincere. This is of the highest moral value—and not only moral value but practical value—at the present time because the wholehearted concurrence of scores of millions of men and women, whose co-operation is indispensable and whose comradeship and brotherhood are indispensable, is the only foundation upon which the trial and tribulation of modern war can be endured and surmounted.¹³⁰

There was a time, not long ago, when the affairs of the 1930s looked so simple. Recession and unemployment could have been avoided, or rapidly put right by deficit financing; Germany's grievances should have been assuaged before the victors disarmed; German rearmament should have been prevented; the Führer's own plans were manifest to anyone who cared to scan *Mein Kampf*; Roosevelt's hand proffered across the Atlantic would have been there for the taking if only matters had been managed differently in 1938; Hitler was bluffing at Munich or, if not, would have been overthrown by his opponents within Germany; the effective help of Russia was available. Indeed, whole works were written about British policy towards Germany as if the Far East, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean had not existed. To put it kindly, all those assumptions are open to question, and some demonstrably mistaken. Others will bear fresh reflection in the light of fuller evidence and lengthening perspectives. It is time for us to look at the 1930s with a stronger determination to understand why ministers behaved as they did, and to realize that almost everyone was an appeaser somewhere. Eden and Chamberlain, Halifax and Churchill, were at one in upholding non-intervention in Spain; Churchill had no intention of committing Britain against Japan, and indeed was apt to believe that the risks there were not serious; those who, like Duff Cooper, longed to see Britain stand up firmly to Hitler, favoured concessions to Italy; the same was true of almost all those who were strongly influenced by naval considerations or a special concern for the defence of the Empire. Many of the more telling

¹³⁰ Parl. Deb., 5th series, House of Commons, vol. 351, cols. 294-5.

criticisms of Munich apply equally to Yalta, with the difference that the British ministers dealing with Stalin in the later stages of the war knew that they were negotiating with a tyrant guilty of crimes on a scale beyond anything of which Hitler was guilty in 1938. Nor was Chamberlain the only Prime Minister who has felt impelled to announce his trust in the other side's good faith; after Yalta, Churchill proclaimed his faith in Stalin and the Russian Government in terms which went beyond those used by his predecessor after Munich. We shall judge ministers of the 1930s more fairly if we conceive of them as men grappling with a deadly situation, contemplating the early outbreak of a war which they believed would be more horrible in its devastation and bloodletting than any previously recorded; this is at least as true as the image of ministers hopelessly deluded, clinging to insular and foolish views, shuffling from expedient to expedient. Baldwin and Chamberlain, Eden and Halifax, had done their best to work for a peace which would be more than an armed truce; when that prospect was denied, they tried to salvage something from the wreckage; the avoidance of another war came to constitute a campaign in its own right. Chamberlain's volume of speeches for those years is entitled *The Struggle for Peace*, and to the Cabinet summoned when news of Germany's invasion of Poland reached London, he said, 'The event against which we have fought so long and so earnestly has come upon us'.¹³¹

In the bleak mid-winter of December 1941 Sir Alexander Cadogan found himself travelling by train from Murmansk to Moscow. His companion Mr Maisky, formerly Russian Ambassador in London who had confessed in the early days of the war that he counted the British, French and German losses in the same column, became sneering about Chamberlain's government. 'I had to remind him' Cadogan recorded, 'that Chamberlain was the *first* man of only *two*—and the French came in a bad second—who declared war on Hitler.' It seems that Cadogan, whose share in forming British policy towards Germany had been considerable, expressed himself with effect and warmth. At all events, Maisky soon retreated to his own compartment.¹³²

¹³¹ E. L. Woodward, *British Foreign Policy in the Second World War* (HMSO, London, 1970), i, p. 1.

¹³² Cadogan to Sir E. Bridges, 12 October 1945, FO 370/181, P.R.O.