CHAPTER TWO

Dealing with a "17 Stone Germany": British Foreign Policy towards Danubian Europe, 1936–1939

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From the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 onwards, Great Britain was much more diplomatically engaged in Danubian Europe than is usually assumed. The transformed political map of this part of Europe, drawn as a result of the demise of the Habsburg Empire and the establishment of successor states, abounded with trouble spots emerging from ethnic divides and frontier disputes which were never settled in interwar period. Britain was not concerned with the details of territorial arrangement in the region, but it was interested in maintaining peace and stability that would ensure no regional conflict would spill over to the rest of the continent. This would allow Britain to facilitate trade and economic exchange in Europe and the wider world and, in particular, to focus on the affairs of the British Empire.[1] With Germany's and the Soviet Union's exclusion from the affairs of Danubian Europe after the war, it was France and Italy that vied for predominance, just as Austria-Hungary and Imperial Russia had done prior to 1914.[2] The Foreign Office continuously provided a counsel of moderation with a view to appeasing local conflicts between revisionist Hungary and the Little Entente—consisting of Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania—and between revisionist Bulgaria and other Balkan states. The British were, however, weary of assuming any commitments in an area not considered to have been

[1] For the studies discussing the earlier period than that covered in this chapter see Gábor Bátonyi, *Britain and Central Europe, 1918–1933* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998); Miklós Lojkó, *Meddling in Middle Europe: Britain and the "Lands between", 1919–1925* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2006); Dragan Bakić, *Britain and Interwar Danubian Europe: Foreign Policy and Security Challenges, 1919–1936* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017).

[2] For the rivalry between Paris and Rome, see William Shorrock, *From Ally to Enemy: The Enigma of Fascist Italy in French Diplomacy, 1920–1940* (Kent: Kent State University Press, 1988); Dennison Rusinow, *Italy's Austrian Heritage, 1919–1946* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); John Gooch, *Mussolini and His Generals: The Armed Forces and Fascist Foreign Policy, 1922–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

of vital strategic importance for them and thus often created the impression that they stood completely aloof from Danubian matters. A study of British policy towards the Danubian states in the 1930s has aptly labelled such a stance and the lack of any decisive line of action "passive pragmatism."[3]

This study will provide a short overview of the key issues with which the Foreign Office dealt with in Danubian Europe and then focus on its handling of the developing crisis from 1936 onwards that ended in the Second World War. It will look into the attitudes of Foreign Office officials and their often-differing views of the challenge posed by Germany's expansionist aims in the region and the appropriate policy for Britain to pursue. It will also examine the impact of policy recommendations formulated in the Foreign Office on the highest level of decision-making in the Conservative-dominated Cabinet under Stanley Baldwin and Neville Chamberlain. One of the major themes of this study concerns the internal dynamics of the Foreign Office and Cabinet which ultimately shaped the British response to Germany's penetration of Danubian Europe and the consequences that followed.

The rise of Hitler to power in Germany in 1933 opened a new era in international relations. This was first evident in the violent assault on the independence of Austria—the Nazi putsch in July 1934 claimed the life of the Austrian Chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuss. British commitment in Danubian Europe was out of the question due to unfavorable public opinion and the attitude of Cabinet. Furthermore, without prospect of tangible economic assistance to Vienna on account of the unwillingness of economic departments to abrogate the most-favored-nation rights, there was little, if anything, that could be done to help preserve Austrian independence. Italy and France were afraid of German subjugation of Austria for their own security reasons. Italy was apprehensive of the Nazi drive towards its own German-inhabited province of Alto Adige (Tyrol), taken from Austria after World War I, and possible aspirations on the Adriatic coast. France feared anything that could strengthen Germany and threaten the peace settlement of which it was the main beneficiary and guardian. The three powers eventually issued a joint declaration on February 17, 1934, which upheld Austria's independence and integrity in accordance with the peace treaties. The Anglo-French policy of co-operating with the Italians, despite all the difficulties caused by Mussolini's ambivalent position—he tried at the same time to cultivate a special relationship with Hitler based on their ideological affinity—reached its peak at the Stresa Conference in April 1935 convened for a show of unity in the face of German rearmament.[4]

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[3] Michael Newman, "Origins of Munich: British Policy in Danubian Europe, 1933–1937," *Historical Journal* 21, no. 2 (1978): 371–86.

[4] Aaron Goldman, "Sir Robert Vansittart's Search for Italian Cooperation against Hitler, 1933–36," *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 3 (1974): 93–130.

The Foreign Office was divided in their view of the immediate Austrian problem and its consequences. Edward Carr, a first secretary in the Southern Department, produced a memorandum which argued that Austria could not maintain her independence and, moreover, that German domination over that country was preferable than Italian as it offered better prospects for economic and political stability. Owen O'Malley, the head of the Southern Department, and Reginald Leeper, the head of the Press Department, endorsed his views. On the other side, Ralph Wigram, the head of the Central Department, Orme Sargent, an assistant under-secretary, and Robert Vansittart, the permanent under-secretary, resolutely opposed Carr's arguments. Vansittart had long been advocating support for Austria with a view to the long-term consequences of Anschluss: he believed that the destruction of the small Alpine republic would just mark the beginning of successive and acquisitive German actions in Europe which would pose ever greater menace for Britain. In one of his typical metaphors, Vansittart warned:

> I remain one of those simple persons who prefer a 13 stone Germany to 15 stone Germany. The programme put before me here is one of an eventual 17 stone Germany—for she would put on another stone or two later on. . . . She is, believe me, less dangerous at 13 stone—a very nice weight for *anyone*, & one which admits of the existence of some other 12 st[one] people. When she ceases to be inflamed and sobers down, I shall less dislike the 15 st[one] programme—though I shall never take kindly to a 17 stone programme for a potential cannibal. . . . To put the matter the other way around is a most dangerous gamble. . . . I do *not* think you will break her [German] appetite by feeding her on men.[5]

This debate set the tone for many others that would follow: from the outset it was assumed that Germany was intent on expanding her economic and political might in Europe. Mainly resulting from Vansittart's efforts, the Defence Requirements Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence which labored between November 1933 and June 1934 identified Germany rather than Japan as Britain's ultimate enemy and lobbied the increase in armed forces to support a continental commitment in Europe.[6] Unfortunately, Italian aggression against Abyssinia beginning in October 1935 dealt a serious blow to Anglo-Italian relations. Unlike the French, the British did not condone Italy's African adventure, but nor did they make

[5] Minute by Vansittart, March 18, 1934, R 2190/37/3, FO 371/18351, London, The National Archives (hereafter TNA), emphasis in original; see a discussion in Bakić, *Britain and Interwar Danubian Europe*, 132–35.

[6] Brian McKercher, "Old Diplomacy and New: The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1919–1939," in *Diplomacy and World Power: Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890–1950*, edited by Michael Dockrill and Brian McKercher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 79–114.

Mussolini realize that his aggression would be opposed by means of the League of Nations' sanctions. The Italian attack thus strained Anglo-French relations and spelled a death knell to both the collective security of the League of Nations and the so-called Stresa front. Moreover, it pushed the Duce away from the western democracies and into the arms of Hitler.[7] Mussolini was now resigned to the fact that Austria would sooner or later fall into German hands and sought for compensations in other directions at the expense of London and Paris. In addition, Hitler reoccupied the demilitarized Rhineland on March 7, 1936, in contravention to both the Versailles and Locarno Treaty of 1925. The strategic implications of this move for smaller Danubian states were obvious: they could hardly expect any military assistance from France in case of German aggression.

Shortly before the German blatant breach of the treaties, Carr and William Strang, head of the Central Department after 1936, contended that since Germany must expand somewhere, she should have an "economic" preponderance in Austria and the entire Central and South-Eastern Europe. Once again, Vansittart warned against handing out South-Eastern Europe to Germany and insisted that concessions to that country must be part of a general political settlement encompassing "a [German] return to Geneva, disarmament and a formal renunciation of any territorial designs in Europe, including any covert aims of absorption via disruption in Austria and Czechoslovakia." He was seconded by Lawrence Collier, the head of the Northern Department, who pointed out that German economic penetration also implied a political one.[8] For the British, it was difficult to decipher what Hitler really wanted; for example, it was considered he would be satisfied with cultural, and not territorial, autonomy for the Sudeten Germans in Czechoslovakia. Nevertheless, by 1936, the Foreign Office came to the conclusion that Britain had to make a choice in her relations with Germany: either make it clear to Hitler that expansion in Central and South-Eastern Europe was not acceptable, in which case Germany would have to be given concessions elsewhere, namely in overseas colonies, or to sit firmly on the colonies and consent to German penetration in these regions, provided it was done peacefully and without abrogating the principles of the League of Nations.[9]

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[7] Goldman, "Vansittart's Search for Italian Cooperation," 111–30; G. Bruce Strang, *On the Fiery March: Mussolini Prepares for War* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003), ch. 2; Robert Mallett, *Mussolini and the Origins of the Second World War, 1933–1940* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), ch. 3.

[8] Minutes by Carr and Collier, January 30, Strang, January 31, Vansittart, February 3, 1936, TNA, C 585/4/18, FO 371/19884.

[9] O'Malley memorandum "German expansion, political and economic, in central and south-eastern Europe," February 27, 1936, TNA, R 1167/1167/67, FO 371/20385.

The remilitarization of the Rhineland was a catalyst for British policy-makers. In Sargent's analysis, the British government was facing a dilemma as to whether it should seek a general European agreement which could, if Germany refused to cooperate, lead to the conclusion of a defensive alliance between France, Britain, and Belgium or strive for an Anglo-French-German agreement to stabilize the situation in the west and leave the south-east of the continent to its fate. Vansittart instantly made his stance clear: "What would a purely Western, and hand-washing settlement be worth in the long run?"[10] This tortuous question was debated at the Cabinet meeting on July 6, 1936, in connection with an eventual conference of the Locarno Powers in Brussels and was interlocked with two other key issues: the future of the League of Nations and German colonies. The discussion was informed by two basic assumptions. The first was the considered opinion of Eric Phipps, Ambassador in Berlin, "that it might be possible to get Germany to enter into a new Locarno Treaty, but it would be at the expense of Eastern and South-Eastern Europe." The second was that British defensive preparations were not sufficiently advanced for a potential war with Germany at present and that public opinion was anyway averse to the possibility. In the circumstances, the Cabinet decided that Britain could not uphold its full obligations to the League and had to focus on regional security in Western Europe. "Consequently, it was suggested our policy ought to be framed on the basis that we could not help Eastern Europe" but "we should not announce that we were unwilling or unable to help." When someone asked if constant truckling to Hitler was not having the effect of encouraging him in his aggressive policy and thus leading to war, the reply was frank and succinct: "at the moment the country had neither the means nor the heart to stop him."[11] Ten days later, the Cabinet went even further and decided to "confine" discussion with Germany to a new Locarno only, a settlement limited to Western Europe.[12]

Vansittart was alarmed with such a decision and saw it as ignoring the reality of Hitler's designs on Central and Eastern Europe.[13] The Foreign Office under his direction spared no effort to influence the Cabinet to reconsider the far-reaching consequences of its newly-proclaimed policy. Sargent and Wigram jointly prepared a memorandum, circulated to the Cabinet, in which they argued that Britain should maintain its policy of searching for a general settlement rather than one confined to Western Europe. The latter course, they claimed, would not provide any assurance

[10] Minutes by Sargent and Vansittart, July 1, 1936, TNA, C 4721/4/18, FO 371/19908.
[11] Cabinet 50 (36), July 6, 1936, TNA, CAB 23/85/3.
[12] Cabinet 53 (36), July 16, 1936, TNA, CAB 23/85/6.
[13] Minute by Vansittart, July 19, 1936, TNA, C 5315/4/18, FO 371/19910.

of general peace as it would neither cover real danger spots, nor be acceptable to France. It would also not secure a détente with Germany, as the restitution of her colonies would remain as a grievance.[14] However, from summer 1936 onwards, it became increasingly clear that Vansittart's policy recommendations, which emphasized the need to include Eastern Europe in any agreement with Germany, were out of step with the prevailing opinion in the Cabinet. In October, it emerged from Cabinet discussions that "an Eastern and Central European settlement" should not be placed in the forefront of a conference with the Locarno Powers "since our intention was to avoid putting so much prominence on the Eastern settlement as to block the way to a settlement in Western Europe."[15] This was exactly the sort of diplomatic strategy that Vansittart had disproved of and found inadequate for protecting British interests on the continent.

Along with Austria, Czechoslovakia presented another danger spot that could spark a general conflagration. In the latter half of the 1930s, and in parallel with the growing strength of Nazi Germany, the German minority in Bohemia became restless. The British were concerned that this internal trouble might invite the interference of Germany and turn into an international crisis which could provoke another European-scale war—given the existing defensive treaties between Czechoslovakia and France signed in 1925, France and the Soviet Union, and, finally, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union concluded in 1935. The tenor of reports from Joseph Addison, minister in Prague from 1930 to 1936, was notoriously anti-Czech. Addison's cynical and entertaining, but defamatory, reports about internal and external affairs of Czechoslovakia earned that country an exceedingly bad reputation in the Foreign Office. According to him, Czechoslovakia was an artificial and untenable creation in which the Czech minority was suppressing all other nationalities, and especially the racially and culturally superior Germans.[16] Although Addison's "dislike for the Czechs" and "characteristic depreciation of the country" were duly noted, the Foreign Office officials still considered his dispatches to be "first-rate."[17] For all Addison's racist slurs and bias, it was only before his departure from the

[14] Memorandum prepared by Wigram and Sargent, "Proposed Meeting of Locarno Powers," July 13, 1936 [circulated to the Committee on Foreign Policy, F.P. (36) 6], TNA, C 5052/4/18, FO 371/19909.

[15] Cabinet 60 (36), October 28, 1936, TNA, CAB 23/86/1.

[16] For a compilation of Addison's most important and typical reports see TNA, R 6487/32/12, FO 371/20375; also, Mark Cornwall, "The Rise and Fall of a 'Special Relationship'? Britain and Czechoslovakia, 1930–1948," in *What Difference did the War Make?* ed. Brian Brivati and Harriet Jones (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1993), 130–50.

[17] Minutes by Gallop and Carr, August 16, 1934, TNA, R 4479/237/12, FO 371/18382.

Prague Legation that Vansittart and Anthony Eden, foreign secretary after December 1935, expressed their dissatisfaction with his unsolicited suggestions as well as his overall performance.[18]

From the 1935 elections onwards, the main representative of the German minority in Czechoslovakia was *Sudetendeutsche Partei* (SdP) led by Konrad Henlein who became an instrument of Nazi aggressive designs against his own country.[19] This fundamental fact was not grasped in the Foreign Office where the opinion was unanimous that the Sudeten Germans had some legitimate grievances of which Henlein was a mouthpiece. Furthermore, Henlein was perceived as "moderate" and sincere in his protestations of loyalty to the Czechoslovak state, under pressure from radical elements of his party, whereas the blame for internal tensions was ascribed to the intransigence of President Edvard Beneš and the Czechoslovak government.[20] After having met Henlein in person during his visit to London, Vansittart, in particular, was taken in and convinced in his views on the wrong-headedness of the authorities in Prague. "France and this country can hardly be expected to fight in support of a policy so foolishly stiff and imprudent," he commented with indignation.[21] It was only with the benefit of hindsight that Vansittart acknowledged any error, explaining that he had not been aware that Henlein had been "in Nazi pay."[22]

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[18] Minutes by Cheetham, September 5 [quoted], Vansittart, September 10, and Eden, September 15, 1936, TNA, R 5216/32/12, FO 371/20375.

[19] Mark Cornwall, "'A Leap into Ice-Cold Water': The Manoeuvres of the Henlein Movement in Czechoslovakia, 1933–1939," in *Czechoslovakia in a Nationalist and Fascist Europe, 1918–1948*, ed. Mark Cornwall and R. J. W. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 123–42.

[20] Minute by Bramwell, June 19, 1936, TNA, R 3417/32/12, FO 371/20374; minutes by Cheetham, February 9, Carr, February 11, Sargent, February 16, and Stanhope, February 17, 1936, TNA, R 657/32/12, FO 371/20373; minute by O'Malley, February 19, 1936, TNA, R 869/32/12, FO 371/20373; MacDermott memorandum "The German Minority in Czechoslovakia," April 8, 1936, TNA, R 971/971/12, FO 371/20376; Vansittart's "Memorandum on conversation with Henlein," October 18, 1937, TNA, R 7107/188/12, FO 371/21131.

[21] Minute by Vansittart, July 18, 1936, TNA, R 4395/32/12, FO 371/20374; see also Norman Rose, *Vansittart: Study of a Diplomat* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 223.

[22] Robert Vansittart, *The Mist Procession: The Autobiography of Lord Vansittart* (London: Hutchinson, 1958), 470; for a fuller discussion on Henlein's activities and their impact on British policy see Johann Bruegel, *Czechoslovakia before Munich: The German Minority Problem and British Appeasement Policy* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 132–43, 209–25; Keith Robbins, "Konrad Henlein, the Sudeten Question and British Foreign Policy," *Historical Journal* 12, no. 4 (1969): 674–97; Cornwall, "A Fluctuating Barometer," 324–30.

Beneš's foreign policy constituted another concern for the Foreign Office. In relation to the Czechoslovak-Soviet pact, conditional on that between France and the Soviet Union, the majority of the Foreign Office officials, including Foreign Secretary John Simon (1931–35), found that the Czechs had embarked on a highly dangerous course by overtly associating themselves with the Soviets.[23] Such assessment was based on Czechoslovakia's heterogeneous ethnic composition and inherent weakness therefrom, which made it a folly for Prague to pursue a forward foreign policy. On the other hand, Collier and Vansittart realized that Germany aimed at the disruption of Czechoslovakia and thus argued that Beneš had no alternative.[24] It was rather indicative of the animosity felt in the Foreign Office to the Czechoslovak-Soviet treaty that German propaganda, cloaked in an anti-communist campaign, regarding the alleged military cooperation between the two countries was taken at face value. In particular, many officials, such as O'Malley, Bramwell, and Carr, suspected that the Czechoslovak airports were used by Soviet aircraft in anticipation of a showdown with Germany.[25] The War Office also suspected there was some military understanding behind the treaties concluded between the Soviets, French, and Czechs "in a form which can with truth be officially denied."[26] This misleading information largely came from the Prague Legation, and it was mostly Robert Hadow who was proffering it with persistence and conviction, along with his unduly alarmist warnings about the bolshevization of the country in which he served.[27] Both the British military and air attaché to Czechoslovakia did not believe in the rumors about the Russian airmen, but even their considered opinion was not enough to do away with the illusions harbored at the Prague Legation and, for that matter, the Foreign Office.[28] Collier was therefore perfectly justified when he proclaimed:

[23] Minutes by Lambert, Carr, and O'Malley, June 20, 1935, a collective minute by Lambert and Gallop, July 9, 1935, and minute by Simon, July 11, 1935, TNA, R 3805/3805/12, FO 371/19495.

[24] Minutes by Collier, July 22, 1935, and Vansittart, June 30, 1935, TNA, R 3805/3805/12, FO 371/19495.

[25] Minute by O'Malley, April 8, 1936, TNA, R 1015/21/3, FO 371/20360; minutes by Bramwell and Carr, May 16, 1936, TNA, R 2817/1162/12, FO 371/20377. The Czechoslovak-Soviet mutual defense treaty is discussed in Igor Lukes, *Czechoslovakia between Stalin and Hitler: The Diplomacy of Edvard Beneš in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), ch. 2.

[26] Minute by O'Malley, March 24, 1936, TNA, R 1681/1162/12, FO 371/20376.

[27] Lindsay Michie, *Portrait of an Appeaser: Robert Hadow, First Secretary in the British Foreign Office, 1931–1939* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996), 53–54.

[28] H. C. T. Stronge, "Memorandum respecting Interviews with Dr. Beneš, General Krejci, Colonel Hajek and other Senior Officers," Prague, December 6, 1936, TNA, R 7442/1162/12, FO 371/20376.

"I am not convinced by Mr. Hadow, who is notoriously inclined to see everything through anti-Czech spectacles, and, like Sir J. Addison, swallows anything from the opponents of Dr. Benes."[29]

Charles Bentinck, the new minister in Prague, reported along the lines of his predecessor, though without the latter's racist prejudices, insisting that Czechoslovakia had to improve the lot of the Sudeten Germans and reach an agreement with Germany. In 1937, however, the mood of the Foreign Office changed, and Bentinck's suggestions were met with a great deal of skepticism. Connor Green noted that "the writer has entirely failed to grasp the fact that, since Germany is bent on imposing her will on Czechoslovakia, a solution of the Sudetendeutsch problem would be extremely unlikely to have any effect whatever on German intentions." Vansittart similarly ceased to stress the maltreatment of Sudeten Germans. He continued to favor an improvement in their status, but now for tactical reasons rather than on merit: it was crucial, Vansittart claimed, to rob the Germans of their excuse for meddling in Czechoslovakia's affairs and buy some time in the process.[30]

To counter Germany's predatory intentions in Central Europe, the British still counted on Rome. It was an article of faith in the Foreign Office that Italy's opportunist policy towards Germany was incompatible with true Italian interests because German subjugation of Austria and Czechoslovakia would bring about immense dangers and ultimately vassalage of Italy to the Reich.[31] To be sure, there was much in Mussolini's previous conduct that could support such a belief. Italy had concluded the Rome Protocols in March 1934 with Austria and Hungary, carving out her own economic and political sphere of interest in Central Europe, and that arrangement certainly implied a special commitment to Austrian independence. This had been convincingly proven four months later at the time of Dolfuss' assassination when Italian divisions had mobilized on the Brenner Pass to come to Vienna's aid if necessary. But as we have seen, the Abyssinian affair aggravated Italian relations with Britain and France beyond repair, without a realistic prospect of returning to the anti-German Stresa front. The Foreign Office did not appreciate this fundamental change and stuck to the belief that Italy would have to reorient its policy towards Lon-

[29] Minute by Collier, November 6, 1936, TNA, R 6275/1799/12, FO 371/20378; also, minute by Collier, January 14, 1937, TNA, R 7442/1162/12, FO 371/20376.

[30] Bentinck to Foreign Office, January 5, 1937, and minutes by Green, January 8, and Vansittart, January 14, 1937, TNA, R 133/133/12, FO 371/21125.

[31] Memorandum "Prospects of Italo-German Co-operation in Central and South-Eastern Europe," December 3, 1936, TNA, R 4312/1167/67, FO 371/20385; "The Possibility of an Italo-German Rapprochement," March 4, TNA, 1936, R 1457/341/22, FO 371/20417.

don and Paris. Consequently, O'Malley formulated a common appreciation of the relations between Rome and Berlin as follows:

> As far as the Southern Department is concerned, we have always maintained that the danger was slight of real cooperation between Italy and Germany; that what was going on was just a flirtation which both parties calculated was likely to make us more rather than less acquiescent to their several points of view; that it was Italy who was making the running and that the Germans had not altered their traditional view of Italy as a thoroughly unreliable and in some respects almost contemptible Power.[32]

This illusion was not shaken even by Mussolini's famous Milan speech of November 1, 1936, in which he declared the formation of the Rome-Berlin Axis. Facing difficulties with both dictators, the Foreign Office felt, despite some reservations on the part of Eden, that it would be beneficial to ease tensions with Italy in the Mediterranean with a view to preventing a political agreement between Italy and Germany.[33] The Cabinet endorsed such views and authorized Eden to "adopt a policy of improving relations with Italy."[34] Eventually, this line of reasoning and negotiations with Mussolini led to the platitudinous Gentlemen's Agreement of January 2, 1937, which neither dispelled mutual suspicions in the Mediterranean nor arrested the Italian drift towards Berlin.

But central to the formulation of Foreign Office policy towards Danubian Europe was to assess how German ambitions in this region would affect Britain and what could be done to prevent a crisis. Strang argued that Britain could not risk its own existence in a war over Central Europe and he did not believe that France would intervene militarily in that region. He hoped that British rearmament and continued expression of interest in the affairs of Central Europe might deter Germany from violence. If that proved not to be the case, Strang recommended "a parallel policy, the object of which would be to ensure, if possible, that if changes take place at all, they would take place in peaceful and orderly conditions." Eden took a favorable view of Strang's analysis, although he differentiated between the cases of Austria and Czechoslovakia. He thought that Britain could do nothing to assist the former country and did not believe that Anschluss would considerably change the balance of power.

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[32] Minute by O'Malley, August 19, 1936, TNA, R 4939/341/22, FO 371/20417; also his memorandum "Italian relations with foreign countries," October 8, 1936, TNA, R 6165/6165/22, FO 371/20425.

[33] Sargent memorandum "Anglo-Italian Relations," November 2, 1936, and minute by Eden, November 2, 1936; memorandum "Relations with Italy," November 13, 1936, TNA, R 6646/226/22, FO 371/20412.

[34] Cabinet 63 (36), November 4, 1936, TNA, CAB 23/86/4.

"I am myself doubtful whether Germany would in fact gain so much in increased capacity for aggression from the absorption of Austria," Eden professed. On the other hand, he found Czechoslovakia's position different insofar the majority of her population was willing to fight, and France was bound to defend her.[35]

Contrary to the positions above, Sargent was convinced that satisfying German ambitions in Central Europe "would not bring stabilization or security to Europe as a whole." In his view, it made no difference if Germany achieved her goals by force or peacefully as Strang suggested, because the result would be the same—the strengthening of German and the consequent weakening of British position. In the latter case, Britain would be an accomplice "in the coercion of a large number of people, who would be deprived of their independence."[36] Vansittart insisted that what Germany described as her legitimate claims in Central and South-Eastern Europe clouded much more ominous demands than merely economic dominance. When Alexander Cadogan responded by enquiring as to the exact meaning of German hegemony to which British policy was opposed, Vansittart put down on record what he feared with prophetic foresight: "It means, to be quite precise, the conquest of Austria & Czechoslovakia & the reconquest of Danzig & Memel; followed by the reduction of the other states to the condition of satellites—military satellites when required. . . . We fought the last war largely to prevent this."[37]

Nevertheless, there was a consensus that concessions would have to be given to Germany if there was to be some general settlement. Vansittart and Sargent were—unlike most of their contemporaries—willing to grant them in colonies at the expense of Britain, rather than in Danubian Europe at the expense of other nations. Although both officials did stress the immorality of making unsavory bargains and pointed out that confrontation with Germany concerned the very survival of democracy and personal liberty,[38] there were classical strategic reasons behind their recommendations. Vansittart spelled out to Harold Nicolson, a former Foreign Office colleague, in no uncertain terms his conviction "that a German hegemony in Europe means the end of the British Empire"; even if an attempt was made

[35] Minutes by Strang, July 2, Cadogan, July 5, and Eden, July 8, 1937, TNA, C 4757/3/18, FO 371/20711; also minute by Strang, July 28, 1937, TNA, C 5316/270/18, FO 371/20736; minute by Cadogan, December 12, 1936, TNA, R 7312/1167/67, FO 371/20385.

[36] Minute by Sargent, July 2, 1937, TNA, C 4757/3/18, FO 371/20711.

[37] Minutes by Mallet, May 24, Baxter, May 26, Sargent, May 27, Cadogan, May 28, 1937, and Vansittart's marginal notes, TNA, C 3621/270/18, FO 371/20735.

[38] Minutes by Sargent, May 8, 1937, and Vansittart (marginal), TNA, R 2983/1/22, FO 371/21158; minute by Vansittart, May 21, 1936, TNA, R 2746/2745/21, FO 371/20396, and April 26, 1936, TNA, W 3851/79/98, FO 371/20472.

"to buy Germany off for a generation by offering her a free hand against the Slav countries," that would be of no avail. "Once she has established herself in an unassailable position she will turn round upon us and we shall be too weak to resist her."[39] Vansittart and Sargent had no illusions that even a redistribution of colonies would put an end to European troubles, but they found that such proposal "would have this advantage over the abandonment of Central Europe, that we should be gratifying Germany's pride and ambitions without in the process strengthening her strategically or politically."[40] Sargent even proposed to state frankly to the Germans that the annexation of Austria would change the balance of power between Great Powers and the consequent growth of German strength would become a threat to general peace and British interests.[41]

As Vansittart and Sargent were the most senior officials, their views informed Foreign Office policy. It was based on the premise that the precarious peace and stability of Europe hinged on close Anglo-French understanding, the execution of a British rearmament program "and a lingering doubt in the minds of some Government whether, in fact, Great Britain would refrain from armed intervention if trouble arouse."[42] Although Britain was actually not prepared to use force of arms to prevent German encroachment into Eastern Europe, it refrained from proclaiming so publicly. For that reason, it was all the more important to employ delicate diplomacy which, along with still-considerable prestige, was the only means at Britain's disposal to maintain the existing equilibrium. "If we were to intimate plainly to Germany that we should not oppose any territorial change that would be effected peacefully and by the will of the people, this would tend to make it easier for Germany to get what she wanted with the minimum of violence as the result of a short, sharp localized war, for our intimation would certainly be interpreted as meaning that in fact we should acquiesce in the 'fait accompli', however achieved."[43] Sargent and Vansittart were willing to go further than this with regard to Czechoslovakia. They advanced the opinion that it was possible to avert disaster in that country if the British government said about Czechoslovakia what it had already said about Austria—a mere expression of interest in her independence—on the grounds that, as Vansittart put it, "a judicious bluff may just turn the scales

[39] Nigel Nicolson, ed., *The Harold Nicolson Diaries, 1907–1964* (London: Phoenix, 2005), 159; also, minutes by Sargent and Vansittart, June 21, 1937, TNA, C 5200/3976/18, FO 371/20749.

[40] Minute by Sargent, July 2, 1937, TNA, C 4757/3/18, FO 371/20711.

[41] Minutes by Sargent and Vansittart, June 21, 1937, TNA, C 5200/3976/18, FO 371/20749.

[42] "Notes on Sir N. Henderson's Memorandum of May 10, 1937," October 15, 1937, TNA, C 5316/270/18, FO 371/20736.

[43] Ibid.

in the direction of safety."[44] This approach was mindful of the constraints of British policy, but it aimed at making the utmost effort to contain German danger without risking a war. However, to the British government this smacked of assuming responsibility for a settlement possibly entailing humiliating concessions on the part of Czechoslovakia or for the lack of any agreement.

With Neville Chamberlain replacing Stanley Baldwin as prime minister in May 1937 the basis of British foreign policy took a significant shift. He was determined to make his mark in the conduct of foreign policy and work towards finding a *modus vivendi* with both dictators, thus removing the threat to peace and British security. Central to his plans for an Anglo-German understanding was the notion that Britain had no place in Danubian affairs, and that Germany was entitled to play a preponderant role in the region for geographical reasons. It was the visit of the Lord President of the Council, Lord Halifax, to Hitler on November 19, 1937, that marked a definite departure in British foreign policy away from that previously pursued by the Foreign Office. The prime minister encouraged Halifax's trip despite Foreign Office opposition, presenting it as another opportunity for détente with Germany. In fact, Halifax was a mouthpiece of his views. Speaking to Hitler about Austria, Czechoslovakia, and Danzig, Halifax declared in a blatant disregard for Eden's brief: "On all these matters we were not necessarily concerned to stand for the status quo as today, but we were concerned to avoid such treatment of them as would be likely to cause trouble. If reasonable settlements could be reached with the free assent and goodwill of those primarily concerned we certainly had no desire to block."[45] To Hitler who had just two weeks earlier astonished his foreign minister and military commanders with his determination to destroy Austria and Czechoslovakia by force of arms, this statement confirmed what he had already come to believe: that Britain would stand aside when he embarked on a war.[46]

This was the beginning of the eclipse of Foreign Office influence over policy-making. Chamberlain and other Cabinet members believed that the office was anti-German and thus made it impossible to make a settlement with Berlin and they also doubted the viability of Czechoslova-

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[44] Sargent memorandum "Problem of Czechoslovakia," January 11, 1937, TNA, R 622/188/12, FO 371/21126; minute by Vansittart, February 16, 1937, TNA, C 926/270/18, FO 371/20734.

[45] "Conversation with Hitler on 19 November 1937," TNA, C 8094/270/18, FO 371/20736.

[46] This paragraph is based on David Faber, *Munich: The 1938 Appeasement Crisis* (London: Pocket Books, 2009), 9–45; and Andrew Roberts, *The Holly Fox: The Life of Lord Halifax* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), 65–75.

kia.[47] In analyzing the Halifax-Hitler conversation and the latter's agenda in Central Europe, Sargent was perfectly aware of the strength of the critics of the Foreign Office. He insisted on the importance of putting forward new and concrete proposals for Anglo-German understanding to pre-empt the suggestions that it was the obstruction of his colleagues and him that stood in the way of progress. Therefore, Sargent and Vansittart suggested that the Germans be offered colonial concessions and a unilateral declaration of British policy towards them on "an *off*-chance" that this could divert the Reich from expanding in Europe.[48] Their proposal could not be further from Chamberlain's position. He pointed out to the French prime minister, Camille Chautemps, and foreign minister, Yvon Delbos, that Britain would not wage war for the sake of Czechoslovakia. Furthermore, along with Eden, he urged French leaders to press the Czechs to grant autonomy to Sudeten Germans.[49] Since Chamberlain was intent on establishing full control over the Foreign Office, he removed Vansittart from the position of permanent under-secretary in January 1938, with an ostensible promotion to the newly-established post of the chief diplomatic adviser to the government. The appeasement minded Cadogan became a new permanent under-secretary, while Strang had already been promoted to the position of the head of Central Department after the sudden death of Wigram, Vansittart's fervent supporter. Eden did not oppose the government's policy over Danubian Europe in the wake of Halifax's visit to Hitler but resigned in February 1938 because of Chamberlain's handling of Italy. With the appointment of Halifax as his successor, the Foreign Office was completely under Downing Street's thumb.

The stage was thus set for British acquiescence in the German annexation of Austria on 12 March 1938. Although not unexpected, the rapidity and forcefulness of Hitler's action did make a strong impression in Britain. The Foreign Office officials were especially alarmed. The previously reluctant Strang expected that Hitler's success would make him even more willing to take further risks and mused: "This is the case in favour of an immediate declaration on our part of support for France if invaded by Germany

[47] David Dutton, *Anthony Eden: A Life and Reputation* (London: Arnold, 1997), 83. For prejudiced views on Czechoslovakia, see Vít Smetana, *In the Shadow of Munich: British Foreign Policy towards Czechoslovakia from the Endorsement to the Renunciation of the Munich Agreement (1938 to 1942)* (Prague: Charles University, Karolinum Press, 2008), 44.

[48] Minutes by Sargent and Vansittart, November 23, 1937, TNA, C 8161/270/18, FO 371/20736. Emphasis in original.

[49] Record by the Foreign Office of an Anglo-French conversation, held at No. 10 Downing Street, on November 29 and 30, 1937, TNA, C 8234/270/18, FO 371/20736.

as a result of her going to the assistance of Czechoslovakia."[50] However, the lesson that Chamberlain drew from the Anschluss was an entirely different one. He came to the conclusion that it was impossible to save Czechoslovakia from German aggression and abandoned any thought of giving a guarantee to that country.[51] Halifax executed Chamberlain's policy by producing a memorandum for the Cabinet in which he emphasized that Britain had no commitments vis-à-vis Czechoslovakia.[52] With the report of the Chiefs of Staff to the effect that Britain and its possible allies could not provide effective military assistance to Czechoslovakia, the ground was now prepared for the Cabinet to sanction Chamberlain's views. At the Cabinet meeting on March 22, Halifax impressed on his colleagues that no policy involving a risk of war could be adopted and that the alternative was to pressure the Prague government to reach an agreement with the Sudeten Germans. To that end, the British would press France to use its influence with the Czechs and approach Germany, together with the French, with a view to accepting a settlement reached in Czechoslovakia.[53] The opposite views, including that which warned that the subjugation of the smaller nations in Central and Eastern Europe would immensely increase the resources of Germany two years hence, were brushed aside. Halifax's proposals, strongly backed by Chamberlain, were accepted and formed the basis of British policy in the months to follow. Under Halifax's instructions, the Foreign Office also prepared an analysis of what options were opened to Britain, which clearly toed Chamberlain's line. The argument that German domination would bring in its tail a danger to the British Empire was declined as being too "confident prediction of future events than the experience of history will support."[54] In essence, Whitehall decided to leave Czechoslovakia to her fate shortly after the Anschluss.

The German annexation of Austria had considerable impact on all the Danubian countries. From 1935 onwards, Germany had acquired an economic stranglehold on export and import trade of these states and that was translated into her growing political influence in the region. Danubian countries were themselves very much attuned to the attendant dangers to their independence and sought help in London. Although the Foreign Office was sympathetic to their pleas, it could not prevail on the Board of Trade and Treasury to depart from laissez-faire economic principles and

[50] Minute by Strang, March 18, March 21, 1938, TNA, C 1809/132/18, FO 371/21674.
[51] Faber, *Munich*, 152–53, 157.
[52] C.P. 67 (38), March 13, 1938, TNA, CAB 24/275/31.
[53] Cabinet 15 (38), March 22, 1938, TNA, CAB 23/93/2.
[54] Halifax memorandum "Possible Measures to Avert German Action in Czechoslovakia," March 18, 1938, TNA, C 1865/132/18, FO 371/21674.

assist the Danubian states by augmenting their trade with Britain.[55] In May 1938, Halifax took the somewhat sudden initiative to strengthen British political influence in Central and South Eastern Europe by using economic leverage. For that purpose, he envisaged the formation of an ultimately standing Cabinet committee and proposed Vansittart to take charge if it; he requested the Foreign Office to work out more detailed suggestions to be presented to the Cabinet.[56] Shortly afterwards, Halifax submitted a memorandum to the Cabinet, stating that as a result of Anschluss German influence in that region extended "in a manner and to a degree that has not been witnessed since 1917." Halifax argued, in line with traditional British policy, that it was essential to prevent Germany from attaining "a virtual hegemony in Europe" which would, in case of retrocession of some colonies to Berlin and a probable General Franco's victory in the Spanish civil war, "constitute a direct menace to the security of the British Commonwealth." However, the object of the proposed action was not to form an anti-German bloc but rather "to endeavor to ensure that this area of Europe shall look specifically for leadership to this country, and generally towards the Western Powers, rather than feel obliged in default of any other *point d'appui* to allow itself to be exploited by Berlin."[57]

It fell to the Cabinet Committee on Foreign Policy to consider this idea, but Chamberlain proved rather obstructive. His unhelpful attitude must have had something to do with the decision to appoint Frederick Leith-Ross, chief economic adviser to the government, to be a chairman of the proposed committee rather than Vansittart, whose well-known views and vigorous personality would vouch for energetic proceedings. Moreover, Chamberlain discounted the political premises on which the whole scheme was based and eventually decided that a special ministerial committee was not necessary; instead, the inter-departmental committee was established, the role of which was confined to examining the material and making recommendations to the Foreign Policy Committee.[58] To further clip the wings of the entire scheme, the Foreign Office set itself against collaborating with the French so as not to foster the impression that it aimed at encircling Germany.[59] In view of Chamberlain's efforts to whittle down Hali-

[55] David Kaiser, *Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War: Germany, Britain, France, and Eastern Europe, 1930–1939* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), chs VII and XI.

[56] Ingram to Nichols, May 11, 1938, TNA, R 4755/94/67, FO 371/22342.

[57] Halifax memorandum, "British Influence in Central and South-Eastern Europe," May 24, 1938, TNA, C.P. 127 (38), CAB 24/277/8.

[58] Minutes of the Foreign Policy Committee, June 1, 1938, and minutes by Ingram and Sargent, May 27, and Cadogan, May 28, 1938, TNA, R 5362/94/67, FO 371/22342.

[59] Minute by Ingram, June 2, 1938, TNA, R 5389/94/67, FO 371/22342.

fax's original intentions, it was hardly surprising that the two sessions of the newly-minted "Interdepartmental Committee on Economic Assistance to Central and South-Eastern Europe"—which comprised the representatives of the Foreign Office, Bank of England, Board of Trade, Export Credits Guarantee Department and Department of Overseas Trade—held in summer 1938 brought no tangible results. Finally, as Kaiser elaborates in his study, the prime minister's subsequent actions in handling Germany effectively renounced the policy that aimed at containing German economic-political expansion in the Balkans.[60]

Eventually, the Munich conference of September 29–30—the discussion of which is beyond the scope of this study—brought about the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia and established an undisputed hegemony of the German Reich along the Danube. This was evidenced in the so-called first Vienna Award on November 2 that saw further mutilation of Czechoslovakia to Hungary's benefit executed through the Axis arbitration. Britain and France were content to be excluded from that affair and spared additional embarrassment.[61] The British government failed, even after the Vienna Award, to honor what one of Chamberlain's ministers described as "a moral obligation to [rump] Czechoslovakia" promised at the time of the Munich conference.[62] The dismemberment of Czechoslovakia, however, induced the Foreign Office to revive the work of Inter-Departmental Committee, although it was admitted that the new conditions might have rendered it "Utopian." Moreover, the guiding principle remained that any activities must not have a semblance of the policy of encirclement of Germany. The examination of the situation in individual countries of the region showed that, apart from Turkey which had been brought under British influence by means of a £16-million export credit guarantee, Greece occupied a special position on account of her political and strategic importance as Mediterranean, rather than just Balkan, Power. For that reason, the passing of Greece into the German camp would be intolerable in terms of its "disastrous" effect on Turkey, Egypt and other countries in the Eastern Mediterranean; consequently, it was decided that no effort should be spared to assist Athens. Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria and Hungary were ranked lower in priority and found to be, to a greater or lesser extent, drawn into the German orbit—any assistance to them would be difficult to realize. Nevertheless, Halifax recommended different measures with a view

[60] Kaiser, *Economic Diplomacy and the Origins of the Second World War*, 254–59.

[61] Thomas Sakmyster, *Hungary, the Great Powers, and the Danubian Crisis, 1936–1939* (Athens GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1980), 214–15.

[62] Halifax memorandum "British Guarantee for Czechoslovakia," November 12, 1938, TNA, C.P. 258 (38), CAB 24/280/13; Cabinet 55 (38), November 16, 1938, TNA, CAB 23/96/7.

to increasing "normal trade" with the countries concerned and extending them non-commercial, politically-motivated credits.[63] But the emphasis on Greece confirmed that Britain had neither strength nor political will for determined action in Danubian Europe and thus focused to stem German expansion at the gates of the Mediterranean and protect the vitally important Imperial communications.

It was the German occupation of the rest of Czechoslovakia on March 15, 1939, that made apparent the dismal failure of Chamberlain's appeasement policy. The immediate reaction to German aggression was a British guarantee of the independence of Poland, given on March 31, and of Romania and Greece on April 13, 1939 (the latter guarantee was also a response to Italy's invasion of Albania on April 7). Given for the purpose of deterring Germany from further expansion in Eastern Europe, these guarantees were not underwritten with either firm political resolve—a guarantee for territorial integrity was conspicuous by absence—or the military capability to carry them out.[64] It was a measure of distrust in British determination and ability to uphold its guarantee that Yugoslavia found such insurance rather embarrassing and the Foreign Office did not extend it to Belgrade. Nevertheless, it was only in the aftermath of these guarantees that the British government offered "political credits" to Romania and Yugoslavia amounting to five million and 1.5 million pounds respectively to be spent, to a large degree, on armaments.[65] But this was a case of too little, too late to contain the German danger. This became manifest on September 1, 1939, when the assault on Poland forced Britain to take up arms together with France, although reluctantly and without any effect on Poland's rapid defeat.

This study demonstrates that until late 1937, Vansittart and his supporters in the Foreign Office, above all Sargent, directed British policy towards Danubian Europe in such manner as not to allow Germany to believe that Britain would leave unchecked her thrust in that region. This was a subtle diplomatic game with a fair element of bluff, but it took account of the fact that the other side was also bluffing and was not prepared for a lengthy war. However, O'Malley rightly pointed out that he was not "alone in believing that nothing like a common view" on the recommenda-

[63] Halifax memorandum, "Central and South-Eastern Europe," November 10, 1938, TNA, C.P. 257 (38), CAB 24/280/12; see also Foreign Office memorandum "British Influence in Central and South East Europe," June 14, 1938, TNA, R 5558/94/67, FO 371/22342.

[64] For the negative attitude of the Chiefs of Staff, see Brian Bond, *British Military Policy between the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 305–7.

[65] Paul Hehn, *A Low Dishonest Decade: The Great Powers, Eastern Europe, and the Economic Origins of World War II, 1930–1941* (New York, London: Continuum, 2002), 338–44.

tions made by Vansittart "would be obtainable in this [Foreign] Office, the Cabinet, Parliament or the country."[66] There was much force in these words at least as far as the Cabinet and parliament were concerned. As has been seen, the Foreign Office could not impress its views on the Baldwin Cabinet in the summer of 1936, let alone on that of Chamberlain in 1937–38. It was, however, Chamberlain's taking control over foreign affairs from the Foreign Office specialists that changed the direction of British policy.[67] The prime minister shared the view of many influential Britons that Danubian Europe could not be protected from Germany's predatory designs and, moreover, that British interests did not require an attempt to prevent German hegemony in that region. By the time the appeasers disillusioned themselves on that score, Germany had grown to that "17 stone" weight that Vansittart predicted and warned against. The implications of such development came to the light when the Second World War broke out and, in particular, in 1940, when Hitler's armies overran France and wiped out British forces from the continent, a major success to which the resources of Danubian Europe made considerable contribution.

[66] Minute by O'Malley, June 2, 1937, TNA, R 3795/1/22, FO 371/21159.

[67] Brian McKercher, "The Foreign Office, 1930–1939: Strategy, Permanent Interests and National Security," *Contemporary British History* 18, no. 3 (2004): 87–109.