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to the Polish guarantee, September 29, 1938 to March
31, 1939*

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Corrections and omissions.

- I. Line 5, page 262 should read as follows: "result in Sixth-Forms of adequate size. The existing Sixths already tend to be somewhat small, as will be seen" (the underlined words have been omitted.)
2. Line 7, page 266: substitute "Area 4" for "Area III".

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to examine the motives and execution of British policy in Europe between the stated dates.

One theme is held to run continually through this period - the intention to restrain the dictators from precipitating European war. Emphasis is laid upon Chamberlain's stubborn belief in his own ability to pacify Hitler, though this personal policy of appeasement is shown to be strongly supported by other significant administrators of foreign affairs.

A survey is made of Britain's relationships with the other Munich signatories primarily, though dealings with other powers are examined when relevant. It is shown that as the promise of success for appeasement waned so Chamberlain's attitude to France became increasingly more open-handed, and that for the same reason greater emphasis was put on rearmament. Both of these movements are construed as supports to a sagging appeasement, not a denial of it.

A significant shift in British policy is seen in Britain's declaration of solidarity with France early in February but again this swing is interpreted as being still very appeasement-minded. It is this new avenue of appeasement that Chamberlain was to explore more thoroughly when forced to re-appraise his policy after 'Prague'. That he refused even then to abandon his hopes of pacifying Hitler is seen in the fact that he devised a plan unlikely to be fully acceptable to the powers it concerned, and that by finally anchoring British policy to Poland rather than the Soviet Union Chamberlain was avoiding the anti-German role he had appeared to propose and which was so inconsistent with the principles on which appeasement was founded.

Appeasement was thus a consistent policy and though its direction and application were often remoulded to suit the situation in Europe at the time, it was never in this six months abandoned.

British policy in Europe
from the Munich Agreement
to the Polish Guarantee,
September 29, 1938 to
March 31, 1939.

Being a thesis submitted for the degree of
Master of Arts at the University of Durham.

Presented by Roger J. Richards

July 1967.

"I am a man of peace to the depths of my soul."

(Neville Chamberlain, in a broadcast
message to the nation, September 27, 1938)

C O N T E N T S

Abbreviations used in citing references	(i)
1. Munich in Ferment	1
2. German Blight	36
3. Appeasement via Rome	76
4. France and Rearmament	101
5. Appeasement Checked	122
6. France Mated	152
7. New Year and New Fear	173
8. From Strength to Strength	210
9. Spring Fever	251
10. Hitler in Hradschin	270
11. Appeasement in Eclipse	296
12. Guarantee to Poland - Revolution or Evolution?	325
Bibliography of works referred to and cited	347

ABBREVIATIONS USED IN CITING REFERENCES

- AD Foreign Relations of the United States 1938-1939.
(U.S. Government Printing Office. 1955)
- BD Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939.
Third Series. Edited by E.L. Woodward and Rohan
Butler (H.M.S.O. 1950).
- DIA Documents on International Affairs 1928-1938
R.I.I.A. (London 1929-54).
- DM Documents and Materials Relating to the Eve of the
Second World War. Two volumes.
(Moscow 1947).
- GD Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945.
Series D. Various editors (H.M.S.O. 1951).
- HCD Parliamentary Debates, House of Commons (Official
Report) Fifth Series.
- HLD Parliamentary Debates, House of Lords (Official
Report) Fifth Series.

Chapter one

Munich in Ferment

On the eve of Munich, Masaryk the Czechoslovak Minister in London, said to Chamberlain and Halifax:

"If you have sacrificed my nation to preserve the peace of the world, I will be the first to applaud you. But if not, gentlemen, God help your souls." (1)

These words highlight the essence of the Munich Agreement by which the four great powers of Europe, Great Britain, France, Germany and Italy, decided the sacrifices to be made by Czechoslovakia in the interests of world peace. Twelve months were to show that it was God's help and not Masaryk's applause that was deserved ; Germany, that 'inexorable Oliver Twist'⁽²⁾ was to return for more. The irreconcilable conflict between the Nazi territorial appetite and the determination of the Western democracies to protect Europe from domination by a single power led inevitably to war.

Chamberlain and Halifax worked continuously and conscientiously to avert a major European catastrophe and to persuade Hitler to achieve his apparent ambitions by limited and peaceful means. The fact that history shows them to have been following a pitifully vain hope⁽³⁾ does not discredit the honesty of their efforts. Nor, despite the evidence of Hitler's deeds, can they be held entirely culpable for failing to recognise the consummate

guile of this one man who made their efforts worthless from the start. For they did not, and could not, know Hitler. General Halder's testimony at Nuremberg on (4) February 25th 1946 supports this view:

"Whoever did not know Adolf Hitler cannot imagine what a master of deception and camouflage this man was."

It is easy to scorn Chamberlain's estimation of Hitler after their meeting at Berchtesgaden as being a man (5) 'who could be relied upon when he had given his word' but that was probably the impression that he was intended to gain. Chamberlain's fault as such lay in the assumption that Hitler's aspirations were confined to the redressal of certain grievances inherent in the 1918 peace settlement and that these being satisfied he could be brought to sit at a conference table thus enabling a general and peaceful European settlement to be achieved. Chamberlain's policy during the period covered by this thesis was determined by this belief, a belief which was not totally banished from his mind till it was fully discredited by the outbreak of the second world war.

It should not be denied that the situation at the time of the September crisis made an effort of the kind highly desirable. The Munich Conference, the ensuing

agreement, and the Anglo-German Declaration were a full expression of Chamberlain's policy, for here was consultation of the European powers in order to achieve a pacific agreement and promote mutual understanding and collaboration for the future. But this meant a price had to be paid and to many distinguished politicians of all parties the legalised rape of Czechoslovakia was too high a price. On the level of international diplomacy, however, Munich had left hopes high. Dr. Benes, who resigned as President of Czechoslovakia five days after Munich paid respect to a 'new development and new European co-operation'.⁽⁶⁾ He was resigning because the sacrifices demanded of his country had been 'exaggerated and unjust' but believed that the new forces in Europe should not be hindered by himself because of his personal attitude.

What, in fact, was the real achievement of Munich from the British point of view? To understand this fully it is necessary to look at the composition of Czechoslovakia prior to the agreement. According to the census of 1930 the state was made up of 7,447,000 Czechs, 3,231,600 Germans, 2,309,000 Slovaks and a sprinkling of Magyars, Ruthenians and Poles. Briefly the

problem concerned the three million Sudetenland Germans whom Hitler wanted to be brought within the Reich. The new boundaries of Czechoslovakia after Munich still contained a quarter of a million Germans (who could make further trouble later on) but Czechoslovakia also lost nearly a million Czechs who found themselves incorporated in Germany. The importance of Munich does not really lie in the remapping of the Czechoslovak-German frontier for this had already been decided at Berchtesgaden and Godesberg. The purpose of Munich from the British point of view was to get Hitler to achieve his desires in less haste and by a different method than he had obviously been intending. The latter days of September had left few people in doubt that a German invasion of Czechoslovakia was imminent. The Czechoslovak army had been fully mobilised and so too had the British navy. Czechoslovakia had pacts with both France and the Soviet Union which she hoped would become operative in the event of German aggression. The Soviet Union however would not recognise her obligations until France had begun to fulfil hers, (7) but the French army 'either did not want or was unable to make such preparations.' (8) On September 19 both France and Great Britain had recommended to Prague

'that the Sudeten areas be transferred to the Reich as the only effective assurance of the maintenance of peace' (9)
The inferior defence positions of both France and Britain together with the apparent unwillingness of the commonwealth countries to go to war over the issue of Czechoslovakia (10) made it all the more desirable that an alternative solution to the problem should be found, if at all possible. For the British government the Munich agreement was such a solution and, in fact, the lesser of two evils.

Both at home and abroad the immediate reaction to Munich was one of intense relief - with the exception at least of Czechoslovakia. A situation pregnant with the notions of war had been saved by peaceful negotiation. Even the German peoples, in conflict with their Fuhrer's deepest motives, had shrunk from the aspect of war and felt a distinct gratitude to Chamberlain for his peaceful intervention. A letter, dated October 2, from a Gottingen professor gives evidence of this German reaction:

"...We know how much the British Prime Minister has done to prepare the settlement. The crowds cheering him during his three days' trip through Germany really expressed the general feeling of admiration, even of love, which he has won." (11)

This feeling was equally shared across the Atlantic where basic isolation did not mean that the United States were not intimately concerned with the affairs of Europe. Indeed, on September 26 President Roosevelt had appealed to Hitler not to break off negotiations and again two days later begged Mussolini to intercede with Hitler. A letter written by Roosevelt on October 11 expresses the genuine relief felt in America:

"...I can assure you that we in the United States rejoice with you, and the world at large, that the outbreak of war was averted. To me the most heartening aspect of the situation is the fact that this feeling of relief has been so spontaneous and has been expressed with such obvious spontaneity throughout the world." (12)

In Britain and France the steps taken by Chamberlain and Deladier for the preservation of peace were in full accord with the overwhelming sentiment of the general public in their countries. Views expressed in 'the Times' of October 1 probably endorsed majority opinion:

"No conqueror returning from a victory on the battlefield has come home adorned with nobler laurels than Mr. Chamberlain from Munich yesterday".

On his return he was hailed as a God-sent bringer of peace, the saviour of European man-kind. Forty

thousand persons of all classes and nations wrote to him to express their gratitude for what he had achieved at Munich. The reason for this hectic emotion that the Munich Agreement had let loose has been summed up by Duff Cooper in the following words:

"For many days they (the English people) had been preparing for war with all the anguish that such preparation inflicts upon the human mind. They had foreseen financial ruin and sudden death.... Suddenly in the twinkling of an eye, the clouds dispersed, the sky was blue, the sun shone. There was to be no war, neither now nor at any future date." (13)

But there was another side to the reaction in Britain which saw mainly the 'stink of Munich'. (14) This was an intellectual rather than emotional reaction which found in Munich not a cause for joy but a sense of shame. There were moral aspects of the 'way in which Czechoslovakia was thrown to the wolves at the last minute' (15) that were by no means compensated for by the fact that war had been averted. The principal argument levelled against the government was that they had acted dishonourably in encouraging France to desert Czechoslovakia, her faithful ally in her hour of need. Churchill, one of the sternest critics of Munich, believed that the choice facing the government had been between war and shame. To him Munich had merely postponed the evil day: 'They

chose shame and they will get war too'. He vigorously condemned the whole affair as a 'disaster of the first magnitude'. (16)

To the opponents of Munich there were more far-reaching arguments to be aimed at the government than the betrayal of a minor ally. A deeper implication was a surrender of the democracies to the Nazi threat of force. Harold Nicolson in the House of Commons strongly denounced the Munich Agreement as the abdication of Britain's traditional policy in Europe:

"For 250 years at least the great foundation of our foreign policy...has been to prevent by every means in our power the domination of Europe by any single Power...By that paper signed lightly...in the early hours of the morning the Prime Minister of Great Britain put his signature to a statement that that policy after 250 years had been abandoned." (17)

The argument was also used that Britain's strategic position had been greatly worsened by the 'surrender' of Czechoslovakia. Attlee maintained that Britain's position was now 'one of great danger'. Britain, he complained, was 'isolated'. (18)

The debate on the Munich settlement opened in the Commons on October 3. The critics, apart from members of the regular opposition, included Duff Cooper,

Churchill, Eden, Cranborne, Amery, and Harold Nicolson. Duff Cooper resigned his office as First Lord of the Admiralty so that he might continue to 'walk about the world with my head erect'. (19) He felt nothing but shame at the whole affair. To his mind Hitler could have been forced into moderating his demands over Czechoslovakia had the government pursued a firmer line with him and shown that Britain was prepared to fight for the rights of a far-away country.

Churchill was vehement in his hostility to Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler. The deference that he believed had been shown to the Nazis touched the depth of his British pride.

"What I find unendurable is the sense of our country falling into the power, into the orbit and influence of Nazi Germany, and of our existence becoming dependent upon their goodwill or pleasure." (20)

Moreover the moral relapse of Munich was, he maintained, the thin end of the wedge.

"This is only the beginning of the reckoning. This is only the first sip, the first fore-taste of a bitter cup which will be proffered to us year by year unless by a supreme recovery of moral health and martial vigour, we arise again and take our stand for freedom as in the olden times." (21)

Churchill was so far in opposition to the government's handling of the recent crisis that he tried to influence the thirty or forty Tory dissentients to vote against the government in the division. ⁽²²⁾ As it was they registered their objections by abstaining. The voting figures in favour of the government's policy by 366 votes to 144 endorsed Chamberlain's mission to Munich, a mission on which he had gone, in any case, with the support and blessings of all parties.

The Munich debate records vividly the sharp division that was left in public opinion once the automatic and very natural emotional relief at living still in peace had subsided. The conflict of 'peace but not justice' ⁽²³⁾ was to cut across party allegiances and personal friendships. Duff Cooper, after his resignation, was ignored by political acquaintances and avoided by an old friend. ⁽²⁴⁾ These difficulties emanating from a marginal moral case gave rise to 'bitter controversy...and the word 'Munich' became a gage of battle'. ⁽²⁵⁾

Just as the fervent expressions of relief accumulated around Chamberlain so too did the accusations, doubts and fears of those who questioned Munich.

As Chamberlain will be seen to be the initiator of British foreign policy in this period under examination it will be relevant to inspect briefly the method and manner of his policy-making. For there was much in Chamberlain's very individual approach to foreign affairs, let alone in his actual policies, which created suspicions and doubts in the minds of many. From the time of his becoming prime minister Chamberlain had spurned the traditional mechanism of foreign policy formulation. The dominant voice in these affairs was to be his own and not the foreign secretary's. The influence of the foreign office decreased as Chamberlain's interest and activity in foreign affairs became greater.

In one branch of foreign policy particularly, Chamberlain exercised a very close personal control. This was concerning Britain's relationship with the two European dictatorships. As 1938 progressed and the likelihood of hostilities increased so did Chamberlain take this branch of British foreign policy more personally in hand. Lord Strang, Head of the Central Department of the Foreign Office at the time, believed that Chamberlain's individual conduct of these affairs did not

mean that he ignored more conventional methods; he maintained that Chamberlain 'certainly made full use of the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet'. Strang admits, however, that especially at times of crisis Chamberlain -

"tended to consult and carry with him an inner group of Cabinet Ministers composed of the Foreign Secretary, Lord Halifax, and two former holders of that office, Sir John Simon and Sir Samuel Hoare..... As his agent and chief official adviser in these matters he called in Sir Horace Wilson, Chief Industrial Adviser to the Cabinet." (26)

The testimony of one of this inner group, Hoare puts a different emphasis on the matter and it is probably nearer the truth -

"It was in the late summer of 1938 that the Inner Cabinet of Chamberlain, Halifax, Simon and myself tended to take the place of the Foreign Policy Committee." (27)

Hoare explains, legitimately enough, that 'the summoning of a large committee became practically impossible' because 'the critical situation at the time was changing so constantly'.

Such comparatively informal methods were bound to bring the government and especially Chamberlain

under suspicion. The role of Sir Horace Wilson, who had a room in 10 Downing Street during Chamberlain's premiership, gave rise to much justifiably scepticism. (28) The arrangement was specially distasteful to officials of the foreign office.

"This was the feeling of the Foreign Office, that the Prime Minister preferred the amateur advice of Sir Horace Wilson, chief industrial adviser, to their own expert counsel." (29)

The real influence of Wilson was, at the time, much over-estimated, for Chamberlain was too masterful and stubborn a man to be swayed much by others. In fact he was not influenced by Wilson but merely assisted and reassured by him. But, that being so fixed in his views should mean that he at times ran contrary to and frequently ignored the advice of his foreign office was reasonably a cause for distrust. And distrusted in many circles he certainly was. Some credited him with ideas of dictatorship, while his self-righteousness and treatment of criticism as a personal affront irked many of his supporters almost as much as it did Liberal and Labour members of Parliament. This distrust did not stop at Chamberlain himself but devolved on the government and even on Parliament. Many members of the government were quite

undistinguished but even after Munich Chamberlain resisted counsel to reconstruct his government and strengthen it to meet criticism. ⁽³⁰⁾ A contemporary view of the lack of confidence in the government can be seen in a letter written at the start of the Munich crisis by Thomas Jones, a convinced peace-at-any-price man.

"I wish I felt more confidence in the collective wisdom and strength of the cabinet. Nobody does - they don't themselves." (31)

Of those concerned with the political implications of Munich some found it necessary to register the intensity of their belief in the moral wrongness of the government by resignation. That of Duff Cooper has already been mentioned. He believed Chamberlain was as glad to be rid of him as 'he was determined to go'. ⁽³²⁾ Another man whose disgust at Munich brought similar reaction was Con O'Neill who had been with the Foreign Office in the Berlin embassy for hardly a year. Antony Winn resigned from the staff of 'the Times' because Dawson suppressed his article on Duff Cooper's resignation, substituting one of his own but still publishing it under Winn's title as lobby correspondent. ⁽³³⁾

In France too there were resignations symptomatic of similar feelings of ignominy at leaving a faithful ally in the lurch. Reynaud and Mandel abandoned the

Deladier cabinet; Churchill had earlier warned them that such action would seriously weaken the French government, (34) but the situation had now changed. But perhaps the most expressive reaction came from General Faucher who had been training Czechoslovak troops. His sense of shame was so deep that he relinquished his French nationality and applied for enrolment as a Czech citizen. This was probably something of an exaggerated sacrifice but there can be no doubt that the betrayal of the Czech nation was more a matter to perturb French souls than British.

The French nevertheless were not idealists. They were realists, and two decisive influences had shaped their role at Munich. Firstly there was their grave defence position and the moral weakness of the nation behind it; secondly, the vital influence of the United Kingdom. Domestically France was depressed and weakened through the existence of innumerable political factions. Throughout the whole of the September crisis the French government had been deeply divided between resistance and surrender. French defences were in a state worse than Britain's. A gloomy picture was painted by Sir Maurice Hankey on the deficiencies in the French defence position in a memorandum to Phipps soon after Munich.

"I need hardly mention the deplorable state of their aviation nor the defects in the quantity and quality of their machines... even their anti-aircraft active and passive defences are weak. If I am correctly informed, there is not a single really up-to-date fast fighter in the active defences of Paris, and the gun and electric-light (sic? searchlights) defences of the country still require two years before they can be regarded as satisfactory.

Even the passive defences...revealed grave deficiencies. There were no gas-masks for the general population...they were late with their design and no masks were yet available. Trench refuges had not been constructed on anything like the same scale as in England. I am told that the men engaged on shelters and on widening bridges over the Seine on the west of Paris went on strike during the critical week." (35)

In such circumstances the inflexible determination of Chamberlain to avoid war was no doubt viewed with some considerable relief. Deladier was pleased to let Chamberlain take the lead and Chamberlain was pleased to have it.

There is evidence that Chamberlain's opinion of
(36)
the French was low but in any case his purpose was too fixed, his skin too thick to be troubled by the sensitive way in which the French regarded their formal treaty with Czechoslovakia. From the start of the crisis Chamberlain was in direct control and in much of what he

did in pursuing his policy left the French so in the dark that Deladier and Bonnet were commuting between Paris and London to find out what was happening. The foreign office was deluged with communiques wanting to know the exact position of Britain with reference to the Franco-Czech Treaty. While the crisis had not deteriorated too far replies were guarded:

"His Majesty's Government, while they would never allow the security of France to be threatened, are unable to make precise statements of the character of their future action, or the time at which it would be taken, in circumstances they cannot at present foresee." (37)

The tenor of the French notes was that they would stand by their obligations in respect of Czechoslovakia but Chamberlain's insistence soon brought a French acceptance to the principle of self-determination in that country as the only way of avoiding war. A communication from Phipps, the British Ambassador in Paris, sensed a changed attitude in France by September 24. Though Phipps had quite possibly lost much of his objectivity in the defeatist atmosphere of Paris, the text of his despatch of that date caused Chamberlain much joy.

"All that is best in France is against war, almost at any price...

To embark upon what will presumably be the biggest conflict in history with our ally, who will fight, if fight she must without eyes (Air Force) and without real heart must surely give us furiously to think." (38)

This telegram gave the foreign office furiously to think how outrageous it was that the best in France was against war, but Chamberlain welcomed the decline in French militancy. He and some of his ministers had been quite worried that the French might take precipitate action and involve themselves in war thus facing the British government with a fateful decision. By September 27 Chamberlain had obtained the entire agreement of the French government 'not to take any offensive measures without previous consultation with and agreement by' the British government. (39)

By the time that the Munich conference took place the French party were little less desperate than the British to avoid war. Deladier defended the cause of the Czechs without much conviction complaining that what was happening was 'due solely to the pig-headedness of Benes'. (40) The French were in fact 'resolved to reach agreement at any cost'. (41) Certainly the French attitude had mellowed in the past fortnight but Deladier,

had been constrained by Chamberlain's determination to toe the British line, rather than been following a policy of which he was entirely convinced. Chamberlain was fully aware of the position the French were in and handled Paris to his own advantage. He was dubious of the kind of influence France might try to put on him and this was clearly expressed by his refusal to communicate the idea and essence of his pet brain-child, the Anglo-German Protocol, to the French before obtaining Hitler's signature to it. Strang, who drew up the text of this agreement has put this on record:

" I urged that he should inform M. Deladier, who was still in Munich and staying nearby, of his intention to seek this direct agreement with Hitler. He said that he saw no reason whatever for saying anything to the French." (42)

This then was the state of Anglo-French relations at the time of Munich. Britain, afraid of impulsive action on the part of France, had insisted upon consultation before any decisive steps should be taken in honouring the Franco-Czech Pact. But at the same time she did not want too close a degree of collaboration while pursuing her individual policy towards Germany. For that policy might well have been distinctly embarrassed

by France had she been intimately acquainted with its details. France had been happy enough to leave the initiative and immediate responsibility to Britain - this helped to salve her conscience - but the British conduct inevitably left her with suspicions especially (43) once the Anglo-German Agreement had been announced.

Of the two dictator powers relations with Italy despite continuing difficulties over bringing the Anglo-Italian Agreement into force, had been by far the more propitious. Despite the fact that the Rome-Berlin Axis was by this time the corner-stone of Italian foreign policy, Mussolini had certainly not seen eye to eye with Hitler over the Sudeten question. In the first place Italy had wanted an overall solution to the Czechoslovak problem believing that the Hungarian and Polish minorities should be considered as well as the (44) German. In the second place Italy did not want war. Even in the darkest days of the last week of September Mussolini continued to hope that Hitler would get all he wanted by peaceful means without placing Italy in the acute position of having to fight a war for which she was not prepared. The Italian foreign minister, Ciano, wrote in his diary on September 26:

"There is now an atmosphere of war.
The last hopes of all are attached to

the message sent by Chamberlain to the Fuhrer after the meeting which took place in London. These hopes are of brief duration...It is war. May God protect Italy and the Duce." (45)

It was by virtue of Mussolini's intervention with Hitler, pressed for by Chamberlain, that Hitler postponed invasion hour thus permitting the idea of a four-power conference to be mooted and accepted.

Kirkpatrick has put on record that at the conference the Italians were 'clearly terrified of being landed by Hitler into a European war'.⁽⁴⁶⁾ This might suggest that Mussolini took only a passive part in the deliberations, but it was quite the opposite. This point is elaborated by Kirkpatrick in his biography of Mussolini. He is described as assuming 'the principal role in an affair in which the Fuhrer desired to play no part'.⁽⁴⁷⁾ The activity might have been Mussolini's, but the influence was still Hitler's. In everything the Duce said or did there was a determination not to upset his Axis partner in any way. This Italian awareness of German sensitivity was a difficulty in the way of any genuine improvement in Anglo-Italian relations. Chamberlain had hoped to achieve more with respect to Italy but the German shadow came between them.

Just before the opening of the conference Chamberlain tried to talk with Mussolini but the British opening was coldly refused and the opportunity lost. Later, however, during the conference, the two did converse but a suggestion that Mussolini might delay his departure so that they could have a private meeting was ruled out because Mussolini thought it might 'offend German susceptibilities.' (48)

In spite of these difficulties Chamberlain did receive from the Duce an indication that he was concerned to have good relations with Great Britain. This was conveyed in his stated intention of shortly withdrawing ten thousand troops from Spain which would facilitate the implementation of the Anglo-Italian Agreement of April 16 1938. (49) This factor concurred with the obvious Italian desire for peace and their timely intervention to prevent German action prior to Munich, left a very favourable impression on Chamberlain's mind. In his diary on October 2 he wrote of Mussolini:

"He seemed to be cowed by Hitler, but undoubtedly he was most anxious for a peaceful settlement, and he played an indispensable part in attaining it... His manner to me was more than friendly; he listened with the utmost attention to all I said, and expressed the strong hope that I would visit him early in Italy, where I should receive a very warm welcome." (50)

Although as a result of the tensions and strain of the past few weeks Chamberlain had probably over-estimated the sincerity of Mussolini's intentions with reference to Britain, nevertheless it was evident that hopes for the maintenance of European peace would be more profitably pursued with the Italian end of the Rome-Berlin Axis than with the German. A further indication of this fact was found in the Italian initiative to put down an appendix to the Munich Agreement whereby direct negotiations between Prague, Warsaw and Budapest were to be opened in order to solve the problem of the Polish and Hungarian minorities incorporated in the Czechoslovak state. For the present, Anglo-Italian relations seemed to be in an optimistic state, but time was to tell that there were deeper motives in Italian policy than those Chamberlain had seemed to see.

With Germany relations were inevitably less distinct but Hitler's demeanour at Munich and the willingness with which he signed the subsequent Anglo-German Declaration were again eagerly taken as signs of improved relations and hope for the future. Certainly was such 'moderate and reasonable' behaviour (as described
(51)
by Chamberlain) on the part of Hitler a cause for

great relief following the tirades and bellicosity of
the previous days. (52) But the unfortunate truth was
that the reasonable outcome of the Munich Conference was
not so much a triumph for the peacemakers as it was a
personal defeat for Hitler. His tone was subdued not
because he was in any way genuinely convinced by the
ideals and principles of the appeasers but because he had
been denied his war and immediate total victory over
Czechoslovakia by factors over which the appeasers had
had little control. It was a sulking rather than sub-
missive Hitler that was present at Munich.

It was not until the eleventh hour intervention
by his ally Mussolini that Hitler gave up his resolve to
bring about a war. This appeal from Italy, continued
pressure from Britain, an entreaty from the United States,
together with Hitler's own realisation of how much he was
really being offered had all helped to influence his
decision to relent. There was, however, one other factor
which was decisive. This was the peaceful sentiments
of the German people. As a result of a march by an armoured
division right through Berlin Hitler had been mortified
to find that his people were far from sharing his lust
for war. (53)

Hitler had been all the more determined on war over Czechoslovakia because of the very shape and form of the national existence of that state which was, to him, an insufferable challenge. His hatred of Czechoslovakia was intense for several reasons. The Republic was the embodiment of Versailles, Slav nationalism and democracy, three factors which were anathema to the Fuhrer. Apart from this she was the ally of France and Bolshevism and a haven of refuge for Jews and others escaping from the Reich. These ingredients in the make-up of Czechoslovakia together with the fact that that country represented an immense strategic barrier to German domination of Europe had made Hitler all the more 'bent on having his little war'.⁽⁵⁴⁾

Hitler's reaction to Munich was one of fury. He had been interested in the Sudeten Germans only because they served as a lever with which to break up the Czechoslovak state. Despite the defences put up by his Foreign Minister, Ribbentrop, of the German action in the Sudetenland, there is no doubt that Hitler's purpose from the start had been plainly aggressive. German dominance of the Czechoslovak state would have secured a powerful position in Central Europe for the

Reich and from there Hitler had intended to launch his drive for 'Lebensraum' in the East. But Munich had interrupted these plans and this caused Hitler intense annoyance. Ribbentrop who owed his position in the Reich entirely to his success in winning Hitler's favour, claims that 'the Fuhrer was very satisfied with Munich' and that there was 'never as much as a hint to the contrary'.⁽⁵⁵⁾ It must be appreciated that Ribbentrop wrote this in prison while he was on trial for his life and that he was concerned in his memoirs, as in his defence at the trial, to create an impression favourable to history and the jury. The captured German documents expose Ribbentrop's deceits as too do some remarks, revealed in the Nuremberg Trial, that Hitler had made to his supreme commanders at a secret meeting on November 23, 1939:-

"It was clear to me from the first moment that I could not be satisfied with the Sudeten German territory. That was only a partial solution. The decision to march into Bohemia was made. Then followed the erection of the Protectorate and with that the basis of the action against Poland was laid." (56)

Although Munich was a great triumph for Germany it had been a harrowing experience for Hitler.

He objected to the method of diplomacy through personal contact - by which Chamberlain laid such store - and it was further galling for him to be in the company of three men who were his equals instead of being surrounded by a crowd of obedient cyclophants. Even so, once the conference was under way he had largely managed to control himself and Chamberlain discerned little trace of his true feelings. (57) Kirkpatrick, however, had been more observant. In a broadcast he made during the war he referred back to the Munich Conference saying how Hitler's face had been 'black as thunder'. As the talks progressed Hitler's discomfort became more obvious.

"Hitler sits moodily apart. He wriggles on the sofa, he crosses and uncrosses his legs, he folds his arms and glares around the room." (58)

When the Agreement was finally ready Hitler 'scratches his signature as if he were being asked to sign away his birthright'.

The Fuhrer's immediate reaction to Munich was made known to Kirkpatrick by some members of Hitler's entourage. After the conference had broken up Hitler is supposed to have said:

"Gentlemen, this has been my first international conference and I can assure you that it will be the last... If ever that silly old man comes interfering here again with his umbrella, I'll kick him downstairs and jump on his stomach in front of photographers." (59)

The German nation as a whole were unacquainted with these sentiments of their Fuhrer and believed that Munich had been an unqualified triumph for Germany. This deviation in views between the German Chancellor and his people was fully appreciated by Hitler. It was a rift that created the first doubts in his mind as to whether he would be able to count on the devotion of his people in all future circumstances. And it was a rift that he was to try to heal over the next few months by alienating the apparent sympathies of the German people for Chamberlain and Great Britain.

Chamberlain's reaction to Hitler as seen in his diary for October 2 (60) was evidently mainly conditioned by the private conversation the two had at which the Anglo-German Agreement was tabled and signed. Chamberlain put great value on getting Hitler's signature to some statement on the future of Anglo-German relations. The final declaration which Lord

Strang had originally drafted while dressing and having breakfast on the final morning in Munich, was as follows:

"We, the German Fuhrer and Chancellor and the British Prime Minister, have had a further meeting today and are agreed in recognising that the question of Anglo-German relations is of the first importance for the two countries and for Europe.

We regard the Agreement signed last night and the Anglo-German Naval Agreement as symbolic of the desire of our two peoples never to go to war with one another again.

We are resolved that the method of consultation shall be the method adopted to deal with any other questions that may concern our two countries, and we are determined to continue our efforts to remove possible sources of difference and thus to contribute to assure the peace of Europe." (61)

Mussolini described this declaration as 'a glass
(62)
of lemonade to a thirsty man'. It did mean a lot to Chamberlain; on returning to his hotel after being with Hitler he patted his pocket triumphantly and exclaimed
(63)
'I've got it'. But it meant more to Chamberlain than Mussolini seemed to think. The optimistic, if vague terms in which the declaration was phrased was a welcome bonus on top of a successful conference which had saved the peace. But it was not only in hope that Chamberlain had sought Hitler's signature to this protocol; it was
(64)
also in calculation. Well might the British Prime

Minister display his piece of paper to the crowds at Heston and in Downing Street - it was a pledged agreement to peace and consultation with Germany. If Hitler honoured it, so much the better. But, were it not honoured no one would be left in doubt as to who was the 'guilty party'. (65)

For the present the agreement meant an easing of tension between Britain and Germany. It encouraged the hope of the British people that a comprehensive agreement with Germany might, after all, be possible. For a new foundation for the development of Anglo-German relations had been laid and this gave impetus to the desire for a friendly settlement. These were vain hopes. Von Dirksen, the German ambassador in London, was to learn a few days after Munich that 'the signing of the protocol meant no change of policy', as far as Germany was concerned. But for several weeks, and despite ominous murmurs from Hitler, hopes in Britain were mainly high and particularly in the minds of several leading politicians and government members. (66) It was believed for the time being that, as Chamberlain had expressed in the Munich debate, the declaration was a sign of genuine desire on the part of Germany to reach an ultimately peaceful understanding

with Great Britain.

"I believe there are many who will feel with me that such a declaration...is something more than a pious expression of opinion...I believe that there is sincerity and goodwill on both sides in this declaration. That is why to me its significance goes far beyond its actual words." (67)

Moreover no one could deny that at Munich Hitler had for the very first time made some concession to the forces of reason. Chamberlain could also gain encouragement from the blatant desire for peace of the German people that he himself had experienced.

"...the German desire for peace must have its effect on Hitler, and I hope too that the personal contact I have established with him will help." (68)

Here, so it seemed, were the foundations for appeasement to build on.

This belief in the heightened possibility of a lasting peace in Europe was supported by the generally pleasant tenor of the talk between Chamberlain and Hitler. Spain, economic relations and disarmament were all discussed rationally and with care. The responsible and civil nature of this conversation as compared with the hysteria and war panic of a few days before brought a real atmosphere of sanity and hope into Anglo-German

relations. The progress of these relations was to expose the mirage nature of the atmosphere but for the present at any rate outward signs justified the exuberant pleasure of the crowds both in London and Berlin.

This then was the situation in Europe following Munich, which was a significant landmark in British foreign policy. The diplomatic atmosphere between Britain and the totalitarian states was a mixture of relief, hope and suspicion, while Chamberlain was now concerned to build on the promise of the Anglo-German Declaration, he and his government were not to allow themselves to be lulled into a sense of false security.

"Perhaps if I were differently constituted, I might just sit back and bask in this popularity while it lasted. But I am already a little impatient with it, because it seems to assume so much. We have avoided the greatest catastrophe, it is true, but we are very little nearer to the time when we can put all thoughts of war out of our minds..." (69)

Chamberlain was all too conscious of the situation facing the United Kingdom. The immediate tension in foreign policy had been largely dissipated, but the underlying conflicts which had caused this tension were still present and liable to erupt at any time.

In the ensuing months Chamberlain continued to work to avoid any deterioration in relations but at the same time strove to strengthen Britain's position in Europe so that she would be prepared to defeat her enemies if the final, horrible catastrophe occurred. In diplomacy this meant a closer collaboration with the principal ally, France, who sorely needed the moral support and leadership of a steadfast guide. It also meant the fostering of the sympathies of Washington and identifying basic American ideals with British aims in Europe.

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Chapter two

German Blight

Once the immediate dust of Munich had settled there were important matters to pursue with each of the other signatories of the Agreement. The feeling of relief at peace was to be diminished once the true state of relations with Germany came into focus. Policy towards Germany now contained two main elements. Firstly she must not be antagonised in the execution of the Munich Agreement so as not to detract from its international effects; secondly, while this was being seen to the good contacts presumed to have been made with Hitler at Munich must be fostered and strengthened. Mechanism in the form of an International Commission had been set up to implement the Agreement. This Commission consisted of the German Secretary of State, a Czech delegate and the British, French and Italian ambassadors in Berlin.

Within a few days of its initial meeting the Commission was in deadlock, the stumbling-block being the differing interpretations placed on specific items of the Agreement by Germany and Czechoslovakia. On the morning of October 5 Sir Neville Henderson, British ambassador in Berlin, reported:

"There was serious divergence in International Commission yesterday evening on two questions of principle:-

- A. As to what statistics should be used for establishing German preponderance.
- B. Percentage that constitutes such preponderance." (1)

The Czechs demanded 1930 or 1921 statistics and a 75 per cent majority, while Germany was adamant on 1910 statistics and a 51 per cent majority. A proposal by the French delegate that 1918 be taken as the year and a two-thirds majority for the preponderance was a compromise satisfactory to neither party and the meeting broke up. The purpose of Germany was obviously to squeeze as much of Czechoslovakia for herself as possible and the lack of assistance from Britain and France in achieving this purpose was immediately seized upon by Hitler as an opportunity to accuse them of going back on the Munich decisions.⁽²⁾ This was a minor disaster from the British point of view especially as Hitler was intending to order the army to occupy the Godesberg line if the Czechoslovak government did not agree to the German demands by mid-day of the 5th.⁽³⁾

Under these circumstances a crisis was averted by the British, French and Italian ambassadors deciding

amongst themselves that Hitler's desires would have to be met as they did not actually contravene the Munich Agreement. This proposal would be put to the Czechs at the next meeting of the Commission and they would be asked to accept it. Henderson claimed that if the three ambassadors had not acted in this way 'the Munich Agreement might have been nullified'.⁽⁴⁾

By the morning of October 6 Henderson was able to report that the military sub-commission had reached agreement in regard to the whole line to be occupied by Germany by October 10.⁽⁵⁾ Of tantamount importance to this achievement had been the resignation of Benes announced at 6.00p.m. the previous evening. This ushered in a much more pro-German government in Czechoslovakia which gave promise of a genuine easing in relations between the two countries. As Henderson wrote in his memoirs, 'from the moment Benes resigned the position became easier'.⁽⁶⁾ This changed attitude in Czechoslovakia is summed up by Weizsäcker, the German State Secretary in a memorandum issued on the 6th.

"The new Czechoslovak Cabinet fully realised that with her new restricted frontiers Czechoslovakia could pursue only the policy of close dependance on Germany and cooperation with her." ⁽⁷⁾

The fact of agreement could in no way be attributed to Germany who continued to refuse to modify her demands. This could well be taken in London as an attitude inconsistent with that which Germany had generally put on evidence at Munich. These doubts were given further basis when again German greed caused dissension in the Commission:-

"Difficulty has arisen over interpretation of the phrase 'without any existing installation having been destroyed'. The Czechs argue that this phrase applies only to State and public property but not to private property. The Germans insist that it applies to all installations which serve any public purposes whatever even if in private ownership, e.g. gas and electricity works, local railways." (8)

The British reaction was to relate this problem strictly to the terms of the Munich Agreement, maintaining that the distinction claimed by the Czechs between public and private property was quite immaterial. The uppermost thought in Halifax's mind was not sympathy for the Czechs but the avoidance of crossing swords with Germany. Within the first week since Munich much had happened to prove that Europe was still walking a tight-rope. There had been outbursts from Hitler against British and French genuiness at Munich; stalemate had temporarily been reached in the International Commission and meetings had been suspended at the German

request; there had been a Hitler ultimatum against Czechoslovakia if the Reich did not get her own way in the detailed interpretation of Munich. So again, as at Munich, Czechoslovakia's position could not be supported, but was sacrificed to the policy of appeasing Germany.

By October 7 the British attitude concerning the fortunes of the International Commission became more explicit. Communications of that date from Henderson exhibited little concern at the fate of the Czechs:-

"It would be as unwise as it would be misleading to encourage Czechoslovak Government to believe they have much to hope for from International Commission... The Germans are certainly not a magnanimous race...It is kinder in the end to be outspokenly realistic than to encourage false hopes out of excessive sympathy and sensitivity." (9)

In the same telegram the Ambassador strongly urged that 'the best tactical chance for the Czechs (lay) in direct negotiations'. Although the duties specified for the Commission by the Agreement were by no means finished Henderson was advising that the Czechs should be left to themselves in their territorial battle with Germany. He believed that they might achieve more this way and that the Commission

was even hampering the Czechs in trying to salvage what they could of their state. This suggestion for bilateral negotiation was quite contrary to the spirit and word of the Munich Agreement. It can only be presumed that Henderson, who was in his own way as profoundly intent on preventing war as was Chamberlain, saw in the difficulties emanating from the Commission a possible source of warfare and a certain cause of trouble in Anglo-German relations. He was quite ready to do what he could for the Czechs 'behind the scenes' ⁽¹⁰⁾ but the official British attitude - which would be known to the Nazis - must be advice to the Czechs to acquiesce in the German demands.

The desire on the part of Britain for continued harmony is very apparent. On October 7 Halifax received von Dirksen, the German ambassador, at the foreign office and referring to Munich told him that:

"it was the earnest desire of His Majesty's Government to see the contacts that had been thus established bearing fruit in further directions for the good of European peace." (11)

Reports had been received by the foreign office concerning the ill-treatment of Sudeten Germans who did not belong to the Sudeten-German Party. Halifax

wished to prevent this unsavoury element in German policy from embarrassing Anglo-German relations and so requested a diplomatic favour from von Dirksen.

He emphasised that he:

"would be grateful if by means of relevant German reports he might be enabled to combat such assertions, the spreading of which might in fact hamper the advocates of friendly Anglo-German relations in the realisation of their aspirations." (12)

The British emphasis was blatantly on leaving nothing undone that might help to secure a firmer Anglo-German understanding. (13)

Despite this emphasis in British policy the Germans had been far from convinced of the British readiness to accept the German interpretation of Munich. In a memorandum dated October 7 Weizsäcker, the German Secretary of State, drew attention to his view that Britain was following an obstructionist policy.

"Altogether in questions in dispute between the Czechs and ourselves opposition in the Commission comes from the British rather than the French." (14)

The fact was, no doubt, that Germany had no intention of recognising any charitable actions on

the part of Britain, that Hitler was fast recovering from the attack of faintheartedness he had experienced at Munich. Moreover, although the memory of Munich nettled him, he fully appreciated that his position and prestige in central Europe had been greatly advanced.⁽¹⁵⁾ He was now determined to press home his advantage to its extremity.⁽¹⁶⁾ The territorial gains made by his greedy policy in the International Commission were considerable:

"The rough effect was that the line proposed at Munich was extended to something much more like that of Godesberg.."⁽¹⁷⁾

This improvement in the Reich's central European position gave Hitler added confidence to follow a policy of generally alienating his country from Britain. So it was only a matter of days following the trouble in the Commission before more tangible evidence of German ill-will towards Britain was to be received.

Two days after Halifax's interview with von Dirksen there came a public speech by Hitler at Saarbrücken the tenor of which was a distinct embarrassment to the British attempt to conciliate

Germany. Halifax's affable request concerning the Sudeten Germans was testily countered. Alluding to the 'Versailles epoch' manner in which he thought Britain continued to treat Germany, Hitler smartly rapped the knuckles of the British foreign secretary.

"We cannot tolerate any longer the tutelage of governesses! Enquiries of British politicians concerning the fate of Germans within the frontiers of the Reich - or of others belonging to the Reich - are not in place." (18)

There was a certain degree of justification for this objection to the way in which Britain concerned herself in German domestic affairs, and such a rebuff did not excite any lasting resentment. But another part of Hitler's speech harboured a much greater threat to British foreign policy. This was contained in a vehement attack on the unstable nature of the democratic governments led by Chamberlain and Deladier which might at any time bring more militant men to power.

"But they govern in countries whose domestic organisation makes it possible that at any moment they may lose their position to make place for others who are not very anxious for peace. And those others are in fact there. It only needs that in England instead of Chamberlain, Mr. Duff Cooper

or Mr. Eden or Mr. Churchill should come to power, and then we know quite well that it would be the aim of these men immediately to begin a new World War. They make no secret of the fact, they admit it openly." (19)

Hitler was playing on the pacific sentiments of his people which had been manifested by their relief at Munich. His words were carefully chosen to act as a stimulant to German public opinion by persuading the German people of their foolishness in putting their trust in fickle democracies. His intention was to alienate German sympathies from Britain and his propaganda machine was soon to get into full swing in endorsing this policy. It was poison to the appeasers in Britain. They were however, accustomed to Hitler's tirades and did not immediately take the poison of the speech too seriously. Nevertheless, a sensitive spot had been touched and when in the next few days, the German press launched a studied attack on Britain this spot began to fester.

The first days of October had not augured well for the future of Britain's relations with Germany. They had exposed the difficulties inherent in the Munich Agreement, the over-riding problem being that in a highly complex international atmosphere, the tensions

created in the International Commission might explode in any direction. The fears mentioned above that Munich had only temporarily shelved and not dissolved the menace of war were being given a reinforced foundation.

Soon after the Munich crisis Chamberlain had stated publicly that Britain had resolved upon rearmament so as not to stand defenceless should a new crisis arise. ⁽²⁰⁾ It was this fact that the press in Germany eagerly took up, framing Britain in the eyes of the German public as a potential aggressor against the Reich who needed very carefully to be watched. On October 12 the Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung gave ominous reports to its readers that Britain was rearming rapidly and that the sole object of these armaments was war. ⁽²¹⁾ Such distortions of the truth were to be found in most of the leading German dailies and there was mention of British 'warmongers'. On the 13th Henderson reported that

"The whole press, obviously under official inspiration, protests today against the re-armament campaign in England. Germany, it is said, must watch developments carefully and 'in certain circumstances might be forced to draw theoretical and practical conclusions'." ⁽²²⁾

The argument was frequently used that even if the

prime minister's intentions were honourable Germany must reckon that when the opposition got to power it would use against Germany the instrument that the present government was creating.

The German documents show to what extent this press campaign was due to official inspiration. ⁽²³⁾

Apart from achieving the desired effect on the German people this campaign was also aimed at creating a split in British public opinion by causing a breach between those who did not want war with Germany and those who demanded a firmer defence position in the event of further international crisis. ⁽²⁴⁾ Chamberlain's policy of moderate, or defensive rearmament could not escape this purposeful German policy despite the fact that he was concerned that no chance should be given for Germany to suspect British good-will. In all his post-Munich speeches he had been at pains to underline the defensive purpose of Britain's armaments programme and to establish the final aim as agreed ⁽²⁵⁾ disarmament. Such efforts were clearly abortive and thus the action of the German press in blackening British intentions was a definite and serious blow to the spirit of the Anglo-German protocol which Chamberlain

was trying to foster. Von Dirksen considered that this spirit had already been given a mortal blow by Hitler's Saarbrücken speech with which 'all hope of a fresh Anglo-German detente was killed in the eyes of the general public'.⁽²⁶⁾

By mid-October the appeasers were facing a most unfavourable wind blowing in from Germany, and an atmosphere had been created which could only aggravate their friendly intentions towards the Reich. As Weizsäcker explained to von Dirksen on October 17th:-

"Things here are moving rapidly but not in the direction of a German - British rapprochement at present." (27)

It is very relevant to understand Hitler's frame of mind at the time. His chagrin at Munich has already been explained. His plans had been upset, he had misjudged the temper of his people, and he had been forced to submit to international arbitration. He was disgusted with his people's clamours for peace, and more painful, was disgusted with himself for having retreated from his intended programme. A matter which caused him further discomfort was the way in which the German public had so genuinely praised Chamberlain's peaceful efforts. This had inevitably reduced Hitler's prestige amongst his own people.⁽²⁸⁾ It was therefore

politic to him to have the increase in British re-
armament interpreted in such a way as to dispel the
German impression of Britain - harmful to him - that
had been created at Munich. Moreover he did all he
could to diminish Chamberlain's role at Munich, giving
blessings for its achievement rather to Mussolini:

"Ever since the Munich meeting Herr Hitler
in all his public speeches has given to
Signor Mussolini in the first place the
credit for having saved peace. In his
references to the Duce he invariably terms
him 'my friend' or 'our only friend'. The
press, wireless and cinema have taken
their cue from Herr Hitler and it has
become the habit to append the cliché
'the Fuhrer's friend' to every mention
of Signor Mussolini's name. It is also
an understood thing that at public
meetings the word 'Mussolini' should be
greeted with loud applause." (29)

While the general atmosphere of these tactics had
the desirable effect from Hitler's point of view
of inclining Germans away from pacific Britain and
back to their previous regard for the expansive
aims of the Reich, it also helped to dispel the
idea of Hitler as a peaceful negotiator, an idea
with which he was rather afraid of being hoist. A
further aim was that of preparing public opinion in
Germany for closer alliance with Italy, a move for
which Hitler was now preparing.

(30)

But all these motives do not fully explain the intensity of his anti-British speeches and of the press campaign. This was motivated also by another of his miscalculations. In signing so willingly the Anglo-German declaration he had suffered a further deception. He had presumed that following upon the British triumph of the Munich agreement it would be accepted by Britain at its face value. He had thought that it would leave Germany in the happy position of being the most power-⁽³¹⁾ fully armed country in Europe. This would have left him free to resume his aggressive plans as convenient. But this was not to be. It turned out that Britain had not only won peace but also time in which to strengthen her military position.⁽³²⁾ This aroused a storm of resentment in Hitler but it had the consolation of presenting him with the ideal platform from which to resume the cold war, and to disgrace the 'war-mongering' British in the eyes of his people.

Despite all the opposition and antagonism from the Nazis Britain was extremely loath to let the links with Germany crumble during these weeks. Leading British cabinet ministers made speeches in which they offered Germany means by which a closer Anglo-German understanding could be achieved. Chamberlain, Hoare and

Simon amongst others directly or indirectly presented Germany with requests to produce a programme of her demands so that negotiations might begin. (33) Even though the unfavourable events of the first three weeks of October made it a most inauspicious time for such overtures to be started, it was nevertheless thought better to continue actively in their attempts at the appeasement of Germany, than to allow matters to drift in the hope that an invigorated British defence position might stimulate a more agreeable attitude to Britain on the part of the Reich.

Thus it was that the appeasers tried a new line of approach - economic appeasement. The published British documents are of little value in tracing the progress of this policy for by mid-October Chamberlain's ideas were not shared in the foreign office and he was concerned to put as little economic business as possible through this official channel for fear that it might obstruct his plans. This situation is made plain in a memorandum that Fritz Hesse wrote on October 11. In an interview with Stewart, Chamberlain's press secretary, he had been told that:

"...the Prime Minister had not received assistance or support of any kind from the Foreign Office, which on the contrary had striven during the last 3 days to sabotage his plans..." (34)

and that

"in all future moves it was important that all major questions should be dealt with direct, thus bypassing the Foreign Office and also Sir Neville Henderson...the Foreign Office would always be brought in by Henderson, and thus there was the risk of causing all kinds of obstruction and undesirable publicity."

Thus, though its ultimate goal was political, economic appeasement was to be channelled through the Board of Trade.

Chamberlain, confronted with an obtuse and damaging policy by Germany which was alienating a large section of British public opinion, needed to use such methods in order to advance his own policy of appeasing the Nazis without exciting harmful publicity at home. This element of subterfuge in his execution of policy at this time, though open to criticism, was of German origin. He was, in fact, playing the German game. Struggling against the anti-German tide in the foreign office Chamberlain intimated to the Reich his idea to come to some arrangement over colonies. This was channelled

through Stewart in the same interview with Hesse. It was important that 'German colonial demands should not be put forward publicly' ⁽³⁵⁾ for this would arouse a storm of criticism in Britain and the Dominions which would kill this avenue of negotiation before discussions could start. Germany, however, was not to be tempted. State Secretary Weizsäcker was dubious about passing the suggestion on to Ribbentrop, the whole tone of Hesse's memorandum being incompatible with existing German policy -

"I wonder whether the arguments of Dr. Hesse do not tend too strongly in a direction which, as things are now, is not the same as that taken here." (36)

As nothing came of the colonies carrot alternative ideas were pursued by Chamberlain. Hesse had gathered from Stewart the impression that Chamberlain had in mind a plan for some kind of 4 - power declaration aiming at an agreed limit to armaments for each country. The idea was in part continued in unofficial discussions, the immediate basis for co-operation being on economic lines.

On October 17 and 18 a German economic delegation was in London. The main purpose of the delegation was a visit to Eire for negotiations with the Eibe

government on a trade agreement. But the delegation found time to have confidential and unofficial talks in London, at which Sir Frederick Leith-Ross, the government's chief economic adviser expanded the idea of economic co-operation between Britain, Germany, France and Italy. He suggested that 'representatives of the four Powers should meet in the very near future for a completely unfettered discussion'.⁽³⁷⁾ While making no promises as to the benefits which such collaboration might bring to Germany, Leith-Ross did suggest that a solution to Germany's foreign exchange problems could result:

"He had therefore already considered whether it might not be possible for Great Britain, France, and Holland to allocate to Germany a larger total of foreign currency - he mentioned a figure of 25 per cent more. The foreign currency thus made available could then be used by Germany to pay for her imports from the Balkan countries." (35)

Von Dirksen considered that these suggestions were 'worthy of special notice in view of the fact that Leith-Ross exercises a very considerable influence on British economic policy'. "Ruter, the leader of the German delegation was also interested. He reported to his foreign ministry on October 20 that 'the

genuineness and importance' of Leith-Ross' proposals 'ought not to be underrated in Berlin', especially if 'taken in conjunction with Chamberlain's plans aimed at the same objective'. (39)

Berlin, however, was not to be tempted, "Ruter had believed that Leith-Ross had put forward ideas that the German Ministry of Economics had eagerly awaited, but if such was the case, the timing was still inconsistent with policy in Berlin. Clodius, Deputy director of the Economic Policy Department of the Foreign Ministry explained that the present did not seem an opportune moment to support the British proposals. (40) On top of that they were too indefinite for immediate action. "Ruter himself had been perturbed by the way in which the British government had handled the whole issue.

"...one was struck by the fact that the Board of Trade was particularly insistent that nothing about these talks should become known to the press or to the public." (41)

Although Chamberlain had found a very likely trail to appeasement in Germany's need for foreign currency, circumstances were against him and had thwarted his efforts. The intrigues of the opposition, difficulties in relations with the foreign office, and the need not

to arouse adverse opinion in the dominions had meant the use of somewhat clandestine methods which at a delicate time in Anglo-German relations, were viewed by the Germans with suspicion. By November 3 it was announced from Germany that no decision had been taken on Leith-Ross' suggestions. (42)

This lack of response from Berlin did not mean that Britain stopped applying the stimulus. In the influential circles it was still firmly believed that economic appeasement was practical politics. The published memoirs and biographies of the leading British politicians of the time shed little light on this element of foreign policy but the German Sources provide an adequate reflection of what was happening. Von Dirksen, at a week-end stay with Sir Samuel Hoare towards the end of October, was pumped with plenty of pro-German motives which he could pass on to his superiors. But nothing could be achieved in that direction for von Dirksen himself, uncertain of the real intentions of the German high command could only try to 'keep things even until an explanation on a broader basis were forthcoming'. (43) Ashton-Gwatkin, head of the economic department of the foreign office, took up the argument on November 6 where Leith-Ross

had left off. Three days later von Dirksen informed Weizsäcker that Ashton-Gwatkin desired an interview with Göring, but again stress was laid on 'the private nature of the proposed journey, about which nothing should be allowed to leak out'. (44) Had it not been for the extensive anti-Semitic activity that was to break out in Germany the following day, this lure of appeasement might possibly have met with greater success despite the German intention of 'spinning out matters as far as possible'. (45) But the disgusting news of the November pogrom was to put a further obstacle in its way; and it was an insurmountable one. For it even made the appeasers stop dead in their tracks and re-appraise their policy which embodied giving economic assistance to a country which could so callously initiate the basest of reprisals against a guiltless minority. The clarification of events that von Dirksen awaited had come in terrible form, and economic appeasement thereby contracted a paralysis from which it would never recover.

In all these matters during the weeks since Munich Britain had shown a maturity and generosity in dealing

with the Nazis which was much to her credit. Policy was devoid of the anti-German prejudices which thrived in the foreign office. It contained no echoes of the anti-German prejudices which thrived in the foreign office. It contained no echoes of the spirit of the Versailles epoch - a change in attitude which Hitler had expressly requested at Saarbrücken,⁽⁴⁶⁾ and to which Halifax drew attention in a speech he made at Edinburgh on October 24.⁽⁴⁷⁾ (He had in fact pointed this out personally to Hitler in 1937)⁽⁴⁸⁾ Hesse made it plain in his memorandum following his talks with Stewart that concerning the Czech conflict:

"...Chamberlain's attitude in particular had never been dictated by a consciousness of military weakness but exclusively by the religious idea that Germany must have justice and that the injustice of Versailles must be made good."⁽⁴⁹⁾

By the end of October von Dirksen could report that this frame of mind was being more and more widely taken by the British public in general, who had:

"already gone so far as to recognise Germany's theoretical claim to the removal of the degrading terms of the dictated Treaty of Versailles."⁽⁵⁰⁾

Not only was this unbiased and generous nature of Chamberlain's diplomacy appreciated in Germany;

so too was the honesty of his belief that he was pursuing a policy essential to world peace and that in the success of this policy lay benefits mutually to Germany and Britain both in detail and general context. Official reports from the German embassy in London to Berlin left no room for Chamberlain's genuineness to be doubted.

"A lasting rapprochement between the two countries is regarded by Chamberlain and the British Cabinet as one of the chief aims of British foreign policy, because world peace can be secured in the most effective manner by this combination.

...in Chamberlain the British Government possesses a statesman for whom the attainment of an Anglo-German rapprochement was simultaneously dictated by the head and by the heart." (51).

Leith-Ross in his deliberations with Ruter and Susskind had explained that as economic adviser to the British government he was responsible for assuring that 'no suitable chance of furthering co-operation between the nations of Europe should be let slip'. (52) The emphasis of course, was on avoiding Anglo-German slips.

It was also quite definite that Chamberlain did not stand alone in his ambitions but that British public opinion was generally in agreement with his broad plan of appeasing the Germans. 'The Times'

can be taken as representative of one segment of influential opinion in declaring on October 3 that 'the policy of appeasement must of course be pressed forward'. (53)

Von Dirksen bore witness to this general support for Chamberlain in an extensive political report to Berlin on October 15 when he stated that 'any agreements which he may eventually conclude with Germany...are assured, even in the future, of the unanimous approval of the British people'. (54) There could neither be any real fears in Germany for Chamberlain's political position, or that the 'warmongers' in the Conservative ranks or the opposition would gain power. Van Dirksen believed Chamberlain to be so certain of his political position that his policy towards Germany would never be successfully opposed even by 'fanatical anti-Germans or political intriguers'. (55)

Much of the anti-British content in the German press during these weeks had seized on British re-
armament as the serious bone of contention between the two countries. The Munich crisis had exposed serious deficiencies in the island's defences especially in anti-aircraft preparations, and all the Service

departments were putting in claims for increased supplies. Chamberlain was all too conscious of the weaknesses that had been revealed and their influence on diplomacy.

"Our past experience has shown us only too clearly that weakness in armed strength means weakness in diplomacy. One good thing at any rate has come out of this emergency through which we have passed. It has thrown a vivid light upon our preparations for defence, on their strength and on their weakness." (56)

It should be emphasised, however, that while progress was being made daily in improving the country's defensive position it was considered of the highest importance not to commit the country to any large-scale measures in rearming which might either upset the balance of the country's trade or raise the fur on the German back. (57) Chamberlain refused to allow British rearmament to assume an offensive character.

Within Conservative ranks there was a vociferous element demanding 'some scheme of national registration and national service' (58) but Chamberlain remained unconvinced by their arguments. Towards the end of October More-Belisha was campaigning for the formation of a Ministry of Supply. (59) Chamberlain again remained unmoved. Such progress as was made concerned the

essentials of defence - the improvement of all aspects of air-raid precautions, the development and perfection of techniques of enemy detection, and the building up of that section of the air force responsible for the foiling of enemy air attacks. (60) Speaking in the Commons on November 1 Chamberlain explained that he was forming a separate ministry of civilian defence to co-ordinate all aspects of the country's defence against air-attack. (61) In addition a cabinet committee was set up 'to go into the priorities of the three Defence Departments,' (62) and the state of the country's defences became the subject of frequent and important reviews by the committee of imperial defence. (63)

The basic defensiveness of this rearmament policy was emphasised by Chamberlain:

"Our sole concern is to see that this country and her Imperial communications are safe, and that we shall not be so weak relatively with other countries that our diplomacy cannot enter upon discussions on an equal footing." (64)

Berlin was fully aware of these motives. Apart from the effect of such public elucidations Hesse and von Dirksen were unbiased in communications to their seniors. The latter accurately reported to Aschmann that 'the emphasis in the rearmament campaign here is in the field

of organisation and intensification of defensive measures'.⁽⁶⁵⁾ Hesse was unequivocal in his remarks of October 18:

"No member of the Government or Government parties has given the German danger or German hostility as the reason for re-armament. That has been done exclusively by members of the Opposition and Opposition newspapers." (66)

Despite this full awareness of the state and aims of British policy the anti-British attacks of the German press continued at full force.

It was a matter of fierce disappointment to the appeasers that the path of economic appeasement was in no way smoothed by any sign from Germany that closer Anglo-German collaboration would be welcomed. This blatant lack of response on the part of Hitler was the main single reason for the appeasers' decline in faith in their policy. At a time when they had been at such pains to ensure that Germany was in possession of full knowledge of their genuine aims, and when she had been presented with so many invitations to put forward her requests, it was the greatest discouragement to find that Hitler's only answer was an invigorated press attack and, in November, violent persecutions of the Jews.

It was no fault of Chamberlain and his colleagues that they were swimming ineptly against the German tide. The high command in Germany was afraid of being labelled with peace for some time to come and wishing to dispel this illusion, especially amongst the German public, was concerned to create the impression of Germany being under the threat of British aggression. Appropriate to this aim was Goebbels' speech on October 21 in which he rejected the idea that Britain was prepared to reinstate Germany in her colonial position.

"We have recently become so accustomed to political miracles that people are now beginning to ask "What about the colonies?"...No gentlemen, we have nothing more to inherit. The world is against us. The world is always against us. The only question is whether the world can do anything against us." (67)

This picture of persecuted Germany, friendless and needing to find her own way to salvation looked even more real when British rearmament was translated aggressively. Ogilvie-Forbes, who replaced Henderson at Berlin in the middle of October, considered that it would take a great deal of propaganda 'to persuade the German people that Great Britain has any real designs upon them,' (68) but Goebbels and his machine were working to that end. In addition to blackening

British rearmament the German newspapers continually asserted the superior position of the Reich's military position and deprecated the idea that the thought of war should be banished from the public mind. (69)

The futility of appeasement in the face of this attitude is emphasised by the German desire to weaken the British government's position. This intention, of which the appeasers were of course, ignorant is expanded in an official communique from Aschmann to von Dirksen. The method used was the creation of tension and disruption in public opinion:

"it is still urgently desired that no chance for an attack on Duff Cooper, Churchill or Eden should be missed, whenever they afford the slightest opening for it...It should be pointed out that the propaganda for rearmament emanating from this quarter is subversive, that is to say that it...has as its real object to create in England an anti-German war psychosis in order to exercise pressure on the Government...so that rearmament...would entail enormous new financial and taxation burdens. The aim of the above-named politicians means in effect that their efforts are bound to result in a lasting and intolerable tension in Great Britain, in crises and finally, in a general catastrophe." (70)

And Germany suffered no delusion as to her ability to influence public opinion in Britain, both by subversive

means and the image she created in her ostensible policy. Stewart had informed Hesse that in Germany's reaction to Chamberlain's efforts to bring about multi-lateral disarmament, lay the power 'to stabilise or not to stabilise pro-German tendencies in Great Britain.'⁽⁷¹⁾

Germany's tactics and indeed her very policy could allow of no rapprochement with Great Britain. Throughout the whole of October and the beginning of November the British overtures were coolly handled or rejected while complaints in press and speeches steadily continued. At Weimer on November 6 Hitler again personally publicised (and by so doing glamorised) the anti-German element in England as epitomised by Churchill,⁽⁷²⁾ and the German press took full advantage of the British reaction to his comments.⁽⁷³⁾ While such comments from Chamberlain's point of view were a distinct embarrassment to his policy, they did not jeopardise it. But there was ominous news towards the end of October which spelt greater trouble for in it lay the seeds of a revived hatred of Germany on the part of the British public. This concerned the initiation of persecutions against the Sudeten Jews for the German authorities in Sudeten areas were expelling the Jews and the Czech government were refusing to

admit them to Czech territory. Halifax complained that such action was 'not only inhumane, but also (74) contrary to the intentions of the Munich Agreement'. The British government could well do without any additional obstructions in her relations with Germany, but on the other hand she could not turn a blind eye to the deplorable conditions the Sudeten Jews were facing. Ogilvie-Forbes was therefore instructed to contact the German government and 'urge them to refrain from such expulsions'. An urgent appeal to Weizsäcker["] despatched on October 27 was replied to a week later with the information that 'competent authorities had been instructed to make urgent enquiry into the matter'. (75)

No more of the matter was heard until, with the initiation of anti-Semitic activities in Germany proper, the expulsions were resumed. The details of this Jewish question together with its souring effects on British policy towards Germany will be considered later. (76) It was to certify fears for the future of Anglo-German relations which had become increasingly serious in the first six weeks after Munich. The Anglo-German Declaration had certainly not proved to be the vanguard of a more comprehensive understanding

between the two countries as had been hoped for in London. The spirit of Munich was decaying fast as far as Germany, the focal point of British policy in Europe, was concerned.

Events in central Europe were also proving an embarrassment to Chamberlain. This concerned the matter of the guarantee to Czechoslovakia. Hitler's defiance of the International Commission and resulting gains in Czechoslovakia have already been noted. By this means and also by direct negotiation with the Czechoslovak State he had gained control of a far greater area than had been envisaged at Munich. Poland had also laid claim to Czechoslovak territory and had received full satisfaction to her desires for Teschen and Freistadt (October 10)⁽⁷⁷⁾ In the case of both German and Polish demands the position of Britain was ill-defined, for although she had pledged herself to guaranteeing the integrity of the Czechoslovak state, such a guarantee could not be operative until the International Commission had defined the frontiers of that state. Irregularities had already occurred in that such definition was being made by bilateral agreements but nevertheless it was a process of

definition and not destruction of agreed boundaries. After these German and Polish clouds had been settled Chamberlain carefully avoided the subject of the guarantee as being pregnant with difficulties for the appeasers. However, on October 27 the Hungarians eager to improve their own border with Czechoslovakia tried to make good their claims by force and there were clashes between Slovakian and Hungarian troops.

Britain's position admitted only two alternatives. Either the four Munich powers would agree to enforce the Hungarian claims or else they would disagree among themselves. If the latter were the case, Britain having committed herself in advance to the guarantee would be obliged to come to the assistance of Czechoslovakia if she were the subject of unprovoked aggression. What in fact happened was that Britain was released from this predicament by the dictator powers stepping in and authorising Ribbentrop and Ciano to arbitrate the issue at Vienna. ⁽⁷⁸⁾ Neither Britain nor France was consulted and Hungary was awarded a majority of her claims on November 2.

Despite the fact that Britain had been so obviously ignored, not a murmur of protest was heard

from Downing Street. On November 1 while the matter was still in the air Chamberlain explained that:

"The position remains exactly the same and it cannot be cleared up until the whole question of minorities in Czechoslovakia has been settled... Our original offer was to enter into an international guarantee, but what the terms of that guarantee will be, and who will be the partakers in that guarantee is not a question on which I can give the House any further information today.

We never guaranteed the frontiers as they existed. What we did was to guarantee against unprovoked aggression - quite a different thing. That did not mean that we gave our seal to the existence of frontiers as they were then or at any other time. Our guarantee was against unprovoked aggression and not the crystallisation of frontiers." (79)

Such an unenthusiastic review shows that he patently did not want to interpret either the Hungarian claim as unprovoked aggression or the Vienna award as a breach of the Munich Agreement. This disturbance in that far-away corner of Europe could not be permitted to obstruct his chosen policy of appeasement or deter him from it. In fact he silently concurred with Hitler's own opinion as expressed to Francois-Poncet that by avoiding a four-power discussion Britain and France had escaped a difficult situation which might have proved to be a 'definite danger'. (80)

The whole subject of the guarantee was apparently distasteful to Chamberlain. Although it had been a vital factor in the defence of the Munich Agreement in both Houses of Parliament⁽⁸¹⁾ it had since proved to be an embarrassing threat to the continuation of his appeasement policy. It was therefore in his interests not to define the British position too clearly while, of course, not retracting the promise to Czechoslovakia. His statement to the Commons on November 1 was balanced accordingly. The one weakness in this course of action was that he displayed his hand to the Nazis. Two days later von Dirksen reported to his superiors that:

"It is noteworthy that Mr. Chamberlain refrained from entering into any details concerning the character of the final guarantee...Furthermore it is interesting.. that he referred solely to the case of unprovoked aggression, but did not speak of a guarantee of the frontiers in the sense of a guarantee of the sovereign territory of the state." (82)

The incident and result of the Hungarian claim had thus demonstrated Britain's position vis a vis Czechoslovakia and demonstrated to Hitler that there was little likelihood of any fierce objection.

from London in the event of a further frontier claim against the rump of Czechoslovakia - knowledge that he was to use to his own advantage in just a fortnight's time.

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7. GD, v.IV, no. 36.
8. BD, v.III, no. 145.
9. *ibid*, no. 157.
10. *ibid.*
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15. *ibid*, no. 16.
16. *ibid*, nos. 81, 152.
17. Feiling, *op. cit.* p.391.
18. Baynes, Hitler's Speeches 1922-39, v.II, p.1536.
19. *ibid*, p.1535.
20. HCD, v.339, cols. 550-51. For an account of the measures taken by the government, see *infra*, pp. 61-62.
21. BD, v.III, no. 188.
22. *ibid*, no. 198.
23. GD, v.IV, nos. 253, 255.
24. *ibid*, no. 253.
25. e.g. HCD, v.339, col. 50.
26. Von Dirksen, Moscow, Tokyo, London, p.225.
27. GD, v.IV, no.253.
28. Schmidt, Hitler's Interpreter, pp 113-4.
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30. GD, v.IV, no.400. With this aim in mind Ribbentrop visited Rome between October 27 - 29. See Ciano's Diary 1937-38, p.185.
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67. BD, v.III, no. 280, note 1.
68. *ibid*, no. 281.
69. *ibid.*
70. GD, v.IV, no.264.
71. *ibid*, no. 251, enc.2.
72. Baynes, *op.cit.* pp.1546-47.
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75. *ibid*, no. 250.
76. *infra*, pp.126-30.
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Chapter three

Appeasement via Rome

If relations with Germany were steadily going from bad to worse Chamberlain still had his second string, friendly relations with Mussolini which might draw him away from Hitler. As the likelihood of a direct appeasement of Germany diminished so the importance of the Italian connection proportionately increased. It was very encouraging to the British government to find Italy a much more responsive patient to their international surgery than Germany was proving to be. As the days of October slipped by it became more and more clear to Chamberlain that Italy was the end of the axis upon which his policy had by far the greater chance of success. Immediately upon Munich this state of affairs was not so apparent but nevertheless a great deal of British effort went into regularising and improving the atmosphere between London and Rome.

Mussolini was susceptible to British approaches for two main reasons: his vanity and his jealousy. His vanity demanded the recognition by Great Britain of his African empire. By October 4 there only remained two main European powers which had not recognised the Italian empire. These were Russia and Britain. The prestige value of official European acceptance of

his empire was important to Mussolini for he disliked the ever-growing feeling of being the inferior partner in the Rome-Berlin axis. ⁽¹⁾ An empire, which history had denied the Germans, did something to offset this. But his specific desires for British recognition had deeper motives. These concerned Italy's relations with France. Since October 1936, when Chambrun was recalled, Rome had not seen a French ambassador, and relations between the two capitals had steadily deteriorated. On October 4, however, the French government decided to appoint an ambassador to Rome and with this decision French recognition of the Italian Empire was an automatic implication.

But this was no solution to the continuing Franco-Italian difficulties over strategic colonial possessions. In particular Italy had designs on Tunisia, Djibuti, Corsica and the Suez Canal for the benefit of her trade and European status. ⁽²⁾ It was important, however, that the right moment for a statement of Italian claims should be taken and certainly should it not be at a time which might jeopardise the realisation of the April Agreement. Although Mussolini considered the Agreement had 'lost much of its importance' ⁽³⁾ since its birth on April 16, 1938, it was still sufficiently desired so that claims

against France should await its realisation. Once the British had signified their intention to bring the Agreement into force the wheels against France could start grinding. This policy is contained in a letter Ciano wrote to the Italian ambassador in London on November 14. After referring to the 'truly remarkable development' in Italian history of the imminent realisation of the Anglo-Italian Agreement he goes on to say:

"But having reached this point it is not... the intention of our Chief to halt even for one minute. There is another problem which immediately presents itself and which we must consider in the light of the regime's achievements in the Empire. I speak of our relations with France.

Henceforward it is clear that, since the political, military and even geographical conditions of our country have changed substantially, future conversations with France cannot be resumed on the previous basis. The claims which we once kept unspoken can now shortly be brought into the open." [4)

Once officially announced these claims against France would be a factor of embarrassment to relations with Britain so it was necessary from the Italian point of view to get the April Agreement realised at the first opportunity. Action against France could then be taken. Meanwhile it was hoped that the effort of such action on British opinion could be minimised. There

was, in any case, no question of a demarche, but it would if public opinion could be so prepared that the announcement of Italian demands on France would not provoke undue reaction. Grandi, Italian ambassador in London was given instructions accordingly:

"Let it be seen that something of the sort is bound to come. Predispose English opinion - if it is impossible actually to prepare it." (5)

The urgency of Italy in the matter of the Agreement was very noticeable in Britain, but it was an urgency that Chamberlain took mainly as flattery to his appeasement policy. If Germany was being truculent and unresponsive to British overtures Italy seemed eager to foster the pleasant contacts made at Munich and to stabilise Anglo-Italian relations by fulfilling important requirements necessary to the ratification of the Agreement proposed in April. The fact that Italy was not prepared to carry out all the conditions originally demanded by Britain was a matter which could be played down for it was felt in the foreign office that to refuse Italy now would be to damn the Agreement together with future relations with Italy and would drive Mussolini further into the Nazi camp. (6) Thus, ironically, the British policy was a

blessing to Mussolini; it allowed realisation of the agreement at minimum Italian sacrifice and brought no obstruction to his deeper motives with reference to France.

The other main reason for Mussolini's susceptibility to the British policy, his jealousy was with reference to Germany. Early in 1938 it was evident that the Rome-Berlin Axis had become the corner-stone of Italian foreign policy. But even so Mussolini occasionally had moments of grave doubt and indecision about his axis policy, especially after the Nazi conquest of Austria about which he had never even been given advanced information. ⁽⁷⁾ British policy to Italy was aimed at preventing the consolidation of the axis by seeking to persuade Mussolini to hold back from finally committing himself to a German alliance. Whatever chance of success this policy had was doomed by the means of its implementation. The willingness of Britain to meet Italian conditions was interpreted by Mussolini as weakness. Impressed as he was by power, the very nature of British approaches drove him in the end to a direct alliance with the Nazis. When the Italians had to choose between Britain and Germany there was little in their eyes to recommend the former. Ciano wrote scathingly about Chamberlain and Halifax early in 1939:

"German rearmament weighs on them like lead. They would be ready for any sacrifice if they could see the future clearly. This sombre preoccupation of theirs has convinced me more and more of the necessity for the Triple Alliance." (8)

After Munich however, the Italians were by no means so convinced and on several occasions the off-hand way in which they were treated by Germany did not recommend closer collaboration. True Italian policy with reference to her territorial ambitions was frequently subordinated to Axis policy which was, in effect, German policy. (9) On the other hand Mussolini had to admit that Italian aggrandisement depended very largely on Germany. Such a dependance was personally distasteful to him but nothing could alter the fact that the western powers stood largely for the maintenance of the status quo and that further Italian achievements could only be gained in association with his powerful and aggressive neighbour. At Munich he had looked with jealousy at the extent of the new German inroad into central Europe. Thus, until later in the year when he was more resigned to the advisability of the closest cooperation with Germany, he was concerned to gain what diplomatic advantage he could through his country's independent machinations with Great Britain and France. (10)

These began with Britain on the first day after Munich. In his diary for October 1 Ciano recorded the fact of his giving a 'hint about a resumption of contact in the near future',⁽¹¹⁾ to the British ambassador in Rome, the Earl of Perth. This hint was contained in the confidential information Mussolini had given Chamberlain at Munich concerning a proposed withdrawal of ten thousand Italian legionaries from Spain. Perth reacted to this news with a relevant question - would it not be possible for the Italian government to withdraw all their forces from Spain?⁽¹²⁾ He was left in little doubt that such a withdrawal could not possibly be envisaged. Perth hoped for a percentage withdrawal more in keeping with the plan of the Non-Intervention Committee which would enable the Anglo-Italian Agreement to be ratified with much greater justification. This plan, in effect, demanded about a 4/5 withdrawal. Ciano claimed ten thousand to be half the Italian forces in Spain. This according to a contemporary War Office estimate of 40,000, was clearly inaccurate.⁽¹³⁾ (Another estimate put the figure as high as 100,000⁽¹⁴⁾ - also inaccurate). Thus the immediate problem before the British government was whether the proposed withdrawal was on a sufficiently large scale to justify bringing the Agreement into force.

Two days later Perth was notified that the Italian government had given definite instructions for the ten thousand legionaries to return from Spain. (15) It was with this news that the British government began to feel Italian pressure for the realisation of the April Agreement. Perth reported Ciano's threats:

"Signor Mussolini had in view of the great emergency agreed to go to Munich and assist at Conference there but he must warn me very solemnly that Signor Mussolini would not feel it possible again to participate in a further Conference with representatives of state, however important, which had not recognised the Empire....If Agreement did not come into force Italian Government would be compelled to adopt a different attitude and to take certain action which up to now they had definitely refused." (16)

The appeasers fully appreciated the dangers that this Italian attitude held for them. It was potent bribery. The situation was considered by Perth to be 'the parting of the ways'. (17) He begged authority from the British government to inform Ciano that the Agreement would be implemented. He was convinced that unless this happened Mussolini would presume that Britain did not desire to bring the Agreement into force. The consequences would be disastrous to Anglo-Italian relations. Ciano's vague threats were:

"certainly likely to mean a formal alliance with Germany,...that the Anglo-Italian Agreement dies and all arrangements connected with it will be ended. Signor Mussolini may also have in mind the withdrawal of Italian Ambassadors from those countries which have not recognised the Empire." (18)

In a matter of only four days since Munich British policy towards Italy had been forced into a tight corner. To fail to bring the Agreement into force and recognise the Italian Empire might well result in pushing Italy closer to Germany probably by a definite military alliance. This was just what Chamberlain wanted to avoid at all costs. The future of Anglo-Italian would be jeopardised. On the other hand, the realisation of the Agreement would assist a general European detente - Chamberlain's keenest hope. Ciano had certainly suggested as much, (19) and he had also hinted that another specific result would be the resumption of negotiations between France and Italy. (20) This was a further point that greatly attracted Chamberlain and Halifax. Thus the British government had been put in a position which admitted of only one real way out. There was much, it seemed, to be gained by granting Mussolini his earnest wish; much to be lost by refusing it.

There was no serious doubt in Chamberlain's mind as to the efficacy of implementing the April Agreement and Halifax was equally optimistic. (21) But where doubt did lie very heavily was as to whether such a policy could be pursued safely. In exact terms would British public opinion be in agreement? A communication from Halifax to Perth on October 5 gave expression to these misgivings:

"I have discussed matter with Prime Minister who, like myself, is personally favourable to early action. We fear, however, that it cannot be quite so immediate as Italian Government hope....I am also bound to say that, from point of view of public opinion here worst possible impression would be caused if suggestion were made that Prime Minister had felt obliged to take decision under pressure....

Signor Mussolini should be under no illusion as to the difficulties which we are likely to encounter here in bringing the Agreement into force....if, there is no reduction of Italian air forces in Spain, and if bombing of British ships continues, we shall have considerable difficulty in carrying public opinion." (22)

Reports were persistently arriving in Britain about the bombing of British ships by Franco's forces and this naturally turned opinion against Italy. Moreover there were rumours that planes went directly from Italy on bombing raids (23) and such stories really incensed the British public. Under such conditions it might be

suicidal for Chamberlain's Government to go to Parliament with a motion to ratify the Agreement with the Italians especially when Mussolini was really making only a token withdrawal of troops from Spain. Although Chamberlain's position immediately after Munich could hardly have been more solid, there had already been a certain weakening of this support in some important sectors of public opinion:

"Second thoughts about Munich on the part of a large and influential section of the public made it increasingly uncertain whether Chamberlain could hold his own to the extent of being able to maintain his peace policy." (24)

Italy was repeatedly asked to give assurances regarding the cessation of bombing British ships and that no further Italian pilots should be sent to Spain. (25) Emphasis was always laid on the desirable effect such assurances would have on public opinion in Britain, thus facilitating the implementation of the Agreement, but Mussolini refused to compromise on these points. (26) The reason for his refusal, not communicated to the British Government, was that to make such a promise 'would do too much to weaken Franco's position.' (27)

It might be thought that such an uncooperative attitude on the part of Italy should have been suspect

to Chamberlain. But the fact is that in other areas of diplomacy Britain could acknowledge the best of relations with Italy. In the early days of the meetings of the International Commission the British Government enlisted the support of Italy in the discussion over disputes, (28) and Henderson was able to tell Wilson, the American Ambassador in Germany that Attolico had been 'most helpful'. (29) The desire for cooperation and harmony between the two countries - outside of the Agreement considerations - was moreover not one-sided, as a brief telegraphic communication from Perth to Halifax on October 3 clarifies:

"I learn from a reliable source that any favourable reference Prime Minister may feel able to make to Signor Mussolini's action both before and during Munich Conference would be greatly appreciated." (30)

Chamberlain duly made suitable comments in his speech in the House of Commons of the same day, (31) and the following afternoon Perth was transmitting Mussolini's thanks. (32)

Similar statements were also made in the House of Lords on the 6th. (33) Although such exchanges might seem somewhat trite they were of value to Britain if they improved relations with Italy in the slightest degree, especially at a time when the dominant dictator power was demonstrating its truculence and continued obstinacy in the sessions of the International Commission.

The British government had been requested to give its reply to Italy 'at least in general terms' (34) as soon as October 6, in time for the meeting of the Italian Grand Council. Despite the difficulties that faced the British government as a result of the rushed and unsatisfactory nature of the Italian proposals, Halifax after consultation with Chamberlain despatched the following message to Rome:

"If Signor Mussolini can meet us on the point of time, and if he can in the interval effect the withdrawal which he now contemplates, Prime Minister will bring matter before Cabinet at first opportunity, and if they agree, His Majesty's Government will at once lay matter before Parliament on reassembly." (35)

The Agreement was on the road to ratification, if not as early as Mussolini really wanted. Chamberlain had asked for a breathing space. The matter could not in any case be brought up at the present sitting of Parliament and the earliest possible time was November 1. But the delay was essential to the Government in order to mellow public opinion to its intentions. Ciano appreciated the position in which Chamberlain had been put:

"He does not want to present himself to the Cabinet and subsequently to the House of Commons, with the words: 'Here you are. Take it or leave it. Mussolini has fixed the date'. At the moment, in spite of the vote of confidence, his position has been

shaken, and in those circumstances it would become untenable." (36)

In the three weeks that followed prior to the Cabinet decision being taken British policy to Italy went through something of a metamorphosis. Soon after the 6th. it was felt by the appeasers that Britain could take advantage of Italy's urgent desire for British recognition of her Empire in soliciting Mussolini's support for an attempt to hasten the conclusion of the Spanish conflict. (37) As France, Italy, Germany and Russia were all actively concerned in the Spanish Civil War, it was continually a major threat to general European peace. To do anything to bring this storm-centre to a conclusion would, of itself, be of great value. But to be able to announce that Mussolini had in some way been instrumental in effecting it would greatly strengthen the government's position in suggesting a speedy ratification of the Agreement with the Italians. (38) So the Italian foreign minister was officially informed that Hemming, Secretary of the Non-Intervention Committee, was going to Burgos to discuss with Franco's administration a British scheme for the withdrawal of all foreign combatants in Spain. It was hoped that :

"Italian Government would support his mission and use their influence with General Franco for examination of Non-Intervention plan to which both Italian Government and His Majesty's Government were pledged." (39)

But Britain met with the same cold refusal as she continued to meet over the matters of Italian pilots and the bombing of British ships.

Perth informed Halifax of Mussolini's reaction on the 14th:

"Neither, I fear, will the Italian Government consent to participate in any appeal to General Franco for an armistice." (40)

He continued his communique by relating his fears that Anglo-Italian relations were in a deadlock which would not be removed until the ratification of the Agreement. This was the beginning of the change in the British attitude to Italy from one of optimism in the value of the Agreement's ratification as a bargaining counter to one of urgency that the Agreement must be brought into force so that policy with Italy could proceed. Perth was quite definite in his advice:

"I am convinced, to put it bluntly that it is useless for us to expect Italian cooperation for any further measures connected with the cessation of the Spanish war.... until the Agreement has come into force.

Once that has taken place I personally believe that we shall find Signor Mussolini helpful, not averse to a Four Power meeting about Spain, if this were desired, and anxious generally to help towards a European detente." (41)

Britain continued to press for concessions from Italy but by October 27 it was fully realised that everything hung on the Agreement. Halifax, in enlarging to Washington on the Cabinet decision of the 26th. to bring the Agreement into force stated that it:

"may be expected to restore to Signor Mussolini some of the liberty of action he now lacks in deciding his foreign policy." (42)

It was also firmly believed that to fail to take what would probably be the last chance of bringing the Agreement into force would strengthen the Rome-Berlin Axis. There was also danger in this direction in prolonging the official business of ratification more than necessary.

"the longer the Agreement remains inoperative the more closely Rome becomes bound to Berlin, as recent events have shown." (43)

There had, indeed, been signs over the past fortnight of increased Italo-German sympathy. The genuineness of these signs can be questioned but from the British point of view they were disturbing portents. In the previous chapter it has been mentioned ⁽⁴⁴⁾ how Hitler in all his

public speeches concerning Munich glamorised the part that Mussolini had played. The Italian connection was being regularly plugged. Henderson reported on October 12 how this propaganda was aimed at the German people:

"The advantages of the Italian connexion were being more widely recognised and soon the German people would become accustomed and reconciled to an Italo-German alliance." (45)

The Italian attitude to the German connection seemed little less fixed. On October 13 came the news that Italy had unconditionally approved of the substance and form of Hitler's Saarbrücken speech,⁽⁴⁶⁾ and that Italian opinion was that the Italo-German bloc of 125 million men was much stronger than its opponents who were talking of a preventive war. Such notions served to strengthen Chamberlain's opinion that more cordial relations should be established with Italy by ratifying the Agreement at the earliest possible moment.

Until this finally occurred on November 16 Anglo-Italian relations were in a state of suspension. The Italian attitude had made it quite plain that British approaches would only be considered once the Agreement were brought into effect. If active policy towards Italy had to be postponed for a while, Chamberlain

nevertheless still had the Italian angle on appeasement in the forefront of his mind. The behaviour of the Germans was making him increasingly aware of the necessity for preserving a good atmosphere with Italy.

"I feel that Rome at the moment is the end of the Axis on which it is easiest to make an impression." (47)

Yet Italy as far as his policy of appeasement was concerned could never be an end in itself. He understood Hitler as being the real threat to peace in Europe and knew that his policy could only succeed by achieving a permanent understanding with the Nazis. As Germany was not responding to his calls he hoped that in Italy he might find an alternative path to Hitler's heart.

"An hour or two tete a tete with Mussolini might be extraordinarily valuable in making plans for talks with Germany." (48)

Chamberlain wanted to go to Rome to resume the personal contacts which had been made at Munich. He believed the implementation of the April Agreement would 'obviously contribute to general appeasement' (49) and so help greatly to pave the way for such a meeting. As early as October 31 official documents between the foreign office

and the British embassy in Rome were mentioning the hope of a visit by the prime minister to Italy. ⁽⁵⁰⁾ But it was not proposed to broach the idea with the Italians until November 16 after the declaration bringing the agreement into force had been signed. ⁽⁵¹⁾

On November 2 the House of Commons approved the government's intention to bring the Anglo-Italian agreement into force by 345 to 138 votes. ⁽⁵²⁾ This decision appears to have been the cause for an immediate softening in Italy's attitude towards Britain. Grandi, the Italian ambassador saw Halifax on November 4 to convey Mussolini's appreciation of the efforts taken by the British government. In a short general conversation Grandi expressed his hopes for the future of Anglo-Italian relations.

"He was quite certain that in any time of difficulty in future Great Britain and Italy would be able to act together in their natural role of holding the balance in Europe. He hoped that we should now get back to a regular practice of consultation together on all important points as they arose." ⁽⁵³⁾

This augered well for early Anglo-Italian conversations on which, in view of the hardening attitude of Germany, Chamberlain put such crucial importance. When the idea was officially mooted to Italy it was 'welcomed'

by Mussolini who agreed in principle that the proposed date of the second week in January would be alright. ⁽⁵⁴⁾

In all her dealings with Italy in these six or seven weeks since Munich the British government were very concerned that no excuse for umbrage or suspicion should be given to Germany. There were two specific dangers which had to be avoided; that of letting Germany think that Britain was trying to take advantage of certain difficulties in Italo-German relations, and secondly, that of letting Germany think Britain was in any way attempting to undermine the Rome-Berlin Axis. Conflict had arisen between Germany and Italy regarding Hungary's claims against Czechoslovakia. ⁽⁵⁵⁾ Italy was inclined to support Hungary, especially after receiving an appeal for arbitration from Budapest. Germany appeared to side more and more with Prague, Munich had provided that in the event of no satisfactory understanding being reached between Prague and Budapest consultation should take place between the four signatory powers. Italy eagerly desired that the Czech-Hungarian dispute should be settled by Axis arbitration, an idea of which she was hard-pressed to convince Germany.

The position of Britain in all this was manifested when the Czechoslovak Minister, Masaryk, contacted

Halifax on October 26. Britain saw 'no objection' to the matter being cleared up 'by means of arbitration by the two Axis Powers' - to which Germany was opposed - but 'would be ready to join in any discussion' if the problem were referred to the four Munich powers! (56)

In supporting the plan of action desired by Italy and spurned, at the time, by Germany, Halifax was concerned that no ulterior motives should be suspected.

"You will, of course, appreciate that His Majesty's Government do not wish to give the impression of trying to profit by any Italo-German disagreement over the future of Ruthenia." (57)

Germany must not be allowed to think that Britain was championing Italy's course of action simply because it would aggravate a source of dissension between the two dictator powers.

Likewise in the matters concerning the ratification of the Anglo-Italian Agreement and Chamberlain's projected visit to Rome no suggestion of wooing Italy at the expense of Germany should be given. As regards the former matter the British Government was not so worried about possible adverse impressions:-

"Our bringing into force of the Agreement is not likely to be viewed as an attempt to undermine the Rome-Berlin Axis, since it is Signor Mussolini himself who has taken the initiative by his unilateral

withdrawal of Italian troops from Spain and is claiming that this gesture should enable the Agreement to come into force; as to Germany, whatever her inner feelings on the subject may be, she has never outwardly condemned the Agreement." (58)

In Chamberlain's visit to Rome, however, there was a real danger of misinterpretation. Perth warned Halifax to take care that the publicity of this news should be suitably diplomatic:

"It would of course be of the utmost importance that the press at home should in no way represent suggested visit as an attempt to weaken the Rome-Berlin Axis. Such a line as you will appreciate would be disastrous." (59)

November 16, with the ratification of the Anglo-Italian Agreement and the settling except for formalities, of Anglo-Italian conversations for the second week in January, marked the end of the first phase of relations between the two countries after Munich. Chamberlain could be tolerably pleased. A sensible atmosphere had been created between London and Rome and the stage was set for an extension to this good-will. Mussolini might have driven a stiff bargain but it was well worthwhile, so it seemed, for the benefits to European peace that would now accrue. A note of confidence is perhaps contained in the following entry in Chamberlain's diary for November 6:

"In the past, I have often felt a sense of helpless exasperation at the way things have been allowed to drift in foreign affairs, but now I am in a position to keep them on the move, and while I am P.M. I don't mean to go to sleep." (60)

If he could have heard the conversation that had gone on between Ribbentrop and Mussolini at the Palazzo Venezia on the afternoon of October 28 (61) in which war was accepted as inevitable within the next few years between the Axis, France and England, he would have been less optimistic.

For the time being Chamberlain continued in his hallowed cause of European peace. Another way in which he could 'keep things going' was with reference to France. Britain might be anxious to make friends with Germany and Italy but she did not forget her old allies. And this old ally required help as well as thought.

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Chapter four

France and Rearmament

As events in Europe during October and November gradually revealed the mirage of international security that Munich had been, Chamberlain was to put increasingly greater emphasis on close contact with France. In the weeks before Munich Britain had been tentative about collaborating too closely with France.⁽¹⁾ The situation was not to change radically immediately after Munich despite the message which Chamberlain sent to Deladier, expressing the wish for 'renewed and continuous co-operation'.⁽²⁾ Closer contact with France was to come but rather because things were going badly for Chamberlain with the dictator powers than because he saw France as an essential pillar of British foreign policy. So for the first few weeks after Munich British policy towards France savours of mere formality and patronage rather than interest.

To France, even more than Britain, Munich had been an experience from which a lesson had to be learned about defence precautions. The pith of this lesson was that France was far too weak. The purpose of British policy to France over the ensuing months was to raise her from an insidious depression which was effecting her militarily, financially and morally. Bullitt, the American ambassador in Paris, summed up

the situation facing France in the following resume of a conversation he had with Deladier:

"Deladier sees the situation entirely, clearly, realises fully that the meeting in Munich was an immense diplomatic defeat for France and England and recognises that unless France can recover a united national spirit to confront the future a fatal situation will arise within the next year." (3)

Sir Maurice Hankey, a British official of the Suez Canal Company, examined the problem more closely finding that the responsibility for its solution lay partly with Britain. He emphasised the need:

"for the British Government to exercise early and continuous pressure on M. Deladier to set the French defences in order." (4)

Aware of their deficiencies and of the threats that still existed in Europe nearly all sections of French opinion were 'united in declaring that the closest Anglo-French co-operation is essential'. (5)

Phipps, in forwarding Hankey's memorandum to Halifax, echoed the need for Britain to influence and assist France in the matter of her defensive position and requested some message from the prime minister to the effect that British initiative on these lines would soon be forthcoming. (6)

Although Chamberlain had expressed a desire to Deladier for more stimulated Anglo-French contact, his

approaches in the direction of the Quai d'Orsay were reserved. Such reservations were, no doubt, partly influenced by his aspirations with reference to Italy. Franco-Italian relations were still at a very low ebb and the re-establishment of normal diplomatic exchanges between the two countries by the return of a French ambassador to Rome did little genuinely to improve the situation. It was a significant gesture on the part of France but the news of the appointment was received coldly by Italy. Ciano wrote at the time:

"The news leaves us more or less indifferent. It is good that the French have capitulated but we don't want certain Italians to get excited and enthusiastic about it." (7)

Later in the month French enquiries regarding the possible re-appointment of an Italian ambassador to Paris were brushed aside by Ciano. (8) The as yet unspoken territorial demands on French possessions could not be allowed to be embarrassed by any outward signs of warmth from Italy!

The general state of Franco-Italian relations was well known in the British foreign office. On the actual day of the announcement of the appointment of a French ambassador to Rome, Ciano spoke bitterly to Perth

of the attitude the French press was taking over Mussolini's part at Munich. (9) While friction between Rome and Paris continued British foreign policy would only be aggravated by advancing too quickly in the direction of conversations with France. In the first place Mussolini might well become sceptical of British motives in proposing to implement the April Agreement if, at the same time, there took place a consolidation of the Anglo-French position. Secondly, although it was important for Chamberlain's political position to obtain French agreement to his Italian policy, this very policy might well become awkwardly embarrassed if the Quai d'Orsay were given too much room to voice opinions. The French did, in fact, consider British intentions over the Italian Agreement a 'delicate' question. (10) It is not surprising therefore, to find that they were given little opportunity to raise official objections.

In the absence of any definite signs from the British Government of early official exchanges with the French Government, Phipps again brought Halifax's notice to the state of affairs in France, on October 12. In a telegram of that date he reiterated his earlier observation that the general mood in Paris was that of 'search for a strong hand to lead France out of her troubles'. (11)

In his conclusion he emphasised the role that he and the majority of opinion in France believed Britain should be playing:

"...the country now desires unity and a strong government and recognises the need for a further armaments effort, particularly in the air. But there are undercurrents of defeatism which feel that France's future as a Great Power is dangerously compromised....Meanwhile at a moment of such uncertainty and depression French opinion and not least in financial circles is leaning heavily on Great Britain for leadership and guidance." (12)

Despite such appeals the British government continued in its restrained policy towards France. It was not, in fact, until October 28 that Halifax replied to Phipps' original communication of the 4th. Although it was Britain's earnest desire to have France strong and healthy, it was felt impolitic for Britain to exercise too direct an influence.

"...it must obviously be rather a delicate matter for us to proffer advice on such matters, particularly if such advice takes too official a form. For that reason, I do not altogether like your suggestion of a message from the Prime Minister." (13)

However the idea of a visit to Paris by Chamberlain and Halifax had now been mooted and it was thought that such an occasion of informal talks would be the best way of bringing influence to bear on France. (14)

As time drew on and the likelihood of a real agreement with Germany diminished, the prospect of talks with France was viewed with greater eagerness. And there was a further factor which made the appeasers more concerned about the French connection. This was the fact that while Germany was obstinately ignoring British overtures she was in the process of coming to a limited agreement with France. The fear that such action inevitably raised in the British mind was that Hitler was trying to split Paris and London. Britain had to admit the very slight possibility that in her depressed state France might decide to contract out of Europe altogether by accepting a direct non-aggression pact with Germany. Such an idea had been placed on evidence as early as October 4 in Phipps' communique to Halifax:

"I have heard fears expressed, in certain, but not numerous, quarters lest Great Britain and France should drift apart... owing to German intrigue..."(15)

While Halifax admitted that there was no more reason for Britain to be suspicious of any direct Franco-German discussions which might improve the European atmosphere than there was for France to object to similar Anglo-German discussions, which took place

at Munich, he fully realised the dangers of the situation. (16)
Referring early in November to the possible (though highly improbable) non-aggression pact between Germany and France he pointed out the obvious and dangerous consequences of British isolation and Germany being able to dominate Europe. (17) The tone of Britain towards France now begins to change. Events during the first four weeks after Munich had awakened Chamberlain and Halifax to the dangers proceeding from a weak and demoralised France. Halifax now exhibits that concern over improving French defences that Phipps had shown earlier:

"Hence the great importance which I attach to our using every opportunity of encouraging her by precept and example to rearm as soon as possible." (18)

British foreign policy relying as it did so much on prestige and potential strength rested heavily on the French collaboration.

Britain was now to foster the association with France more vigorously. Speaking at the Guildhall on November 9 Chamberlain took the opportunity of emphasising that if he were a 'go-getter' for peace this did not mean that his contacts with France were any the less valuable.

"Our relations with France are too long standing, too intimate, too highly prized by both of us to allow such suspicions to be entertained for one moment." (19)

Halifax explained in his letter to Phipps of November 1 that even though the French position in central Europe had been shattered at Munich, receding before German predominance, the united position of France and Britain in western Europe must be retained at all costs. The essence of this was strong defences:

"...Great Britain and France have to uphold their predominant position in Western Europe by the maintenance of such armed strength as would render any attack upon them hazardous." (20)

At the time of writing these opinions the British had learned of a proposal for an agreement between France and Germany on similar lines to the Anglo-German protocol which had been signed at Munich, and understood that this proposal was a definite policy idea as far as France was concerned. (21) By this time the British press had given much space to the Prime Minister's intention of bringing forward proposals for a general settlement between the four great powers of Europe - an idea to which Mussolini, in the middle of the month, had given vague assurances of support. (22) In view of the attempts to bring about this Franco-German agreement, France was

concerned to be kept informed about these British efforts for a general collaboration. ⁽²³⁾ At the same time France gave official support to the British intention to bring the Anglo-Italian Agreement into force. ⁽²⁴⁾ This was support which Britain had eagerly desired and was glad to obtain. For, apart from it being in harmony with the policy of Anglo-French co-ordination, it was hoped that the decision to implement this agreement might be 'helpful in assisting the improvement of Franco-Italian relations'. ⁽²⁵⁾

While there was a slight element of apprehension in the British reaction to the present course of Franco-German relations there is no doubt that the predominant reaction to the proposed pact between France and Germany was one of pleasure at a rapprochement which would subscribe to greater understanding between the democracies and the dictatorships. For the conclusion of such an agreement would be an invaluable fillip to Chamberlain's policy of achieving a four-power Europe. Britain and Germany had clearly agreed to conduct their foreign policies with European peace as their goal; a basis for Anglo-Italian understanding was soon to be laid in the realisation of the April Agreement; now France and Germany seemed likely to come to some broad

agreement which would clear the air in that direction. All that remained for that 'general sense of stability and security' ⁽²⁶⁾ that Chamberlain was seeking, to be achieved, was for France and Italy to be able to conclude a similar agreement, for then the way would be clearly glazed for a general rapprochement between all four powers. Even if this hope was never to be realised the fact that Hitler was now prepared to come to some form of understanding with France was, from the British point of view welcome indication of a possible improvement in the European atmosphere. ⁽²⁷⁾

By November 7 Germany had supplied France with an initial draft of the agreement, and on the following day Halifax was acquainted with its terms. ⁽²⁸⁾ Briefly it expressed the willingness of the two powers to maintain peaceful relations and to that end it agreed that there were no longer any territorial questions which divided them. It also acknowledged that all future disputes should be settled by consultation. The British foreign office was relieved that the draft contained no intention to lay down any reciprocal non-aggression undertakings, so that the worst fears were dispelled. ⁽²⁹⁾ Two days later France was informed that Britain would welcome the

conclusion of an agreement on the lines contained in
the draft. (30)

With the fierce anti-Semitic outburst in Germany which occurred at this time, aggravating still further the atmosphere between London and Berlin, the need for ever closer contact with the principal ally was emphasised. (31)
The Prime Minister's visit to Paris was due on the 24th and the series of conversations which took place at the Quai d'Orsay further cemented relations between the two countries. At the time of the visit Chamberlain described this meeting as 'a means for renewing and strengthening mutual confidence' (32) and in this respect it achieved its purpose.

The first matter to be discussed in these conversations was the Franco-German Declaration which was now ready for signature. The British government had specifically requested that publication of the text of the declaration should not, if possible, precede these conversations. (33) As this request had been made only the day before (the 25th) the French government had agreed to defer publication so that prior consultation could take place. Bonnet read the complete text of the declaration to the British party and Chamberlain sincerely believed that this rapprochement 'constituted another

step towards appeasement in Europe'. (34) Apart from the professions of good-will which had been contained in the initial draft the declaration also observed:

"that peaceful and good neighbourly relations between Germany and France are one of the most essential elements of the consolidation of the European situation and of the maintenance of general peace." (35)

The agreement was to be signed the following week and although its general content was akin to that of the Anglo-German Declaration which Hitler had since disgraced, it did seem to put relations between Paris and Berlin on an even keel and pave the way for an improvement in the Franco-Italian atmosphere which was still one of the biggest obstacles in the way of a general European settlement.

Defence, inevitably, occupied a major part of the morning session. Deladier was under no illusion about the necessity for France radically to improve her organisation of defence especially in the light of the new declaration with Germany.

"in present circumstances, if one wished the Franco-German declaration to have a real value, it was essential that France should not slacken her efforts in the matter of defence." (36)

He continued by asserting the need in this matter for co-operation with Britain 'in all possible ways'. Chamberlain's first intention in this vital area of discussion was to have France's position clarified with reference to the possibility of a German attack on Britain.

"the present attitude of Germany had brought before His Majesty's Government the possibility of a quarrel between Great Britain and Germany rather than between France and Germany, and the first blow might well, therefore, be struck against Great Britain rather than France." (37)

In such an eventuality would Britain be able to count on French aid? Deladier's reply was unreserved:

"The present French Government felt still more strongly that, if Great Britain were attacked by Germany, France would be bound to go to her assistance." (38)

In the light of previous qualms as to the state of the French morale, this assurance together with the improved tenor of Franco-German relations, was a matter of great comfort to the British government. Details of adviseable increments in all regions of both French and British defence were fully discussed. The need for unity of action in this respect was well appreciated and early staff conversations between the two countries were approved.

Throughout this extensive and detailed discussion on defence the salient feature was the frankness with which the possibility of German aggression against the democracies is accepted. Six months previously rearmament in Britain had been the cry of alarmists and the war-monger clique; now it had been firmly accepted, as a result of the September crisis and subsequent events as official government policy. Chamberlain's policy of appeasement was now, at one and the same time, supported and denied by rearmament. Halifax had publicly explained this apparent contradiction in a speech at Edinburgh towards the end of October:

"But if this country is to play its full part with others in securing peace, it must be able to speak with equal weight. One-sided armament and one-sided disarmament are both impossible and give no help to peace. And therefore we must take all measures - already taken months ago by continental countries - that are essential to our strength and safety." (39)

Immediately after Munich much effort had been put, successfully, into improving Britain's civil defences. (40) Since then the balance of effort had gone into putting military defences in order, the emphasis being on anti-

aircraft defences. The British government 'now impressed by the necessity for perfecting their air defence' - the aim being to increase output and capacity - were

"devoting themselves first to the equipment of anti-aircraft defence, including guns, and to the production of bombing planes, (which would destroy aerodromes and factories), and fighting planes (to encounter enemy bombing squadrons)." (41)

In mid-November it was announced in the Commons that the air estimates for the following year would be in the region of £200 millions (an increase of £80 millions on the current^d year) and that by March it was expected to complete the programme for the product of 1750 first line aircraft. (42)

Particular attention was being paid to anti-aircraft gun factories. New factories were being built and old factories being extended and re-equipped. Chamberlain gave this information to Deladier together with the fact that output in the British aircraft industry was increasing. 350 machines had been produced in the last month and the figure was rising steadily.

If the statement made by the minister for the co-ordination of defence (Sir Thomas Inskip) on October 26

was somewhat exaggerated when he referred to Britain being in possession of 'a flood of the armaments and equipment which we need to complete our defences,'⁽⁴³⁾ the country was certainly in a much healthier position to resist attack than she had been at the time of Munich.

In fact there was more now behind the British rearmament programme than simple defence, as was revealed in the conversations with France.

The above reasoning by Halifax was essential to public relations so that Hitler might have as little excuse as possible for accusing Britain of lack of confidence. But while Britain genuinely hoped that a strong defence position might add weight to her arguments for peace, a weather eye was being realistically kept open to the possibility of war and the need to prepare accordingly:

"though His Majesty's Government had not said so, they were in fact increasing their bombing force in the same measure as their fighting force. Indeed, it was possible that they might presently increase the emphasis on the bombing side of their programme." (44)

A change of spirit was gradually taking place; rearmament as a safeguard for peace was being slowly converted into rearmament in preparation for war.

The dual nature of British foreign policy at this time was epitomised by these conversations. There were frequent references to and discussions about the way in which international relations could be improved, but on the other hand, the subject of mutual defence was predominant. There was a general alignment of policies with reference to central Europe and the Near and Far East, but the most definite achievement was a decision for some joint planning for air defence. The intention of Britain to encourage France in regaining lost confidence was achieved. There could now be no doubt in French minds that Britain's policy of friendship towards the dictators did not mean a lessening of faith in her allies. On the contrary Chamberlain had manifested considerable interest in strengthening Anglo-French ties.

On the other hand these conversations had contained no mention of any formulation of a joint policy towards the dictators. One of the outstanding features of the talks was, with the exception of the deliberations on defence, their vagueness. While generally strengthening Anglo-French collaboration they had done little in defining any specific programmes. Chamberlain, it

seems, had not yet completely abandoned the wariness, even contempt, with which he regarded the French. His opinion, as expressed in January 1938, still largely held:

"France's weakness is a public danger just when she ought to be a source of strength and confidence, and as a friend she has two faults which destroy half her value. She never can keep a secret for more than half an hour, nor a government for more than nine months!" (45)

Only a matter of a couple of weeks before his meeting in Paris he had written of the forthcoming talks with his customary patronage:

"I felt it to be the right thing for many reasons, to give French people an opportunity of pouring out their pent-up feelings of gratitude and affection, to strengthen Deladier and encourage him to do something at last to put his country's defences in order, and to pull his people into greater unity." (46)

Perhaps one of his main interests in the French talks was that it would 'make it possible for me to go to Rome, in January'. Chamberlain was still clinging tightly to his appeasement policy and Rome was an essential link in the chain to Germany. Any too definite a policy pursued in direct combination with France might cause suspicion in Rome and Berlin and prejudice his plans. The official communique issued after the conversations stated that:

"there has emerged once again complete identity of ideas on the general orientation of the policy of the two countries inspired by the same care for the preservation and consolidation of peace." (47)

If events since Munich had strongly recommended this 'general orientation' between France and Britain Chamberlain did not want to risk his personal policy being encumbered by France. For the time being he would press on by himself.

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22. ibid.
23. ibid.
24. ibid, no. 369.
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26. Chamberlain, The Struggle for Peace, p.375.
27. BD, v.III, no. 285.
28. ibid, no. 295.
29. ibid, no. 291.
30. ibid, no. 300.
31. This was to be the first time Halifax accompanied Chamberlain on one of his diplomatic missions abroad.
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33. ibid, no. 324.
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Chapter five

Appeasement Checked

If October had brought frustration to the appeasers' attempts to promote a lasting rapprochement with the Nazis, November was to bring an explicit German antagonism towards Britain which resulted in a marked lull in the efforts at direct appeasement. In October, before events had gone this far, the lack of reciprocity on the part of Germany had already deterred Chamberlain from his policy towards Hitler, and had made him hope for greater success in the direction of Rome. One of the chief purposes of the French conversations was, to Chamberlain's mind, to pave the way to Rome by stabilising Anglo-French policy towards Italy.⁽¹⁾ But the fact that Chamberlain was by the beginning of November putting such emphasis on the Italian connection does not explain why direct British overtures towards Germany were, for the time being, being relaxed. For, on the face of it, Chamberlain could certainly have approached Hitler with definite proposals for four-power co-operation, despite the discouraging Nazi attitude. One might even say that such an effort was desirable before the atmosphere deteriorated further.

The reasons why Chamberlain temporarily relaxed the German angle of appeasement are still not clearly discernible, but a few definite influences can be substantiated. Relations with Germany were of a very delicate nature and Chamberlain was loath to take any precipitate action which might drive Germany out of reach. Keen on the principle of personal diplomacy he would rather await the improvement in the international atmosphere that he expected would follow his forthcoming talks in Rome, than possibly prejudice his whole policy by some quickly conceived approach to Germany.⁽²⁾ This, of course, is characteristic of his stubbornness, and vision of himself as the supreme peacemaker.⁽³⁾ Also, on the technical level, he could hardly have initiated any direct dealings with Germany before his conversations with France at the end of November, for the topic of relations with Germany was to be an important item on the agenda.

There were two other main reasons. First the fact of German's reaction to date to Chamberlain's active peace policy. This consisted of rude speeches by Hitler, an aggressive anti-British press campaign,

and the initiation of severe anti-Semitic activity. These were formidable obstacles in the way of realising the spirit of the Anglo-German Declaration, and thwarted Chamberlain's proposals for the development of mutual relations. In view of this sort of behaviour on the part of Germany Chamberlain would need to exercise a certain amount of reserve in order not to give his political opponents too easy a chance to attack him. ⁽⁴⁾ There were plenty of signs that though the country's heart was generally as set on peace as he himself was there was a 'constant..body of opinion, and a vocal one, which saw appeasement as altogether invalid and dangerous', as the means whereby it should be sought. ⁽⁵⁾ A new session of Parliament opened early in November when the opposition severely criticised the government's handling of foreign affairs since Munich. There was plenty of evidence of disgust at what was termed the 'spirit of giving in to armed force and its demands' and of 'putting aside all...standards of international justice and morality'. ⁽⁶⁾ The press too gave little encouragement to Chamberlain. Comments on the realisation of the Anglo-Italian Agreement were mocked by their general lack of enthusiasm, as were

those early in December on a further diplomatic move which inspired the appeasers' hopes, the signing of the Franco-German Declaration.⁽⁷⁾ The truculent mood of the Commons continued into December so that Chamberlain even began to have doubts as to whether he would be able to maintain his policy in this 'uneasy and disgruntled House'⁽⁸⁾ without resorting to a general election. But even if he had seriously considered taking such action the results of several post-Munich by-elections suggested that a campaign fought from the stand of appeasement might bring anything but a vote of confidence from the British public. Between Munich and mid-December one Labour and six Conservative seats were contested. While Labour held theirs (at Doncaster), with an increased majority, the Conservatives held four with decreased majorities and lost the other two, one of which, fought primarily over foreign policy saw an increase of 12,000 in the Labour votes.⁽⁹⁾

Lack of any real success with Germany together with the adverse effect this had on opinion in Britain was then a practical reason for delay in the German angle of appeasement, but even this does not fully explain the postponement of any positive action for an indefinite time. This brings in the other main

reason which was the intensification of the Jewish persecution early in November.

Nazi action against the Sudeten Jews was viciously stepped up in the second week of that month and was extended to cover German Jews in general. The murder of Ernst von Rath, third secretary at the German embassy in Paris, by an unbalanced Polish Jew called Herschell Grynspan was used as the excuse for the violent persecutions that now began. On November 9 two days after the incident, Halifax received information from Dr. Weizmann, president of the World Zionist organisation, to the effect that the situation of the German Jews had 'changed most dangerously during the last twenty-four hours'.⁽¹⁰⁾ Pogroms were anticipated and some tactful intervention by Britain was requested. Halifax, however, was very dubious of the suggestion that a prominent non-Jewish Englishman should make tracks for Berlin to try and save the situation.⁽¹¹⁾ Ogilvie-Forbes reiterated Halifax's doubts believing that for Britain to involve herself publicly in a matter which Germany considered to be purely internal would be 'to poke our fingers in a wasp's nest!', especially in view of Hitler's prevailing 'aggressive

and anti-British mood'. (12) The argument for non-intervention by Britain was strong, for on the previous day the German press had attempted to make capital out of the murder of von Rath on the international scene by suggesting to its readers that British politicians were implicated.

"The Jewish murder-urchin Grynspan, also assumed the post of world improver and avenger. Thereby he took the same line as is pursued by Messrs. Churchill, Eden, Duff Cooper and their associates, indefatigably and in the most varied fashion, in association with the international of Jews and Freemasons." (13)

Also, one German paper had published pictures of the above British politicians under the heading 'The Jewish murderer and his inciters.'

In officially objecting to these 'scurrilous attacks' the foreign office instructed Ogilvie-Forbes rather pathetically, to inform Ribbentrop or Weizsäcker that such suggestions were not 'in harmony ...with the intention of the Declaration which the Prime Minister and Chancellor signed in Munich.' (14)

Both Ribbentrop and Weizsäcker were 'indefinitely absent' from Berlin and the only official statement that Ogilvie-Forbes could get was a copy of a denial

by Goebbels, the Minister for Propaganda, of any knowledge of the matter. ⁽¹⁵⁾ This denial was obtained second-hand and had been printed in the Sunday Times the day before!

Goring and several senior ministers decided the measures to be put into force against the Jews of Germany on the 13th. ⁽¹⁶⁾ They amounted to economic, political and social strangulation and included a general fine of one milliard marks as punishment for the Paris murder. The barbarity of these decisions was conveyed to London in impassioned terms by Ogilvie-Forbes. He could:

"find no words strong enough in condemnation of the disgusting treatment of so many innocent people and the civilised world is faced with appalling sight of 500,000 people about to rot away in starvation." ⁽¹⁷⁾

Three days later it was learned that the expulsion of Jews from the Sudetenland had been resumed and Halifax was recognising the uselessness of a general protest to the German government. ⁽¹⁸⁾ On the other hand he was 'anxious to do everything....where good grounds for intervention exist'. ⁽¹⁹⁾ It is difficult to see how he imagined such grounds might present

themselves. Goebbels had already announced that any attack on the German government by international Jewry or their alleged associates would be visited on the Jews in Germany. (20) Britain had already been associated with the murderers of von Rath, so any intervention by her would logically only result in a worsening of the tragic position the Jews already faced.

This tense situation was a direct burden to Anglo-German diplomacy, but British policy to Germany faced a further embarrassment. This concerned the reaction of British public opinion specifically to the Jewish pogroms and the consequent disillusionment in the German leaders:

"...nothing contributed more effectively to the general realisation of the character of the men with whom we had to deal than the orgy of terrorism and economic destruction with which in November Hitler visited the hapless Jews of Germany." (21)

The anti-German feeling was greatly extended. So deep was the indignation of British people at the atrocities being committed in the name of the Reich that a protest meeting was held in the Albert Hall. Nor was this isolated reaction for the Nazis had virtually turned the whole of world opinion against themselves.

In view of this feeling in Britain Chamberlain could hardly have proposed any definite pleas for the appeasement of Germany at this stage, for such a policy would have run directly against the grain of public opinion. Von Dirksen saw the situation clearly enough:

"As long as this mood prevails, it will be impossible for Chamberlain to consider carrying out his plan of attempting a settlement with Germany on a broad basis." (22)

On November 27 the Observer tried to rationalise that 'logically the German maltreatment of the Jews has no bearing upon the policy of appeasement' but the whole issue had, in fact, resulted in a very grave set-back in Anglo-German relations. Within the next few days after the initiation of persecutions the foreign office was to receive more tangible proof of the decay that had set in.

Information was released on November 18 of a private interview which Hitler had given to several select German journalists a few days previously and in which he had revealed his opinion of Britain Ogilvie-Forbes reported that Hitler:

"no longer laid any value on friendship with Great Britain...He had come to the conclusion that friendship with Britain was not a practical proposition as Prime Minister had replied to Munich declaration with rearmament...Great Britain was therefore no longer to be treated with consideration by German press." (23)

As far as German press policy was concerned this was nothing new for Britain had been under severe attack for several weeks, but it was unwelcome confirmation of the Fuhrer's attitude to Britain. In support of this attitude Ogilvie-Forbes also reported in the same communication the rumour that Hitler was intending to claim his full rights under the Anglo-German Naval Agreement of 1935⁽²⁴⁾ for a considerable increase in his tonnage of submarines. This was a rumour which, when translated to reality in the middle of December, was to be greatly regretted by the British government owing largely to the additional tension it placed on the position of appeasement vis a vis public opinion. (25)

Even more indicative of Hitler's frame of mind at this time was the news, received by Halifax the day before, of a fresh German demand on the Czechoslovaks. (26) This demand, amounting virtually to an ultimatum, was for yet further extensions to the German inroad on Czechoslovakia. How contrary to Munich was this

latest German demand can be seen from the fact that the area now coveted by the Reich contained little more than 10% German population. Had the Czechoslovak government not been subjected to such pressure by Germany that 'there was no alternative but to sign' (27) away the territory concerned, Britain would have been put in a rather tricky position. For, if the foreign office had objected to the proposed capture, Germany would have regarded such action as hampering the chances of Anglo-German rapprochement. On the other hand, for Britain to have remained silent would have been to condone an action directly contrary to the terms of the Munich Agreement. As it was the matter was quickly settled between Germany and Czechoslovakia and all that remained to be done was for the International Commission to sanction the settlement. (28) It allotted Germany an area containing 6,000 Germans and 30,000 Czechoslovaks.

It is reasonable to assert that with the disturbing circumstances which had arisen by mid-November the chances of a direct appeasement of Germany had almost vanished. Certainly, the unfriendliness, even veiled hostility of Germany, had created an atmosphere between

the two countries which necessarily obviated action in the appeasers' policy towards the Reich. Von Dirksen, in a survey of his London ambassadorship, referred to the past few weeks in Anglo-German relations as a time when 'all voices of reason and all promptings toward mutual clarification were stilled'. (29) Appeasement had been checked.

It should be borne in mind that it had taken no more than seven weeks after Munich for the German attitude in Europe to have deteriorated so drastically. This fact should surely have put grave doubts in Chamberlain's mind as to Hitler's sincerity at Munich. But he still credited the Fuhrer with greater good-will to Britain than he deserved, and there was to be no change in the conception of his policy which yet envisaged a Germany, pacified by British diplomacy, and co-operating to remove all sources of friction from Europe. Perhaps Chamberlain argued with himself that Hitler was a man of moods and that the special press interview had caught him in a rather intolerant frame of mind; that the suggestion about increasing his submarine tonnage was, after all, only rumour. Such generous thoughts, however, could find no ambiguity in the German demand on Czechoslovakia, and the truth is

that Chamberlain was, at this time, more influenced by the general situation in Europe than by specific relations with Germany. He eagerly awaited the Anglo-French conversations which would assist his way to Rome, with which capital relations had recently improved by the ratification of the Anglo-Italian Agreement. At this time, too, a limited Declaration between France and Germany seemed assured, and this seemed a definite step towards general European pacification. In fact as has already been seen, ⁽³⁰⁾ Chamberlain could view with certain satisfaction a Europe which, on paper, had progressed three quarters of the way to his idea of four power cooperation. He was, nevertheless, to become more depressed as signs from Germany worsened during dismal December.

By the beginning of that month Britain was recognising the advanced German diplomatic position in Europe and the fact that 'all questions arising out of the Munich Agreement have been and will be decided at German Nazi dictation...'⁽³¹⁾

This was a sad reflection on the failure of the long-term intentions of Munich, and also on the failure of British attempts to realise these intentions.

"It is pathetic to see the trouble taken by members of the Foreign Office in their correspondence with interested parties on questions of frontiers, economics, and options, all in vain." (32)

Nevertheless Britain refused to abandon its position with reference to the questions of Munich still to be settled, and would not give way to the German demands for the dissolution of the International Commission. (33)

The next fortnight brought greatly increased tension to Anglo-German relations. The primary cause of this was contained in a note left with Cadogan by von Dirksen on December 12. The note officially informed the British government that Germany intended to increase its submarine tonnage and armament of cruisers under construction. (34) The briefly expressed reason which the German government gave for such action was that developments in the international scene over the past few months had necessitated their 'paying increased attention to the protection of their maritime communications in the event of warlike complications.' (35)

This decision was received very gravely by Britain. It was not only a further indication of Germany's refusal to fulfill the spirit of the Anglo-German declaration but also (as Halifax instructed Ogilvie-

Forbes to explain to the German government) it constituted a further cause for the alienation of British public opinion from Germany. ⁽³⁶⁾ The active response by the British government was to request the holding of friendly discussions on the decision before the German right should be exercised, as provided for by the 1935 Naval Agreement.

It is interesting to note that this German demarche came at a time when Britain was proposing to the Reich Government an additional protocol to the London Naval treaty of 1936 and to the bilateral naval agreement concluded by the British Government. ⁽³⁷⁾ According to this proposal, the proviso for the mutual exchange of information on naval construction would be extended to apply to all sea powers bound to Great Britain by treaty, whereas at the present only Britain, the United States, France and Italy exchanged reciprocal information. Germany, the Soviet Union and Poland only exchanged bilateral information with Britain, on the basis of their individual agreements with her. The British proposal therefore meant a collective agreement between all the above mentioned sea powers. Despite the fact that such suggestions from Britain were doomed by Germany's general objection to collective

agreements and to any fresh treaty relations with the Soviet Union in particular, the newly revealed German desire for exercising full rights under specific Anglo-German naval treaties was little encouragement to British aspirations! And, moreover, this grave matter was to occupy British attention in naval topics till the end of the month. On December 20th Halifax learned that the German Government had agreed to discuss their naval decision with Britain and the date for the discussions was soon fixed as December (38) 30.

The term 'in the event of warlike complications', contained in von Dirksen's letter to Halifax had an ominous ring about it when viewed in the light of a communication received from Ogilvie-Forbes on the 8th. In this, the British Ambassador sent word that it was a matter of genuine conviction among prominent circles in Germany, that Hitler was ready for the expansion of his country beyond its rightful boundaries.

"It is the general conviction in Germany today that Herr Hitler is now about to embark on the third stage of his programme, namely, expansion beyond the boundaries of the territories inhabited by Germans.... One thing is certain: Nazi aims are on a grandiose scale, and there is no limit to their ultimate ambitions." (39)

Little sign of the initial direction such a programme would take could be suggested, for this was a matter of much speculation in Germany. But the ambassador reported the views of one school of thought which maintained that for Hitler to progress unhindered in the east he would need to ensure that he would not be attacked on his western flank. Were this the case his first task would be 'to liquidate France and England, before British rearmament is ready.' (40)

While such thoughts were far from reality they provided a disturbing undercurrent to relations with the Nazis. That such undercurrents were, moreover, far from being disregarded by the British government can be seen from the reaction to further unconfirmed rumour. This concerned Sir Ivone Kirkpatrick who until December 15 was head of chancery at the British embassy in Berlin. A few days before his return to England Kirkpatrick was informed by 'a retired Secretary of State', in somewhat clandestine circumstances, that Hitler had 'ordered preparations to be made for an air attack on London in peace-time'. (41) The informant claimed his news as being first-hand from the German

war office and air ministry and the reaction of the British cabinet was to bring the aircraft regiment from Lichfield and park the guns in Wellington barracks where they could be seen from the German embassy.

Kirkpatrick himself considered the whole episode to be 'rather lunatic' and it does seem to demote Anglo-German relations to the plane of comic opera, but it is significant as a measure of the increasing sensitivity with which Britain was regarding Nazi Germany. It has been noted above that by the end of November serious efforts were being made to prepare against the possibility of a German invasion of Britain. (42) By the middle of December the appeasers were accepting the probability of Hitler making some disturbing move in the near future. Halifax admitted as much to the French ambassador on the 16th:

"I said that we had a good deal of information in the same sense and that it all appeared to point to the conclusion that Herr Hitler would certainly not be likely to let many weeks or months pass without making some disturbing move....I did not... exclude the possibility of his taking some action against this country or France...." (43)

Talks, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, between Halifax and von Dirksen on the evening of the 14th reveal the cleft stick nature of the position Britain had been put in by the events of the past few weeks. Halifax recorded his disappointment in the deterioration of the situation since Munich and asked the German for any observations which might give 'more ground for hope'. (44) Von Dirksen refused to discuss the 'unfortunate' past and turned attention towards the one element in Anglo-German relations which offered any consolation to the British - the economic. He was, it should be stressed, genuinely enthusiastic about the whole economic co-operation might play in a wider improvement in relations, for he believed Germany could get what she wanted by economic means:

"...in the middle of December I began to lay increasing stress in my talks with influential Englishmen on the idea that the way to relieve the tension must be sought in the economic field; there were plenty of causes of political friction, but economic interests were common and they were capable of being developed...." (45)

If, up to a point, here was direction for some kind of mutual collaboration being given by Germany, the

appeasers in Britain had to temper their reaction to the climate of public opinion. With the initiation of the Jewish pogroms early in November the British attitude to economic appeasement had necessarily hardened for the British public would not have tolerated any outstretched-arms dealings with the Nazis at the time. Leith-Ross had made the British position clear to Rüter, head of the German economic mission, on November 10:

"...official conferences on economic pacification could not stand on their own but must be included in the larger framework of a general political pacification...." (46)

The idea of economic appeasement had been present in pre-Munich days as ultimately an important move, and it was now being accepted by the appeasers as the vital link with Germany which could shape the future. It was fortunate that discussions of a friendly nature with the Reich on economic questions could be promoted without too much publicity. Thus, in mid-December, Dr. Schacht, President of the Reichsbank, was in England for three days as the guest of the Governor of the Bank of England. He had conversations with Leith-Ross, Stanley (President of

the Board of Trade), Chamberlain and several leading city financiers. Von Dirksen believed that Schacht:

"met the greatest readiness on the part of those attending the discussion for commercial negotiations on the broadest basis with Germany." (47)

and considered that these unofficial discussions had resulted in 'an improvement in Anglo-German relations on an economic basis'. From the British point of view one thing was quite plain: Germany was not going to allow economic discussions to permeate the political world. An invitation to Schacht for talks with Halifax was firmly declined. Schacht 'was anxious to avoid all appearance of leaving the sphere of purely economic talks' (48) and so the basic British aims were frustrated. But the visit was not entirely fruitless from the British angle. It was something to have conducted amicable conversations on economic subjects deemed suitable for negotiation. Here perhaps was the essential link with the Germans that could be forged into shape in the future. Stanley hinted that he would be prepared to visit Berlin later on for a further 'exchange of views'. (49)

If some measure of Anglo-German co-operation had

thus been achieved on a specific level behind the scenes, outward signs pointed to a hardening of the British government's attitude. In several speeches Chamberlain had recently been showing that when required he could play the strong man vis a vis Germany. Stern lines had been taken over the Menel question and at a luncheon at the House of Commons in honour of Schacht Chamberlain issued a warning note to Germany as to the financial resources of Great Britain in the event of war with Germany. (50) In addition a firmer attitude to defence was becoming increasingly apparent, (51) and a pronouncement by Chamberlain on December 13 assured the doubters of Britain's solidarity with France. (52) On the following day Bonnet assured Great Britain of France's military support in the event of an unprovoked aggression against her, a statement which Chamberlain was gratified to repeat to the House five days later. (53)

It seems that such sterner tones on the part of Chamberlain were more by way of a sop to the constant stream of criticism he was facing (54) than serving as any real evidence of a weakening in his appeasement policy. For if public opinion hampered him in taking any direct action towards the political appeasement of

Hitler, he was still concerned to make sure that Hitler was not allowed to forget that British foreign policy aimed at genuine friendship with Germany. On December 19 (during a severe censure debate on the government's policy in Europe) he addressed an eloquent appeal to the German nation. Regretting that the treatment of the Germans in the post-war period had been neither generous nor wise he continued:

"With the passage of time has come to us a recognition of their great qualities, and a strong desire to see them co-operating for the restoration of European civilisation. There is no spirit of vindictiveness here. There is no desire to hamper their development or cramp their tremendous vitality as a nation." (55)

Here was the open hand of friendship waiting to be shaken. But the lack of response to appeasement was beginning to depress Chamberlain. He rather pathetically complained:

"It takes two to make an agreement....I am still waiting for a sign from those who speak for the German people....that they are prepared to make their contribution to the peace that would help them as much as it would help us....It would be a tragic blunder to mistake our love of peace and our faculty for compromise, for weakness." (56)

Even though the path of appeasement had so far led little way to success, Chamberlain saw no reason to admit even the slightest fallacy in appeasement. What he wanted was time, and besides, the manifest desires of the British people urged him to continue.

"If that policy, having had a full chance of success, were nevertheless to fail, I myself would be the first to agree that something else must be put in its place. But I have been getting a great number of letters which convince me that the country does not want the policy to fail and, whatever views may be expressed in this House, I am satisfied that the general public desire is to continue the efforts we have made." (57)

Such sentiments demonstrate the confusion appeasement was in at the end of December, the mixture of hope, faith, charity - and depression. And a problem which was to increase the latter was that of the worsening signs about Czechoslovakia and the Munich guarantee with reference to that state. The idea of this international guarantee already seemed to have faded away. Since Munich Germany had frequently defied the International Commission and had squeezed further land from Czechoslovakia without let or hindrance. Poland and Hungary had also presented

claims to Czechoslovakian territory and these had been settled, in the case of Hungary, by an 'award' made by Ribbentrop and Ciano at Vienna on November 2. Not long after that came the news of German plans for the construction of an Autobahn by Germany across the country, an intention which Newton (the British Minister in Prague) considered 'a further nail in the coffin of the independence which Czechoslovakia lost at Munich' (58) and a matter altering the basis on which the guarantee was founded.

Aware that the situation had got out of control the British during the November conversations with France, had watered down the guarantee arguing that it would be operative only if three of the four Munich powers were in agreement. (59) Subsequently the British minister in Prague was instructed to approach the Czechoslovak government with this idea, (60) but he found a reluctance to discuss the matter. (61) On December 21 Halifax instructed Phipps to contact the French government again on the subject of the guarantee in the hope that the position might be quickly regularised. (62) The French were slow to respond and the whole affair received great embarrassment from the news Ogilvie-Forbes relayed on the 22nd. to the effect that the

impression he had gained of German-Czechoslovak relations was that the German government was now regarding Czechoslovakia as their own preserve. (63) The whole affair was thus put even deeper into the boiling pot and the lack of success at this stage in achieving a definite international attitude to the guarantee was later to have serious results when Germany resents any mention of the guarantee. (64)

At the end of December, just prior to the talks between Britain and Germany on the latter's proposed naval build-up, the bogey of the German press attitude to Britain again reared its ugly head. In this instance the Reich had chosen to attack British policy in Palestine reporting supposed atrocities by British troops on Arabs. (65) The German Government refused to be held responsible for the publication of such reports, so Ogilvie-Forbes determined to bring the whole matter of press relations up with the Head of the German Press Department (66) owing to its destructive influence on the atmosphere between the two countries. The interview, three days before the Berlin talks was an unproductive as might have been

expected. Aschmann repeated that the Reich could not be held responsible for the insertion of items of foreign news which it 'did not control'. (67)

The final dealings of Britain with Germany in 1938 were no more successful. From the outset of the discussions on the German naval increases it was plain that there was no possibility of Germany reconsidering her decision. (68) Thus much of the business centered around the way in which the decision should be publicised. This matter was of great concern to the British representatives who were very sensitive of the effect the news would have upon British public opinion. (69) Attempting to dissuade the Germans from their chosen course of action Admiral Cunningham pointed out that there could be no result other than having 'an adverse effect on Anglo-German relations' and that:

"His Majesty's Government....greatly feared that an unfavourable impression would be created, and not only in England, when the intention to do so became publicly known as it inevitably must." (70)

The least that the British could hope for was that the German Government might agree to achieve an increase in submarine tonnage by annual stages. By doing thus

'the effect on public opinion in all countries would be less', but the German delegation would not agree to such a course, but stated that they would communicate their final views on the subject at a later date. The British delegation returned to London empty-handed, an unprofitable finale to a depressing December.

Thus the final year of peace before the outbreak of war went out with Germany in antagonistic mood towards Britain, and dramatically enduring the 'cruiser holiday'. Two days before New Year's Eve, Halifax had received an ominous sounding memorandum on the military possibilities of Germany in 1939. Its author, Colonel Mason-Macfarlane issued serious warning to the appeasers:

"There are many logical arguments against the probability of Herr Hitler provoking hostilities against England at an early date. But however improbable it may seem, there is a sufficiency of valid argument and of fact to warrant our taking such a possibility very seriously. It is a possibility which we cannot under any circumstances afford to exclude."(71)

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Chapter six

France Mated.

The sorry state of relations between Britain and Germany during the winter of 1938 tended to overshadow Britain's dealings with the other dictator state. It has already been seen that Chamberlain's desires for Anglo-Italian conversations in Rome in early January had been tentatively accepted by Mussolini upon the ratification of the 1938 Agreement between the two countries on November 16. The idea had been mutually agreed in principle but was still a matter of diplomatic secrecy. An immediate problem presented itself. In a Europe consisting of fragile relationships, matters of initiative in diplomacy could be a real source of difficulty. The problem was this: in the official public announcement of the intended conversations, which country should appear to have taken the initiative? On November 16 the Earl of Perth wrote to Halifax that he hoped 'this question of initiative will not cause any trouble' for he recognised that it might 'be difficult for the Italian Government to make the first formal move.'⁽¹⁾

The British Government, however, was not to capitulate its position in this matter, despite Chamberlain's anxiety to safeguard the forthcoming

talks. After all Britain's position vis a vis Italy had been greatly strengthened with the implimentation of the April Agreement. Mussolini himself had written to Chamberlain a letter which gave proof of this:

"At the moment of the entry into force of the Agreements of April 16, which place on a firm and desirable basis the relations of friendship and collaboration between our two countries I desire to renew to you the expression of my satisfaction and that of the Fascist Government, and to send you personally the assurance of my friendly and cordial sympathy." (2)

Halifax explained Britain's position with reference to this question of initiative in a letter to Perth on November 24:

"...the Italians would be the hosts and we the guests, and it would therefore be more natural for them to issue the invitation. We here, too, should have our difficulties about making the first move, and we should much prefer that the Italian Government should simply issue an invitation...." (3)

In the event of Italy refusing to take this course of action, Britain was prepared to compromise, and Halifax had a second suggestion which visualised an announcement to the effect that at Munich Mussolini had informed Chamberlain that he would look forward to seeing him at Rome and that the Prime Minister had

now indicated that a certain date would be suitable. (4)

As it was, this problem was short-lived. On November 26 there appeared in the American press a report that Chamberlain was intending to visit Rome in January 1939. (5) The report was repeated in the British press on November 28. This necessarily obviated the need for initiative from either Italy or Britain, and in the end it was decided that both governments should simply publish an announcement in the press on December 4 giving the dates of the proposed visit. (6) By this time emphasis was being put on the character that the visit should assume. The British view was that it should be:

"...less an Anglo-Italian conference than a visit of courtesy and goodwill with the object of establishing personal contacts." (7)

As such there would be no need for a fixed agenda, something which might arouse suspicion in the Italian mind as to the intention of the visit. Moreover, the absence of a fixed agenda would be convenient to Chamberlain in the pursuit of his personal diplomacy in that he would be able to follow such lines of approach to the Italians as would seem to him to be appropriate at the time.

The press leakage over the Rome visit was a slight embarrassment to Britain where France was concerned. The British delegation had made no mention of the intended visit at the Anglo-French conversations just held at the Quai d'Orsay. Halifax therefore hurriedly telephoned Phipps at Paris instructing him to contact the French government immediately to the effect that the idea of Chamberlain's going to Rome had been under discussion with the Italians but that the fact was not mentioned at the recent talks because no final decision on the matter had been reached. ⁽⁸⁾ It was possible that the French government might have certain qualms about this British proposal in view of the harsh treatment France was receiving at the hands of the Italian press but, on the other hand, it could always be asserted that any improvement in Anglo-Italian relations entertained the prospect of promoting a detente between Rome and Paris, a hope already held in France. ⁽⁹⁾ The absence of any evidence in the published documents of any serious objection from France to the proposed visit suggests that Paris held to the latter view.

The matter of Franco-Italian relations was soon to assume much greater proportions in the sphere of European diplomacy and was to have serious repercussions on Britain's policy towards Italy. In the middle of November France and Italy had seemed to move slightly in the direction of friendship. France had re-appointed an ambassador to Rome (thereby recognising Italy's empire) and Italy had arranged for the return of ten thousand volunteers from Spain - a favourable circumstance in view of the intimate relations between Paris and London. It was unfortunate that the new French ambassador, Francois-Poncet, arrived in Rome on the very day that von Rath was murdered in Paris, and it was also a bad omen. Mussolini gave his approval to the anti-semitic policy being activated by Hitler and Francois-Poncet's first interview with Ciano was distinguished only by the lack of headway made. (10) Despite France's willingness to respect the axis and to promote a rapprochement in the most useful ways Italy could merely point to Spain and complain that no progress was possible until that boiling pot had cooled down. It was the same story when Francois-Poncet saw Mussolini and Ciano on the 29th.

"...the Ambassador found...that it was not likely that Italy would be ready to discuss any other questions until a solution of the Spanish problem had been found." (11)

The truth, as has already been noted, (12) was that Italy was awaiting the right moment to bring into the open a series of claims against French territorial possessions. Well might Mussolini tell Francois-Poncet that 'events must be awaited'. (13)

The bomb burst the very next day. It was detonated by Ciano in a speech he delivered that afternoon in the National Assembly. Speaking of Italy's desires to consolidate, he said:

"This consolidation is the highest goal of our policy, and we will move towards it with tenacity and realism, not unaccompanied by that circumspection which is indispensable when one aims at safeguarding with inflexible firmness the interests and natural aspirations of the Italian people." (14)

This was immediately greeted with shouts of 'Tunis', 'Djibuti', 'Corsica' - a suspicious demonstration in a state subject to totalitarian discipline - and the campaign against France had been launched. Throughout December the atmosphere between Rome and Paris worsened, and was the one factor which nearly jeopardised the Rome visit.

Presumably in the hope that this incident during Ciano's speech would not have any serious repercussions, Perth made light of it in his report to Halifax claiming that the shouts 'were not distinguishable from the Diplomatic Gallery'.⁽¹⁵⁾ This was plainly not the case,⁽¹⁶⁾ and the press was full of the story on the following day maintaining that the demonstration had been deliberately planned. Halifax demanded further observations on the matter from Perth⁽¹⁷⁾ who was still able to diminish its importance, for fear of its effects on Anglo-Italian relations. He claimed that the intention of the demonstration was to strengthen Italy's bargaining position vis a vis France and that it had been prolonged because most of the deputies thought Ciano had finished his speech.⁽¹⁸⁾ For the first couple of days France, in fact, was not too upset about the demonstration. Phipps reported that the French minister for foreign affairs did 'not take too tragically the unfortunate demonstration in the Italian Chamber'.⁽¹⁹⁾

Greater anxiety was shown, however, after Francois-Poncet had conferred with Ciano on the evening of the 2nd. Ciano states that during the interview 'Poncet was anxious to give the conversation a

cordial note and to exclude from his demarche anything in the nature of a protest'.⁽²⁰⁾ By the time he left and Ciano had made it clear how things stood, Poncet 'was as white as a sheet'⁽²¹⁾ for he had virtually been told that Italy was renouncing the Mussolini-Laval agreement of 1935 which had defined the interests of the two countries in Africa. On the same evening, the French ambassador in London called at the British foreign office with the information that France considered that 'such a demonstration in the presence of a French Ambassador aimed against the integrity of France was a serious incident' and that 'Count Ciano's failure to indicate disapproval or to disavow it made it all the more serious'.⁽²²⁾

In view of this French attitude Britain could not pass by on the other side. On the following day instructions were sent to Perth to communicate to Ciano, with reference to the demonstration:

"the fear of His Majesty's Government that events of this kind, if the Italian Government take no step to correct the impression created by them, are bound to have a most detrimental effect on the prospect of collaboration between the four Munich powers."⁽²³⁾

This change in the British attitude is particularly marked by the different stands adopted by Perth in

conversation with Ciano on two occasions on the 3rd. In the morning interview (before the above orders from the foreign office had been received) Perth 'refrained from commenting' on a statement made by the Italian foreign minister to the effect that the demonstration had not been organised. (24) In the evening, however, when Perth delivered the British government's official view the demonstration had now become a factor in Anglo-Italian relations. (25)

The fact that the Italian government took no responsibility whatever for the demonstration did nothing to alleviate the situation for in a totalitarian state such manifestations of public opinion could easily be squashed if they ran contrary to government opinion. The whole issue might have blown over had it not been followed by a campaign in the Fascist press which went far to confirm the misgivings aroused by the incident. There was little chance of success for Perth's continued policy of playing down the demonstration:

"I feel the French are inclined to over-dramatise the whole affair and that it would be much wiser on their part and on ours now to let it sleep." (26)

The Italians had no intention of letting the matter

drop for they were 'keeping the controversy alive
(27)
deliberately'. This inevitably heightened France's
fears which in turn led to a stiffening of the British
attitude.

The extent of French reaction was revealed to
Perth by Francois-Poncet on December 4. The French
ambassador's thesis contained two main points.
Firstly that on November 30 the Italian government
had 'finally unmasked their true intentions' and
secondly, that in so doing they had hoped to create
friction in the Anglo-French entente:

"He thought that the Italians hoped that
Great Britain might attach more impor-
tance to Anglo-Italian friendship than
to her entente with France, and that
Tunis would be used as a test case." (28)

(29)
Perth considered this 'an alarmist view' but
nevertheless Britain was faced with a request from
France to assist in preventing this Italian game by
showing:

"...very clearly at an early stage that
she stood absolutely by France, and
that she was not prepared to see any
alteration in the Mediterranean status
quo." (30)

This request was received in London on
December 12 and on the following day it was repeated
this time coming from foreign minister Bonnet. (31)

Chamberlain himself had largely precipitated this second request, for in the Commons on December 12 he had, in reply to a question, given a cold factual assessment of Britain's relationship with France:

"There is no treaty or pact with France which contains any specific requirement that Great Britain should render military assistance to her should Italy embark on war-like operations against France or her possessions." (32)

While Bonnet could not refute this situation he was worried that such an announcement at this time of 'unreasonable State of Italian feeling' might encourage extremist activity in Italy against France. Chamberlain was due to speak on the evening of the 13th to the foreign press association and it was there that Bonnet hoped Chamberlain would 'make some suitable reference to the Status quo clause in the Anglo-Italian Agreement'. (33)

Chamberlain demurred from taking so definite a line with Italy in public. (34) He did, however, quickly amend his speech to minimise the effects of his previous statement on Italy. Britain's relations with France, he maintained, passed beyond mere legal obligations, since they were founded on identity of interest. (35)

This appeasement-minded compromise which went a good way to meeting Bonnet's request while not publicly embarrassing Anglo-Italian relations, was satisfactory to the French. On the next day Bonnet took advantage of this British expression by announcing in the Chamber that Britain could rely on French military support in the event of her being the subject of unprovoked
(36)
aggression.

British diplomacy was still faced with the task of taking official action on Francois-Poncet's original request dated December 5. Since that date the anti-French character of the Italian press had continued at full blast, being answered in kind by France. Demonstrations in each country against the other were becoming more frequent.
(37) Genuine cause for uneasiness was being given to the British by the situation because of the reflection it threw upon the recently
(38)
ratified agreement with Italy. One of the foremost of its provisions was that Italy renounced any intention of disturbing the status quo in Mediterranean countries. While Ciano could reasonably state that no part of his November speech could be interpreted as going specifically against this provision the

general reaction in Italy and the inactivity of the Italian government in the face of this reaction, certainly suggested as much. Hence the British had not only to consider their position with reference to France in phrasing a demarche to Italy, but also to take into account the effect which had been made by the events of these ten days on Anglo-Italian relations separately.

The official line adopted with Italy was contained in a letter from Sir Arthur Cadogan to the Earl of Perth on December 12, giving Chamberlain's decision on the subject. ⁽³⁹⁾ The letter itself was strongly worded but as it was up to Perth to convey the sense of it rather than the content, the Italians did not feel its full force. ⁽⁴⁰⁾ Chamberlain had taken into full consideration the effect that the recent anti-French policy of Italy had had on British public opinion and particularly on those sceptics who had laid no value on the April Agreement. His projected visit to Rome was, as a result, viewed with greater apprehension and he now felt 'considerable difficulty' about the idea. The final paragraph of the letter contained a sombre warning amounting to little less than an ultimatum:

"If things do not improve, it will be very difficult for the Prime Minister to come to Rome: if they get worse, it will probably be impossible for him to do so." (41)

Such a line was desirable for two main reasons. Firstly, to emphasise to Italy that British desires for friendly discussions were no sign of weakness; that the entente with France was the backbone of Britain's policy as much as the axis was to Italy's, and that it would never be put in jeopardy. Secondly, to make the French feel happier. The effect of the Italian campaign on French public opinion had been deep and throughout the country there were expressions of determination not to yield an inch of French territory. (42) This inevitably turned French attention towards Britain, for the fear that Italy was trying to divide the entente was keenly felt, there being no counterpart in France to the Anglo-Italian Agreement. With France in such a frame of mind the projected Anglo-Italian talks were viewed with understandable (43) suspicion, making the immediate and earnest aim of Chamberlain's policy a possible bone of contention with his closest ally. A sign of strength from Britain and solidarity with France was thus supplied as an effective remedy to these two ills.

As far as the broad lines of Chamberlain's policy for Europe were concerned it was ironical that at the time when France and Germany had laid a firm foundation to their relationship by the signing of the Franco-German declaration on December 6 disruptions should occur between Paris and Rome. A difficult European situation had now evolved in that while Anglo-Italian and Franco-German relations held reasonable hope for the future, these advantages were being counter-balanced by embarrassment in Franco-Italian and Anglo-German diplomacy. In these circumstances Chamberlain's concentration on Rome, if attended with undue speculation, was certainly logical. Enough has already been said about his way to Germany being routed via Italy. But such a policy might also result in an amelioration of the Italian attitude to France especially as the solidarity of the entente had been emphasised.

For the time being it was necessary to nurture the proposed Rome visit with all the care it merited and to keep France as contented as possible about it. This was not going to be easy for the French, as Phipps told Halifax in a review of their attitude to Italy, (44) had a particularly low opinion of their Latin sister.

And the situation was to get even worse when, on December 17, the Italian government informed France that they no longer regarded the Franco-Italian Agreements of 1935 concerning their mutual interests in Africa as being in force. ⁽⁴⁵⁾ Ciano had intimated as much to Francois-Poncet a fortnight earlier but now it was official Italian policy. The French reply to this action consisted solely in acknowledging receipt of the Italian note and refuting its contentions; so deep was France's resentment at Italy's recent behaviour that no suggestion for the revision of the Agreements was included. ⁽⁴⁶⁾

With Chamberlain's journey to Rome now only two weeks off, Britain began to feel more keenly the apprehensions that France held. On the evening of the 26th. Bonnet recounted to Phipps France's anxiety over the Italian demeanour. He stressed how essential it was that Britain, in her dealings with Italy should in no way 'encourage Signor Mussolini to hope for any concessions from France even of a non-territorial nature'. ⁽⁴⁷⁾ He also made it clear that 'in the poisoned atmosphere of shameless blackmail created by Italy', it would be 'dangerous...even to hint at the

possibility of some voluntary concessions by France'. The position that such requests put Chamberlain in with reference to the Italian visit was extremely difficult. There were two distinct dangers which the French understood only too well. One was that Chamberlain, in playing down the Franco-Italian dispute, might give Mussolini the impression that Britain was almost disinterested. The other was the possibility that Mussolini might threaten immediate hostilities against France unless the British government intervened to bring pressure on France to make timely concessions to the Italian appetite. (48) In view of the delicate nature of the situation Bonnet was concerned to maintain the closest collaboration with Britain up to January 11, and it was only sensible for Chamberlain to alleviate French perturbation by pandering to such wishes.

December generally had witnessed a much closer collaboration between London and Paris than had existed before the conversations of late November. Chamberlain was concerned that this identification of Anglo-French dealings in Europe should be maintained, but it seems that he wanted to juggle with its

appearance as it suited his policy. He had clearly refrained from consultation with the French over his proposed visit until he had been forced to do so. This is contrasted by the willingness of Paris to inform London of each step towards the Franco-German Declaration. Also at the time of Ribbentrop's visit to France to sign the agreement the British foreign office was in receipt of daily records of the significant Franco-German conversations. The essence of this Anglo-French behaviour lies in the fact that both parties were reacting to each other exactly in accordance with their interpretation of their relationship at the time. France, threatened by aggressive signs from Italy wanted to strengthen her position by promoting closer identification of British interests with her own. Britain, on the other hand, dubious of the influence such close contact might have on her immediate relationship with Italy and ultimate success with Germany was wary of responding too enthusiastically to the French initiative. There can be no doubt that Chamberlain's sensitivity over the Rome visit in view of the Franco-Italian dispute allowed him to take full advantage of Britain's

dominant role in the Anglo-French friendship. It was to be several weeks before increased tension in the European drama brought a more welcoming attitude from Britain towards her neighbour. For the time being appearances were maintained towards France while relations with Italy were dependent upon the outcome of the January talks.

As 1938 closed public support for Chamberlain at home was still running fairly high and he still believed he alone could prevail with Hitler. That his own confidence in the rightness of his policy had not suffered any relapse is illustrated by the fact that the Christmas cards he and Mrs. Chamberlain sent out carried a picture of his plane flying over a cloud bank on the way to Munich. (49) At the end of December Lloyd's were laying odds of 32-1 against Britain becoming involved in war before December 1939, (50) a price which seems to reflect the trust in which Chamberlain was generally held by his people. It also reflects, however, the fact that war was still in that people's minds. If this was the legacy of the first three months after Munich the next three were greatly to increase this spectre of war.

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Chapter seven

New Year and New Fear

The new year came in with optimistic tones for European diplomacy in 1939 from both London and Berlin. Hitler in his proclamation to the German people, having stressed his belief in the axis as 'a clear and inviolable' element in German foreign policy, expressed a desire for the maintenance of general peace:

"For the rest, we have always one wish, that in the coming year, too, we may succeed in contributing to the general pacification of the world." (1)

While Hitler tried to persuade Europe that his ideals were happily betrothed to the British policy of appeasement, Chamberlain was trying to convince Europe that this policy had already made commendable progress. He stated in his new year's message that:

"No one would have dared to prophecy that the four great European nations would have advanced so far along the road to conciliation." (2)

Neither statement reflected the state of affairs in Europe very accurately. Hitler was planning the absorption of the remainder of Czechoslovakia into the Reich⁽³⁾ and Chamberlain's policy had failed so far to bring any real security to Europe. One can

only say that Chamberlain believed, however mistakenly, what he was saying, while Hitler was deliberately deceiving his listeners.

Tension in Franco-Italian relations had not diminished the prospect in Chamberlain's eyes of success through the Rome conversations and he seemed undaunted by the fact that he would be trying to stabilise relations with the power that was openly threatening his closest ally. The Rome visit, only a week and a half away, now dominated British foreign policy. These days were marked by frequent exchanges between the British and French governments on the attitude Chamberlain and Halifax should adopt towards Mussolini concerning, especially, Franco-⁽⁴⁾ Italian relations. Brief, informal talks between the heads of the two governments, on the request of the British,⁽⁵⁾ were held in Paris on the 10th. and these seem to have allayed any French fears over the British mission. Such a degree of collaboration was no doubt valuable for Britain in assessing the exact mood of France, but the honesty of Chamberlain towards France can be put in question. It seems that he was more concerned to pacify and reassure his ally than genuinely make preparations for presenting a

united front to Mussolini. Chamberlain's demeanour at the Italian talks certainly bears this out.

The main concern of the British representatives at Rome was to improve the Anglo-Italian situation in the light of the German offensive atmosphere as revealed over the past weeks. In this Chamberlain believed he met with success. After returning to London he wrote:

"I may say at once that I consider I have achieved all I expected to get, and more, and that I am satisfied that the journey has definitely strengthened the chances of peace." (6)

Amery, a constant critic of appeasement thought that the visit far from being successful, was disastrous, and his verdict on the talks is nearer the truth than Chamberlain's:

"Their visit certainly marked, so far as Mussolini was concerned, the quiet burial of that attempt to win him over to which Chamberlain had devoted the last two years." (7)

Chamberlain's glowing verdict on the talks was further expression of that false optimism to which he was becoming prone. It is possible that he was unduly influenced by the enthusiastic welcome he received

from the Italian people who, suspicious of their leader's increasing inclination towards Berlin, were glad of the opportunity to demonstrate their desire for peace. Such a welcome no doubt confirmed Chamberlain in his belief that the feelings of the peoples in the dictator states was a peace potential assisting him in his search for appeasement.

It was no intention of Mussolini that the British representatives should be warmly received. Ciano recorded that Chamberlain should be given 'a not too enthusiastic welcome'.⁽⁸⁾ The Italian leaders were in fact, almost contemptuous of 'the old man with the umbrella'.⁽⁹⁾ Mussolini himself stated:

"These men are not made of the same stuff as the Francis Drakes and the other magnificent adventurers who created the empire. These, after all, are the tired sons of a long line of rich men, and they will lose their empire."⁽¹⁰⁾

It has even been suggested that Mussolini was so devoid of interest in the British visit that on the final day he went skiing rather than fulfill his duties as host at the farewell banquet.⁽¹¹⁾

The above scathing judgement by Mussolini was conditioned, ironically enough, by the readiness

shown by the British to make sacrifices in the name of peace. This willingness to compromise, a basic element in Chamberlain's policy, was, in the Duce's eyes, proof of weakness. Ciano was convinced that Britain would 'never go to war'.⁽¹²⁾ The Italian leaders respected strength and despised weakness. If they had been holding back from any commitment to a direct alliance with the Germans, the faintheartedness of the British at these talks left them in no doubt that hesitation had been unnecessary:

"German rearmament weighs on them like lead. They would be ready for any sacrifice if they could see the future clearly. This sombre preoccupation of theirs has convinced me more and more of the necessity for the Triple Alliance."⁽¹³⁾

There was more hope for the realisation of Italy's ambitions in alliance with a strong Germany than in inclining towards the policies of a seemingly timid Britain. The emphasis of Britain on peace and goodwill had had the effect of driving the Italians deeper into the German camp. Chamberlain's veiled attempt to detach Italy from Germany had accelerated the very process it had tried to halt. In this respect then, the talks were a dismal failure. As Ciano wrote 'Effective contact has not been made': 'the whole

(15)

visit was 'a big lemonade'.

It is difficult to see where Chamberlain thought he had triumphed. It has been shown that no progress was made in Anglo-Italian relations. Because the visit was a failure in that respect it was therefore also unsuccessful in finding an approach to Hitler, a hope which Chamberlain had dearly cherished. (16) He had now had his 'hour or two tete a tete with Musso' and it had signally failed to bring London and Berlin any closer together. The talks had in fact been little more than a depressing resume of a deplorable international situation, and so many suspicions and grievances were expressed, so many veiled and uncommitted answers given, that they had served only to increase Italian contempt for Britain and to lead Europe further from the goal of ever-lasting peace.

The one small scrap of hope in which Chamberlain presumably invested so much importance was Mussolini's assurance that he intended to stand by Italy's agreement with Great Britain and that he wanted peace and would use his influence to get it. (17) Mussolini also expressed his confidence in Hitler's pacific intentions and in the sincerity with which he professed

to desire the annexation only of purely German territories. However, from the outset Mussolini made it clear that there was no crack in the Axis - he specifically stated that 'the Berlin-Rome Axis was an essential point of Italian policy' - ⁽¹⁸⁾ but it seemed that Italy would stand neutral in any Anglo-German disagreement. The Italian attitude to France, however, was still icy and unyielding:

"The great barrier between France and Italy was the Spanish question, on which they took opposite views, and until that was out of the way, no negotiations would be possible." (19)

and Mussolini declared that he required no mediation or intervention with reference to Italy's relations in that direction.

Evident sources of conflict were avoided, Tunis, Nice, Djibouti and the Suez Canal being left unmentioned. The British interest in France was veiled and no suggestion of the stand Britain might take in the event of sterner action from Italy was given:

"The British position with regard to France was just like that which existed between Italy and Germany." (20)

This statement seems to contain some kind of bargaining counter: that Britain's closeness to and identification of interests with France would resemble the degree of

collaboration between Italy and Germany, so that if Italy wanted to make definite claims against France without having to reckon with Britain she should herself be less concerned in the Nazi arena. Such a caution was futile with Mussolini and Chamberlain would have done far better to have made it clear that Britain stood firmly by the side of France. This might have made Mussolini think. A sign of strength from Britain would certainly have impressed him more.

An important topic broached by Chamberlain was that of the international guarantee to Czechoslovakia. Since the Hungarian and German awards of November this problem had not brought any real tension to European diplomacy. On November 28 Chamberlain assured the Commons that the German plans for the Vienna-Breslau Autobahn would not alter the Government's attitude to the Guarantee. (21) Such a statement disguised the discomfort which the guarantee was now causing. (22) Moreover, as has been noted the British concept of the guarantee had changed since its inception, and by early December Halifax had been sounding opinion in several capitals. (23) By then Newton was advising London that Czechoslovakia had:

"so far lost her independence that a new situation has arisen which alters the whole basis on which His Majesty's Government made their statement."(24)

In any case, he argued, Germany was the only Munich power who was physically capable of guaranteeing Czechoslovakia. On December 21 Weizsäcker suggested to the French ambassador that the whole idea of a four-power guarantee might be forgotten and that the guarantee of the Reich would alone be sufficient. (25)

Under these circumstances it was necessary for Britain to elicit Rome's views. At the conversations in January Chamberlain ascertained that Mussolini would be prepared to participate in a guarantee, but on conditions which clearly ran contrary to Munich; that he was satisfied with Czechoslovakia's complete neutrality, and that it possessed a constitution favourable to his views. (26) Such a view could easily be interpreted as reluctance to obstruct the German plan to denude Czechoslovakia of all semblance of independence and sovereignty.

Having determined the Italian position, Britain, (27) unaware of the nature of the interviews which had taken place between Hitler and Chvalkovsky (Czechoslovak foreign minister), decided to approach Germany for her ideas on the nature the guarantee should take. Halifax

was evidently not unduly concerned about the matter for it was not until a fortnight after the meeting with Mussolini that a draft communication to the German government was drawn up and France informed of the British intention. (28) The idea was that Britain and France should make a joint demarche in Berlin.

Further procrastination occurred and it was not until February 8, nearly four weeks after the Rome talks, that positive action was at last taken. (29) In the meantime Troutbeck (British charge d'affaires in Prague), had received information from a 'reliable' source that Chvalkovsky had probably been subjected to considerable pressure during his meeting with Hitler on January 21. (30) Such news was certainly indicative of Germany wishing to regard Czechoslovakia as her own preserve and gave little hope for a satisfactory German response to the joint Anglo-French demarche. It was, however, to be nearly another four weeks (March 2) until Germany clarified her position in a strongly-worded and unequivocal reply. (31)

This British initiative to Germany over the guarantee had been the first (excluding economic dealings) that London had taken in that direction since the anti-Semitic outburst in Germany early in November.

The lull in Anglo-German relations had continued through January when suspicions of further aggressive intentions on the part of Hitler were heightened. Hardly a day passed without official reference being made in the foreign office to the possibility of German military action being planned for an early date, and it was to this idea that British policy was becoming geared. Progress was undoubtedly being made in the Reich's policy to create in England the anti-German war psychosis (32) previously mentioned.

Reviewing the position in Germany at the beginning of January, Ogilvie-Forbes asserted that action of some kind on the part of Hitler was now confidently anticipated:

"...what can definitely be said is that there is in this country a general atmosphere of apprehension that something grave, if not disastrous, must eventually occur." (33)

Inevitably, speculations as to when and in what direction this action was to be taken, soon began to predominate in the foreign office. Ogilvie-Forbes could give no satisfactory indication but thought that Hitler, handicapped by the strain which his successes to date had imposed on Germany's

economic resources, would be likely to make a move in the East, against Roumania or the Ukraine where he could 'with comparative ease...possess himself of many of the raw materials lacking to Germany'. (34)

This report contained the sombre reflection that Britain was powerless to prevent Hitler from doing just as he liked, that Britain could no longer 'hope to be the policeman of Europe'. It was also Ogilvie-Forbes' considered opinion that any attempt on the part of Britain to restrain German action in central Europe would only further upset relations between the two countries. Britain's policy now, he claimed, should be directed at keeping herself out of any war that might be sparked off in the East. The extremity of Ogilvie-Forbes' appeasement is fully revealed in this document. Most of the suggestions he made with reference to British foreign policy at this time were of a negative nature. In fact, far from advising any positive action to preserve peace in Europe he was now mainly concerned to see that Chamberlain kept Britain out of war 'by facing the issue clearly and in good time that we cannot guarantee the status quo in Central and Eastern Europe'. His sole positive suggestion

for British policy (aimed at avoiding any involvement in war) was that all effort should be exerted:

"...to cultivate and maintain good relations with Field Marshall Göring and the moderate Nazis with a view to their exercising a restraining influence on the extremists... who at present have the ear of Hitler." (35)

Such was the enticement to Chamberlain early in the new year to revive his policy of appeasing Germany.

Towards the end of January the more dangerous alternative of Hitler's became the centre of attention; that he might provoke trouble in the West. Frequent rumours and reports seemed to give substance to this possibility. A minute by Strang on the 17th contained the suggestion derived from Polish sources, that Halifax was instructing Bland, British Ambassador in the Hague, to determine the attitude of the Netherlands government to the possibility of a German invasion of Holland, a further idea that had been put forward. (37)

The same day brought news from Ogilvie-Forbes which he described as 'sensational' to the effect that a British member of the Anglo-German Fellowship had received confidential information from a reliable source that in March Hitler was intending to break out Westwards through the Low Countries and Switzerland if Italy had not received satisfaction from France. (38)

Just three days after this report, Seeds, British Ambassador in Moscow communicated a further rumour to the foreign office maintaining that the Memel territory was Hitler's immediate target and that March 15 was the date. ⁽³⁹⁾ (If the location was wrong, the date was surprisingly accurate).

It is not suggested that such a quantity of unverifiable rumours was met by the British government with unmitigated alarm. Far from it. The great variety of suggestions that had been made together with the contradictions therein contained necessarily proved that most, if not all, must be ill-founded. What did give real food for thought, however, was the fact that all these reports agreed in forecasting some early military activity on the part of Hitler.

"...it is remarkable that there is one general tendency running through all the reports, and it is impossible to ignore them." (40)

Such was Halifax's conclusion and he was therefore concerned to keep an open mind about these rumours.

"We cannot vouch for the reliability of any of these reports, but a number of them...have lately begun to come in, so that it would not be safe to ignore them and His Majesty's Government are carefully considering the position." (41)

Additional credence was given to the general purport of these rumours by the promotion to high position in Germany of men who strongly supported Hitler. The removal of moderates such as Schacht and Wiedermann to make way for extremists, was taken in London as symptomatic of the Fuhrer's prevailing mood, ⁽⁴²⁾ despite the fact that certain German sources ⁽⁴³⁾ tried to diminish the importance of such moves. Of particular significance no doubt was the promotion of Ribbentrop to the position of Reich foreign minister ⁽⁴⁴⁾ on February 4. More indicative, however, were reports on the German military position. Halifax received a memorandum on January 21 respecting Germany's air superiority and the possibility of her striking a ⁽⁴⁵⁾ blow against the Western powers. During the following week there came a further report from the Military Attache claiming that the German army was working at ⁽⁴⁶⁾ highest pressure, and Ogilvie-Forbes believed it was 'definitely preparing for possible action on a ⁽⁴⁷⁾ large scale'. On the 31st. the attention of the foreign office was drawn to a Czechoslovak official's opinion that Germany was making speedy arrangements

for a major war and that German orders for armaments from Skoda were either being considered or had already been placed. (48) There were also ominous reports to the effect that Italy had alerted approximately 60,000 specialist reservists for duty as from February 1, (49) while German troop movements had been observed throughout Czechoslovakia. (50) Added to all these disturbing signs were clear indications that Germany was in process of concluding an agreement with Italy and Japan which would convert the Anti-Comintern Pact (51) into a Triple Alliance. The clouds had certainly begun to lower over Europe!

The hypothesis that German action would be directed westwards increased proportionately to the idea that Hitler did not appear to intend any drastic move against Danzig or Slovakia, previous tension areas. While it was apparent that he was regarding Czechoslovakia more and more as a German preserve, his methods were those of propaganda and infiltration (52) and were proving successful enough to obviate the use of force. Similarly Danzig did not seem to be the target for military action since:

"Colonel Beck had received very definite assurances from Herr Hitler that Germany had no intention of confronting Poland with a fait accompli." (53)

This was made known to Halifax on January 25. Four days earlier the National Socialist Party organ, the Danziger Verposten, had carried an article claiming that the Danzig slogan 'Zuruck zum Reich', could not for the present be regarded as practical politics. (54)

Thus there were, all in all, strong indications that Nazi action would be aimed Westward. As far as British foreign policy was concerned this necessitated a regularisation of Britain's position vis a vis Holland and Switzerland in the event of their being attacked by Germany. The less rumoured possibility, that of aggression against Switzerland, was not officially acted upon by the British government during January, though Halifax's personal opinion, as expressed to M. Corbin, French Ambassador in London, was indicative of the official attitude (55) Britain was to adopt early in February:

"...if such a German attack was made on Switzerland, it ought to be regarded as not less of a direct challenge to the Western Powers than would be an attack on Holland." (56)

It was with reference to Holland that British policy was mainly concerned and the government gave careful consideration to the situation in the light of the reports that had come in. It bore in mind two main possibilities; firstly, that Germany might merely pick some quarrel with Holland and secondly that she might actually invade. In the event of the former contingency arising it was thought that it would be necessary to attempt a quick reconciliation between the two parties by means of:

"a proposal to both Governments for the selection by neutral Governments of a board of three arbitrators." (57)

Halifax had little faith in the likely effectiveness of such a proposal but the very fact of its rejection by Germany would clarify Britain's position and give her 'locus standi for appropriate action'.

The alternative prospect of an unprovoked German invasion of Holland was viewed by Britain as a matter of very serious importance.

"...the strategical importance of Holland and her colonies is so great that in the view of His Majesty's Government a German attack on Holland must be regarded as a direct threat to the security of the

Western Powers. Failure to take up such a challenge would place Germany in a position of overwhelming predominance in Europe, and in such circumstances His Majesty's Government are accordingly disposed to think that they would have no choice but to regard a German invasion of Holland as a *casus belli* assuming that Holland resisted invasion." (58)

That Holland would resist was not in doubt. Bland, from his authoritative position at the Hague, thought the Dutch 'would fight literally to the last ditch'. (59)

By the end of January Britain's hopes for a long period of European peace had experienced shattering blows. Von Dirksen, even at the beginning of the month, recorded his belief that appeasement was a vanishing mirage and that Chamberlain was 'farther now from his real goal, the establishment of Anglo-German friendship, than at any time since the Munich Conference'. (60) Much had happened in the four weeks since he wrote those words to make them ring even truer.

The disturbing reports concerning Hitler's intentions did not result in any change in Britain's basic policy with regard to Europe. The dual policy of appeasement and rearmament which had been seriously adopted in November, still applied. Gradually, however, the emphasis was being switched from the appeasement to the rearmament angle in deference to the latest

motions in Europe. Speaking to the Birmingham Jewellers' Association on January 28 Chamberlain gave evidence of this accent on rearmament:

"Let us then continue to pursue the path of peace and conciliation, but until we can agree on a general limitation of arms let us continue to make this country strong."(61)

Halifax reviewing general government policy on January 24 told Washington that:

"His Majesty's Government...have decided to accelerate as far as possible the preparation of their defensive and counter-offensive measures. In the meantime they are employing such methods as are available to them for bringing home to the German people the wantonness and folly of embarking on aggressive military adventures."(62)

It is significant that it is not Hitler but the German people that Britain would now try to influence to peaceful ends, a change symptomatic of Britain's loss of faith in Hitler, and of the desperate hope that his hand might yet be stayed by pacific sentiments on the part of his own people. The illusion that Hitler could be called to heel had now almost completely vanished and continuing attacks on Britain in the German press during January served to confirm the despair with which the Nazis were viewed.

It was the opinion of Ogilvie-Forbes, however, that towards the middle of January there was a considerable diminution of outspoken criticism of Britain in the German press, and he requested that some favourable comment be made in London concerning this development. (63) He had evidently shrugged off his melancholy mood of early January and was now following the same kind of appeasement tactics in Berlin as Perth was at Rome. He is now eager for London to do something positive in an attempt to improve relations with the Reich. He suggested two possible courses of action. Firstly, a dampening of unnecessary criticism of Germany in the British press and, secondly, that Chamberlain himself might make some friendly reference to the improved tone of the German press expressing the hope that it might continue still further in the interests of general appeasement. (64)

The British government's reaction to these suggestions reveal the hardening attitude which was now being taken towards Germany. This was contained in a letter from Kirkpatrick in which he stated that the foreign office would not recommend any government

official to express appreciation before it was ascertained that clear instructions had been given to the German press to adopt a better tone, and that the improvement in the press relations was likely to be lasting. (65) It soon became apparent that the improvement was not to be lasting. An indication to this effect was sent from Warsaw on January 27 when Kennard, the British ambassador at that capital, reported that von Ribbentrop had that day spoken 'with considerable bitterness of the attitude of His Majesty's Government which he considered was largely responsible for the present unrest in Europe.' (66) Ogilvie-Forbes' recharged optimism had been proved unfounded within forty-eight hours of its expression.

The stiffening attitude of Britain towards Germany which was relegating appeasement to the plain of fanciful theory had, in part, been assisted by the United States. On January 4 Roosevelt in a speech to Congress had referred to the external dangers facing the U.S.A. in the following words:

"...the world has grown so small and the weapons of attack so swift that no nation can be safe in its will to peace so long as any other single powerful nation refuses to settle its grievances at the council table." (67)

The reference was obviously to Germany and on the following day Chamberlain issued a statement in full support of the President's observations. (68) It has even been suggested (by von Dirksen) that the American initiative actually originated with Chamberlain (69) but the published documents do not support the suggestion. British reaction was generally solidly in favour:

"President Roosevelt's message...has met with universal approval in the public opinion of this country and in the press of all parties.

...One cannot escape the impression that a certain satisfaction is evinced here that the strong cousin on the other side of the ocean has used language which they would often like to use themselves, but which so far they have not had sufficient courage to use."(70)

The importance of Chamberlain's official response is that by echoing the sentiments of the British public he was ranging Britain with the U.S.A. against Germany. This identification of British with American interests was, in von Dirksen's opinion the most probable result of the failure of Anglo-German appeasement. He had written the day before Roosevelt's speech:

"The only possible alternative which can be seriously considered is to foster closer political ties with the United States. Such an arrangement would offer Great Britain full support and the same security as would agreement with the totalitarian powers."(71)

Some sense of security was certainly becoming wanted.

It should not be implied that such a re-orientation of foreign policy on the part of Britain would be easy or automatic. It was never in fact during January officially adopted. The position was that while relations with Germany were so unpromising the foreign office could gain a certain degree of comfort from these signs of strength from across the Atlantic. As January wore on and the signs from the continent became more and more depressing Britain laid increasing value on this American connection, for Chamberlain had always been glad to use the United States for his own ends. Halifax was in frequent contact with Mallet sending information to the State Department at Washington. Roosevelt was kept up to date with the latest British views of and policies towards Europe, (72) and in anticipation of militant tones from Hitler in his speech at the Reichstag scheduled for January 30 it was even hoped that a further public announcement would be made from Washington in the hope that it might help to stay Hitler's hand. (73) However, Roosevelt was at this time experiencing difficulties in his relations with the new Congress and no such statement was forthcoming for fear of 'going too far

ahead of public opinion' in America and losing control
(74) of Congress. Mallet was at least able to report to
the foreign office that the United States government
'had for some time been basing their policy upon the
possibility of just such a situation arising', (75) as
had been foreshadowed in Halifax's communications
concerning the State of affairs in Europe. It was
officially asserted that 'the speeches and acts of
the President and Administration in recent months had
all been directed towards meeting such a situation.'
In the light of American rearmament this was re-
assuring news despite Roosevelt's statement to the
effect that America was not thinking of participating
in European wars, (76) for it was established that the
United States were prepared to do all they could to
(77) bolster up British policy in Europe.

As things turned out, the substance of Hitler's
January 30 speech seemed to belie the need for this
British orientation towards America. This speech,
eagerly awaited for some weeks as an indication of
the way in which Germany was going, proved to be much
less extreme and offensive than anticipated, and
temporarily dispersed many of the rumours of aggressive

German intentions. Referring to this speech a month later, Henderson (who by then had resumed his post in Berlin) described its immediate impact on Europe in the light of the tension that had built up:

"Herr Hitler's comparatively moderate speech on the 30th. January came, therefore, somewhat as a shock to all those who had worked themselves up into a potential state of hysteria as to German aggressive intention. The terms of that speech were, generally speaking, more reassuring than had been expected and the reference to the hope of a long peace produced an immediate calming effect." (78)

This 'calming effect' was, in fact, due to two main features of the speech. Firstly, as Henderson claimed there was Hitler's profession of belief in a long peace, but there were also expressions of friendship with many of the states in Europe for which grave fears had recently been held.

Hitler inevitably gave much attention to the Axis and a firm declaration of solidarity with Italy was given. But the value of this alliance was not described purely in terms of mutual advantage; a wider, more generous interpretation was made:

"The solidarity of these two regimes is... more than a matter of egoistic expediency. On this solidarity is founded the salvation of Europe from its threatened destruction by Bolshevism." (79)

And this was not all. Not only was Germany, and Italy with her, Europe's insurance against Bolshevism but also a safeguard against war by virtue of their combined military strength:

"I know, too, that not only our own Defence Forces but also Italy's military power are equal to the severest military requirements... National Socialist Germany and Fascist Italy are strong enough to safeguard peace against everyone and to end resolutely and successfully any conflicts which irresponsible elements lightly start." (80)

Hitler supported his benevolent claims for Europe by desires for stable relations with other European powers. He stressed the value of having 'genuinely friendly and neutral states' on Germany's frontiers maintaining that relations with Switzerland, Holland and Belgium (amongst many others) were becoming 'all the more satisfactory'.

Such words dispelled much of the suspicion concerning the possibility of a German move in the west. But perhaps greater relief was to be found in Hitler's statements about countries on Germany's eastern frontiers. For despite the justifiable anxiety that had been engendered by the rumours of aggression against Holland or Switzerland, the foreign office had not lost sight of the more feasible possibility: that Hitler would go east. Henderson, in

his memoirs, having referred to the reports which claimed westward direction for German aims stated that he believed these were merely red herrings put about by the Nazi extremists to obscure real and more immediate objectives:

"...it was obvious that Hitler had other fish to fry before embarking on such adventures...Danzig and Memel, of which two cities the population was preponderantly German, were the most obvious of Hitler's next and earliest objectives, and Germany's relations with Czechoslovakia had yet to be definitely settled." (81)

Thus, when Hitler seemed to deny aggressive designs on these 'other fish', hopes were understandably raised. He wished Czechoslovakia success in re-establishing internal order, while references to Poland were particularly amicable. In view of what was to happen in just over seven months time his assessment of the value of his non-aggression pact with Poland of 1934 is worth quoting:

"There can scarcely be any difference of opinion today among the true friends of peace with regard to the value of this agreement. One only needs to ask oneself what might have happened to Europe, if this agreement, which brought such relief, had not been entered into five years ago. In signing it the great Polish Marshall and patriot rendered his people just as great a service as

the leaders of the National Socialist State rendered the German people. During the troubled months of the past year the friendship between Germany and Poland was one of the reassuring factors in the political life of Europe." (82)

These signs of peaceful German cohabitation in Europe helped to remove the sting from other more truculent parts of his speech. Even a reference to not tolerating the Western States' attempts, for the future, 'to interfere in certain matters which concern nobody but ourselves' (83) i.e. matters concerning Germany's relations in Central and Eastern Europe - did not cause umbrage to Chamberlain and Halifax since they were increasingly prepared to give Hitler a free rein in Europe provided he did not precipitate trouble (84) by using military force.

There was even cause for optimism with reference to direct Anglo-German relations. Good relations with Great Britain could be quickly re-established, Hitler maintained, by the elimination of unscrupulous press propaganda. It was claimed, moreover, that there was no real conflict between the interests of the two countries and that no German desired to make difficulties for the British Empire. (85) The only

problem existing between the Reich and England and France was that of Germany's lost colonies, but even this was no source of real trouble:

"While the solution of this question would contribute greatly to the pacification of the world, it is in no sense a problem which would cause war." (86)

By such professions of pacifism, then, was the calming effect, of which Henderson spoke, produced. And it was an effect assisted in Britain by the Prime Minister who endeavoured to reassure his country that appeasement was working.

"I very definitely got the impression that it was not the speech of a man who was preparing to throw Europe into another crisis. It seemed to me that there were many passages in the speech which indicated the necessity of peace for Germany as well as for other countries." (87)

In the foreign office, however, while due respect was paid to this official statement of Hitler's, it did not cause any relaxing in guard or preparation. The campaign of optimism now being launched in the British press was no reflection of opinion officially held in the foreign office, but rather of the hopes to which Chamberlain was still clinging. (88)

On the same day (January 31) that the Prime Minister commented on the speech in the House of Commons, Phipps

sent a report from Paris claiming that there was a more hopeful feeling in that capital about Hitler than there had been for several weeks. (89) This was largely due to the light Hitler's speech had thrown on Germany's position vis a vis the Italian claims against her. The argument was that Hitler, by inferring 'that Mussolini's attitude at the time of the "Anschluss" was merely a return for Germany's support during the period of Sanctions', had shown that the dictators were therefore 'all square'. There was thus:

"...no necessary obligation on the part of Hitler actively to support the Duce in the latter's claims against France." (90)

To the French this was a soothing interpretation for despite the outward signs of collaboration and friendship that had surrounded the December Declaration with Germany, the atmosphere between the two countries had been anything but friendly, (91) and the vision of Germany championing the Italian claims had continually (92) haunted the French.

The matter of Italian claims against France had also been causing Britain much concern, and this indication that Germany might not be so eager to support Italy

could afford a certain degree of relief in view of an observation of Perth's relaid to Halifax ten days before:

"...the Germans seem to be showing a disposition at the moment to recognise this Italian feeling and Germany's debt to Italy, and by keeping German claims and intentions in the background to put Italy's claims on the map." (93)

Perth had, however, mentioned another angle on the Italian claims, which carried as much danger and which was, in effect, augmented by Hitler's above insinuations:

"Some observers think that the Italians greatly fear that the Germans, having absorbed Austria and the Sudetenland and turned Czechoslovakia (94) into a sort of German protectorate, will proceed inexorably in the spring with the next step in their programme, and that, unless Italy moves fast, her own claims on France will be obscured and overlooked in the resulting general disturbance. There is no doubt that many Italians are afraid of this.... and a feeling undoubtedly exists.... that it is now Italy's turn, and that she must somehow or other get in first with her claims." (95)

The calling up of several classes of reservists in Italy seemed to suggest that the Italians might, in fact, be preparing for such initiative; it was Francois-Poncet's belief that this was being done 'as a means of pressure on France, in the hope that it would cause France to weaken and Great Britain to fail in her

support of France.'⁽⁹⁶⁾ As in the case of speculation on German activity it was impossible for Britain to draw any definite conclusions on what Italy was intending. Not till February was the British attitude to Italy to be more clearly and openly explained but in the meantime there was no shrinking from the truth that the situation between Rome and Paris was continuing to jeopardise closer Anglo-Italian understanding and that it was one which required 'the greatest watchfulness'.⁽⁹⁷⁾

As a result of the rumours of anticipated German aggression France had experienced considerable perturbations owing to her military alliances with both Czechoslovakia and Poland. While intending to preserve an outward aspect of calm, pretending that her Declaration with Germany was in full operation till the latter violated it,⁽⁹⁸⁾ she had serious fears as to the military position of Britain. In a meeting with Phipps on January 29 Deladier 'enquired rather anxiously whether Great Britain would not soon introduce compulsory military service'.⁽⁹⁹⁾ This question was accompanied by an enthusiastic offer of assistance

in making good any agreed deficiencies. Phipps' reply was that the chief effort for the time being had to be on aviation.

The ominous motions on the continent during the past fortnight had resulted in fairly frequent consultation between the two countries in order to establish their positions with regard to Hitler's reported aims. Britain's attitude to France at this time was steadily becoming more genuine and honest, even to the extent of organising joint staff conversations to adopt the attitude of war against Germany ⁽¹⁰⁰⁾ and, within only a matter of days, to publicly announce the position of Britain vis a vis France in unmistakable terms.

It is, in fact, with this announcement that Britain's position in Europe becomes more clearly defined as a power which would need to be reckoned with by any other power intending to upset the balance in Europe by the use of illegal force.

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41. *ibid*, no. 48.
42. *ibid*, no. 5.
43. *ibid*, no. 9.
44. Ribbentrop, Memoirs, p.78.

45. BD, v.III, no. 553.
46. *ibid*, v.IV, no. 23.
47. *ibid*, no. 29.
48. *ibid*, no. 69.
49. *ibid*, no. 312.
50. *ibid*, no. 43.
51. *ibid*, no. 5.
52. *ibid*, no. 61.
53. *ibid*, no. 10.
54. *ibid*, no. 47.
55. *ibid*, no. 87.
56. *ibid*, no. 44.
57. *ibid*, no. 40.
58. *ibid*,
59. *ibid*, no. 27.
60. GD, v.IV, no. 286.
61. Chamberlain, *The Struggle for Peace*, p.389.
62. BD, v.IV, no. 5.
63. *ibid*, no. 11.
64. *ibid*.
65. *ibid*, note 2.
66. *ibid*, no. 33.
67. Langer and Gleason, *The Challenge to Isolation*, p.47.
68. *The Times*, January 5.
69. GD, v.IV, no. 291.
70. *ibid*.
71. *ibid*, no. 286.
72. BD, v.IV, nos. 5, 41.
73. *ibid*, no. 5.
74. *ibid*, no. 28.
75. *ibid*, no. 26.
76. GD, v.IV, no. 524.
77. BD, v.IV, no. 28. Butler, *Lord Lothian*, p. 227.
78. BD, v.IV, no. 162.
79. Baynes, *op. cit.* p.1576.
80. *ibid*.
81. Henderson, *Failure of a Mission*, p.183.
82. Baynes, *op. cit.* p.1577.
83. *ibid*, p.1572.
84. HCD, v.342, col. 2524. BD, v.III, no. 285.
85. BD, v. IV, no. 65.
86. Baynes, *op. cit.* p.1575.
87. HCD, v.343, col. 81.
88. Wheeler-Bennett, *Munich*, pp.328-9.
89. BD, v.IV, no. 67.
90. *ibid*.
91. Schmidt, *Hitler's Interpreter*, p.119.
92. GD, v.IV, no. 378.

93. BD, v.IV, no. 309.
94. The hyphen in Czecho-Slovakia was first made official on November 17, 1938 in the Bill for the Autonomy of Slovakia.
95. BD, v.IV, no. 309.
96. *ibid*, no. 43.
97. *ibid*, no. 309.
98. *ibid*, no. 54.
99. *ibid*, no. 52.
100. *ibid*, no. 81.

Chapter eight

From Strength to Strength

Perhaps the outstanding feature of British diplomacy during February was her more confident and therefore firmer approach to the European situation. This was in direct contrast to the depression and pessimism which had characterised much of her attitude in January. Three main factors contributed to this change of approach; the firmer tone of Roosevelt and his growing influence on American opinion, a decline in the German financial position, and the more reliable state of Britain's defences. The American influence on British policy has already been considered, (1) and the German economic situation will be dealt with later (2) in this chapter. It was the improved state of his own country's defence position which was the main source of hope to Chamberlain.

Great progress had certainly been made since Munich in improving the country's defence potential. Reviewing the situation in February the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir John Simon referred to 1938-39 as 'a year of the most substantial progress in the production of defence materials of all kinds.' (3) He released information to the effect that the total defence expenditure for the year 1939-40 would amount to £580 millions, an increase on the previous year of

(4)
£174 millions. 1939 was to see the 'full blast of production.'

Immediately upon Munich attention had been primarily devoted to measures of civil defence but since then all three main service departments had experienced impressive expansions. The greatest improvements were made by the air force. This was logical in view of the part especially fighter planes would play in the event of aggression against the country but also, as Hoare explained, it was an emphasis facilitated by the fact that the French fleet was felt to be capable of giving essential support to Britain in the Mediterranean and Far East. (5) Simon was able to claim that the R.A.F. had been:

"...very greatly strengthened during the year, both by the recruitment of many thousands of recruits of high quality... and by the addition of large numbers of up-to-date aircraft." (6)

Later when Kingsley-Wood, the air minister, presented his estimates for the coming year to the Commons he could claim that a quarter of a million pounds was being spent on the production of aircraft alone every day. (7) Kingsley-Wood had told the House in November that the programme for expanding the first-line aircraft at

home would be accelerated. (8) He was now able to report that the target of 1,750 by March 31, would be reached. (9) Moreover, these aircraft were 'as formidable as any in the world,' (10) and in order to continue building at this rate and even increase it, a total air expenditure of £205 millions was anticipated. (11)

The achievements in the army and navy, if on not such an impressive level were similarly encouraging as a firm basis for British foreign policy. As at January 1 1937 the tonnage of shipping under construction for the navy had been 375,000 tons; by March 31 it was confidently expected to be 660,000 tons. (12) The personnel of the fleet had, as with the air force, increased impressively. A rise of 32,000, or 36 per cent was recorded between 1933 and 1938. Hore-Belisha's plans for the army envisaged nineteen divisions to protect the country in the event of war in Europe. Of these six were regular (two of them armoured), nine territorial infantry divisions, three motorised and one armoured division. Every fighting arm of the service had been remodelled and was to be supplied with modern weapons. (13)

The pace of rearmament had quickened drastically.

But even though this advance in the country's war potential was sufficient to satisfy those who had been regarded as 'war-mongers', the emphasis from Chamberlain's point of view was still quite definitely on its defensive nature. He explained at Birmingham that 'out motto is not defiance, and, mark my words, it is not, ⁽¹⁴⁾ either, deference. It is defence.' It is significant, however, that the conception of defence was now much more realistic than it had been a few months before. There is even a suggestion of aggressiveness in his assertion that:

"...they could not make nearly such a mess of us now as they could have done then. (at Munich) while we could make much more of a mess of them." (15)

This sign of militancy did not mean that his dream of appeasing the dictators had diminished at all. In the same speech at Birmingham he had admitted to his audience that the totalitarian governments did not share their peoples' eagerness for lasting peace, but his faith in human nature could not be destroyed; there was another angle in appeasement that gave cause for hope:

"...let us cultivate the friendship of the peoples...let us make it clear to them that we do not regard them as potential foes, but rather as human beings like ourselves.." (16)

Despite the ugly rumours of German offensive action (although diminished by Hitler's Reichstag speech), the explosive nature of France - Italian relations, and the depressing atmosphere between Britain and the dictators, Chamberlain still hoped for success in such a policy as expressed above. He could even convince himself that the European situation itself gave promise of success. He wrote enthusiastically to Lord Tweedsmuir early in February:

"I must tell you that I myself feel conscious of some easing in the tension...a number of impressions derived from various sources, which somehow seem to fuse into a general sense of greater brightness in the atmosphere." (17)

It seems that he was escaping further and further from reality, availing himself of that one comfort which promoted the prospect of peace - hope. Halifax frequently defended Chamberlain's policy at the time saying that 'the dominant constituent in his thought was hope rather than faith.' (18) But it was a hope, the proportions of which deluded its owner and led him away from the stark reality of Europe.

"...with a thrush singing in the garden, the sun shining, and the rooks beginning to discuss among themselves the prospects of the coming nesting season, I feel as

though spring were getting near...
All the information I get seems to
point in the direction of peace." (19)

This quotation is an extract from Chamberlain's diary for February 19. It is significant that on that very day he received from Berlin a communication full of encouraging opinions on German desires for peace, which went far to counteract the pessimistic impressions created in that capital over the previous few weeks. (20) Henderson had returned to Berlin! After a four months' absence during which he had been recovering from an operation he had resumed office as ambassador in Berlin 'moderately hopeful, and not inclined to see the black side of anything.' (21) The recovery, however, had not been complete and, on his own admission, he was still physically unfit. (22) Ill health, it seems, was still to cloud his vision of the exact state of affairs.

Soon after his return to Berlin Henderson had two important interviews, one with Ribbentrop and one with Göring.

The meeting with Ribbentrop on February 16 was very friendly. The Reich foreign minister asserted that 'nobody in Germany was thinking of anything but peace' (23)

- a statement that Henderson was almost prepared to
(24)
take at face value. Ribbentrop further claimed
that he felt the best beginning for a better atmosphere
between Germany and Great Britain lay along economic
lines and he referred to the projected visit of the
president of the board of trade to Germany in March in
optimistic terms. Such references were to breed
considerable hope in Henderson for although this visit
was a private one he believed it was the key to much
greater things.

"...behind the facade of privacy, the real
intention of the visit was patent, and
though the primary object was a modest
one, it was legitimate to hope that it
might lead to more general and concrete
trade discussions. From economics to
politics was no great step." (25)

The congenial atmosphere of this first interview was
maintained at Henderson's subsequent meeting with
Göring on the morning of the 18th, despite an expression
of German uneasiness over British rearmament, a mis-
understanding to which Henderson was, in any case, fully
(26)
sympathetic.

On the strength of these two meetings Henderson
felt justified in reporting that he did not believe
Germany was contemplating any aggression for 1939, and
that all stories and rumours to the contrary were

completely without real foundation. He wrote on the evening of the 18th:

"These may sound strange opinions in the light of all rumours current during the past few months but I take full responsibility for making them mine. I regard and always have regarded it as a bad mistake to attribute excessive importance to stories spread generally with intention either by those who regard war as the only weapon with which Nazi regime can be overthrown or by those Nazis themselves who desire war for their own satisfaction or aggrandisement. Germany is not going to be a lamb with which it will be pleasant in the future to lie down but her people want peace just as much as and even more than ourselves and Herr Hitler is not going to disappoint them if he can help it." (27)

A few friendly words from Hitler himself at the British stands at the motor exhibition in Berlin were a further indication, however slight, to Henderson's mind in the direction of peace. He advised Halifax that full publicity should be given to Hitler's peaceful intentions, both in press and speeches.

There can be little doubt that Henderson, after his prolonged absence from the international scene, had not seen things clearly, though he was the subject of German deceit and camouflage. Yet even when he was faced with militant outbursts from Germany he could still find grounds for their excuse. Göring had, before his meeting with Henderson, accused the British press

of inciting the Western powers to war against Germany. With this he had issued what virtually amounted to an ultimatum:

"If this campaign persisted German Government, he said, would have to consider whether it would not be more opportune to take action now themselves before it was too late and while Germany was still in stronger military position." (28)

News of this was reported to Halifax on February 22 and Henderson tried to explain it away as being the 'argument with which the Nazi extremists sought to justify their policy of adventure.' (29) Moreover he refused to align Hitler with these extremists.

On the same day Halifax saw Von Dirksen prior to the latter's return to Germany for a fortnight. Little value resulted from this meeting with reference to the immediate future of Anglo-German relations for it was largely a resume of mutual suspicions. Halifax expressed the hope that the German government would be fully aware of the anxiety created in British public opinion by 'the deliberate failure of the German Government to...take advantage of the new opportunities' (30) that Britain considered to have been created at Munich. In reply the German ambassador maintained that he

thought Hitler had resented British concern with Czechoslovakia, and that the position had been aggravated by the behaviour of the American President. As a result of this there was no chance of a suspension of German armaments production:

"That the head of a great country should make once a week, in some form or other, the kind of declaration that President Roosevelt had been making for some time past was very disturbing. It seemed quite evident that, if France and Great Britain were involved in war, America would also join in and support Great Britain, not in two months but in two days. This naturally caused great concern to the German Government and they could not be blamed; therefore, for feeling that it was in present circumstances impossible for them to suspend their armaments production." (31)

The conversation was not entirely devoid of hope for the future, for von Dirksen reiterated Ribbentrop's earlier belief in the promise held out by economic discussions. He 'looked forward' he said 'to the gradual diminution of tension under the soothing influence of economics.'

The revival of interest in economic appeasement is worthy of attention. It was a ray of hope which Chamberlain and Halifax were determined to pursue for

they could not know at the time that despite the willingness of Germany to explore more fully this avenue of cooperation, she was still equally determined not to allow any discussions to leave economic matters (32) and 'lead up to questions of foreign policy.'

From the British point of view economic appeasement, which had been cherished by the 'inner circle' in October and early November, had received a severe set-back by the German atrocities against the Jews. Economic appeasement had never entirely died, however. As has been seen von Dirksen was concerned to keep this torch alight; Schacht had visited London in mid-December and a return visit by Stanley, President of the Board of Trade, had been mooted. (33) At this time von Dirksen had told Halifax that he thought:

"various points of contact existed in the economic field which might lead to agreements, directly fruitful and positive for economic life and thus indirectly for political relations as well." (34)

More positive advances were made just before Christmas when the British and German Federations of Industry held preparatory discussions towards reaching a comprehensive agreement on prices and markets. (35)

Towards the end of January several opportunities offered themselves for greater activity in the economic field; negotiations for an Anglo-German Coal Agreement were well advanced; the annual dinner of the Anglo-German Chamber of Commerce took place; the first meeting of the central industrial federations of the two countries was fixed for the end of February. (36)

It was at the Chamber of Commerce dinner that both Leith-Ross and Henderson made the opening gambit for resuming top-level economic discussions. They suggested:

"...that a visit to London by Funk, Reich Minister of Economics and President of the Reichsbank, would certainly be well timed for extending the informal economic conversations started in October of last year." (37)

The German representatives did not respond, however, so Leith-Ross repeated the suggestion to von Dirksen on January 31. In the meantime the Anglo-German Coal Agreement had been signed which offered an ideal excuse for a visit by Funk to London. Leith-Ross told von-Dirksen that the intention was:

"... to give a dinner to celebrate the successful conclusion of the Anglo-German coal negotiations to which Funk ...is to be invited as guest of honour from Germany and Oliver Stanley...to represent Great Britain." (38)

Von Dirksen requested Berlin's reaction, but Wiehl, Director of the Economic Policy Department of the German Foreign Ministry, while encouraging Stanley's proposed visit to Germany, was not yet prepared to let Funk go to London:

"Funk has so many engagements as a result of assuming office as President of the Reichsbank that he is quite unable to find time for a visit to London in the near future." (39)

This reply was despatched to von Dirksen on February 6 but its negative nature did not cool the British ardour for economic appeasement. Stanley's visit was insisted upon (40) and arranged for March 17, two days after the meeting of the industrial federations in Düsseldorf. The timing of these two arrangements seems to be significant, the British wishing to know the results of the latter before Stanley started negotiations on broader economic issues. (41) Von Dirksen records with reference to the Dusseldorf meeting that 'the English side attached greater importance' to it 'than was warranted by its rather moderate agenda'. (42)

By the middle of February a firm basis had been laid for an improvement in the atmosphere between London and Berlin. Chamberlain and Halifax were

making a sincere attempt to retrieve appeasement from its depression by the only means available to them. The fact that available British documents give little evidence of this important facet of Anglo-German dealings tells the same story as in October and November - Chamberlain was by-passing the foreign office and using unofficial channels to execute this business. That he found a readiness in Germany to communicate on the economic level was under the strain of purely political matters, adequate justification in his mind to use such methods. Ribbentrop at the end of January had 'betrayed a lively interest in more actively promoting Anglo-German relations in the economic sphere',⁽⁴³⁾ and as has already been noted Henderson was made aware of this attitude soon after his return to office reporting to Halifax accordingly.⁽⁴⁴⁾ Von Dirksen was an enthusiastic middle man⁽⁴⁵⁾ thinking that 'the atmosphere was unusually favourable and also had an alienating effect on the political tension'.⁽⁴⁶⁾ Moreover, the attitude of the German press was encouraging.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Here then is some justification for Chamberlain's

jubilant mood in mid-February, though it should be stressed that progress was being made solely in the economic field, that even this was as yet ill-defined and in its infancy and that despite Henderson's optimism for an easy passage from economic to political matters there was no valid reason for thinking that any definite and lasting improvement in diplomatic relations with Germany would result. Indeed, available evidence suggested that the improved German tone was dictated in large measure by sheer economic need.

"Recent reports on the breakdown in the communications system, general labour difficulties, food shortage, the general unpopularity of restrictive measures and the impossibility of any further large increase in the rearmament programme, owing to export and import considerations, recorded the facts which may have opened Herr Hitler's eyes to the true position and have accounted for his more conciliatory statement of German policy. In fact economic needs may have for the first time outshadowed political aspirations." (48)

Such was Henderson's rather more sombre verdict on Germany's motives as expressed after being back in Berlin a month.

There was at this time little progress made in deciding the direction that economic relations between the two countries should take, Henderson reported, as

much to Halifax after his meeting with Ribbentrop:

"We agreed that neither of us knew very clearly what line any economic discussions would take but that the first aim was to discover where co-operation could most usefully be sought." (49)

Chamberlain, however, knew where he wanted discussions to lead. His mind turned again to colonial appeasement, an idea that had lain dormant since mid-October. (50)

He wrote to Henderson in this sense on February 19

"If all went well we should have so improved the atmosphere that we might begin to think of colonial discussions." (51)

Halifax did not share his Prime Minister's optimism, and on the 20th he advised Henderson to exert a certain degree of restraint.

"I do not myself feel there is any hope of making any sense of colonial discussions . . . unless and until your German friends can really show more than smooth words as evidence of friendly hearts." (52)

Even Henderson could not side with Chamberlain on this point and tried to curb his enthusiasm:

"I should keep away from the Colonial question. I think Hitler...fully realises that that question must wait a long time yet and that economics and disarmament must come first and create that greater confidence which can alone give Hitler the hope of a satisfactory colonial solution." (53)

While this correspondence was being conducted Ashton-Gwatkin had arrived in Berlin for talks of an exploratory nature in preparation for Stanley's visit. While his instructions had been 'to renew personal contacts with officials of the Foreign Office, Ministry of Economics, Reichsbank etc, and to exchange views with them' (54) his visit was not very valuable in getting a composite picture of German economic plans. To the Germans it was clear that Ashton-Gwatkin's aims transcended the bounds of economics.

"He rather gave the impression of wanting to learn from the Foreign Minister how far Germany was prepared for a further rapprochement. When, however, the Minister for his part expressed no special wishes or proposals, Ashton-Gwatkin said in reply to further questions that it was true that he had concrete ideas, but that these extended beyond the limits of economy into the sphere of politics." (55)

Ashton-Gwatkin was unable to report with certainty what approach would be best received by the Germans. For Goring 'insisted that Anglo German economic co-operation should begin at once, and that this would lead on to political agreements' while Wöhlbat (Göring's principal economic adviser) 'thought that some kind of pact between the United Kingdom (and others perhaps) guaranteeing peace in Europe would be a necessary prelude to economic co-operation on any wide scale'. (56)

Such was the contradiction that faced Ashton-Gwatkin. Commenting on the several conversations which took place between the 20th and the 25th, G.H.S. Pinsent, Financial Attache in Berlin, did not think they held much promise for the future:

"Altogether these conversations held out, in my opinion, little hope of progress in economic co-operation." (57)

Ashton-Gwatkin's own report was less than hopeful and told Halifax little more than he already knew.

"There can be no doubt of Germany's increasing preoccupation with economic questions at the present time; nor, I think, of a certain turning towards England in the hope of benefit and advantages. It is less easy to discern any will and intention on the German side to contribute actively towards peace in Europe and in the world in a way which would justify sacrifices on our part and a lively hope in a better future." (58)

This then was the situation that had been reached in Anglo-German economic relations by the end of February. One main question had arisen with effect on the wider subject of British diplomacy in Europe - what should the relationship be between economic and political dealings with Germany? This question was to come to a head in the early days of March.

While advances were being made in this one element of relations with Germany. Britain was becoming more concerned at the way Franco-Italian relations were going. The attitude of Italy appeared to be getting increasingly hostile and provided the big stumbling-block in international relations during February. An abnormal amount of military activity on the part of Italy at the end of January was continued into February (59) with definite emphasis on three colonial centres - Libya, Somaliland and Tunis. This appeared to be an evil portent especially in view of the interpretation that Perth had put on the effect of Hitler's speech on the Italian claims. (60) However, on February 2 there appeared in the Italian press an assertion which tended to counteract Perth's suggestion:

"The German expression...has induced some to think that Germany will only help Italy if she is attacked. Let there be no doubt. If Italy is involved in a war, whether she is the attacker or the attacked, Germany will lose no time in enquiring who is the aggressor but will immediately give full military support to Italy being certain that if Italy has attacked she has done so to defend her rights." (61)

This statement was issued to erase the very sort of impression that Perth had gathered. (62) As far as British fears were concerned for a realisation of the

Italian claims, this statement while diminishing one specific fear, served only to augment the other. Assured of German support Italy might be encouraged to take early action against France. The situation was further endangered by the fact that Mussolini and Ciano were convinced at this stage that they could implement their colonial demands on France without having to take into account military opposition from Britain.

"...it is held more or less generally in Rome that England will not fight, at least unless she is directly threatened. The French Embassy have been very insistent lately that Ciano and probably Mussolini are convinced of this." (63)

It has been noted earlier that this was partly the legacy of the January Rome talks. Perth felt the danger inherent in this situation only too keenly and advised that the Italians should be made fully aware that an attack on France would bring Britain in.

"In my view it would therefore be all to the good if the Prime Minister felt able to make some public reference to the position ...and perhaps the sooner the better." (64)

Phipps, too, while not believing that Italy meant war stressed the need for a sign of strength in the Anglo-French connection.

"The main essential was that France and Great Britain should remain united - the slightest sign of cleavage would be most dangerous." (65)

These opinions coincided with a request from the French government for a clarification of the British position in the event of Italian aggression against France. (66) Perth's suggestion was quickly taken up by Chamberlain. His announcement in the House of Commons on February 6 could leave little ambiguity in Italian minds:

"It is impossible to examine in detail all the hypothetical cases which may arise, but I feel bound to make plain that the solidarity of interest, by which France and this country are united, is such that any threat to the vital interests of France, from whatever quarter it came must evoke the immediate co-operation of this country." (67)

This clarification had the two desired effects; it put the Italians squarely in the picture and helped to reassure France after the repercussions following Hitler's last speech. (68)

The effect of the prime minister's announcement on Italy is difficult to gauge. As a method of dissuading Mussolini from demanding concessions of France by force it was, in a way, superfluous. For Deladier had, unbeknown to Chamberlain (and indeed the Quai d'Orsay) already taken effective unofficial action. He had despatched M. Baudouin, president of the Banque de l'Indo-Chine, to Rome with instructions to convey to the Fascists details of certain concessions he was

(68)
prepared to make to the Italian demands. These
concerned Djibouti, Ethiopia, Suez and Tunis. Thus,
by underhand means Daladier had set in motion a scheme
for negotiations with Italy which would preclude the
need on the latter's part to resort to force.

Ciano recorded Mussolini's reaction to the plan:

"He is in favour of diplomatic negotia-
tions; therefore, he authorised me to
answer M. Baudouin that we consider
the proposals worthy of consideration." (70)

It was made clear to the Italians that these negotiations
could not lead to any open territorial concessions by
the French. Mussolini knew that if he wanted to go
after that it would mean war.

Perhaps Chamberlain's statement of British solidarity
with France only served to stop Mussolini having second
thoughts on this score, though there is no evidence
to suggest that he seriously intended provoking a war
with France in the near future. Negotiations on the
basis of the Baudouin proposals continued between the
two countries until the middle of May.

The British government, unaware of these dealings
behind the scenes, continued to exert what soothing
influence they could on Franco-Italian relations

'without attempting to mediate between the French and Italian Governments on the actual points at issue between them'.⁽⁷¹⁾ The attempts of the Italian press to minimise the importance of Chamberlain's statement⁽⁷²⁾ made it all the more necessary from the British point of view to request explanations for military activity 'in order that the Italian Government may realise that we are fully aware of what is going on.'⁽⁷³⁾

On February 3 Halifax had instructed Perth to find out from Ciano the reason for the military concentration in Libya.⁽⁷⁴⁾ Three days later a reply was received to the effect that it was necessitated by an increase in the number of French troops being sent to that area, and that the Italian response was 'purely for defensive purposes'.⁽⁷⁵⁾ In refuting Ciano's explanation Halifax drew attention to the April Agreement as foreshadowing a policy of reduction in the Libyan garrison,⁽⁷⁶⁾ but again the reply echoed the need of 'providing for complete security of Libya' against possible French attack.⁽⁷⁷⁾

Since the January talks relations with Rome had been aggravated by 'renewed bitterness'⁽⁷⁸⁾ and by mid-February Halifax did not share Chamberlain's continuing optimism:

"I am afraid the business of getting the bridge built between Paris and Rome is likely to be more difficult than the P.M. appears to feel." (79)

In the last half of the month this aspect of Britain's diplomacy was further embarrassed by the attitude of the Italian press. An article had appeared in 'Relazioni Internazionali' on February 11 threatening France with war unless she made certain concessions to Italy. This drew from Britain a stern reminder (80) of the essence of Chamberlain's speech of February 6. This was soon followed by the publication of a German article on Italy's 'just claims' against France. The fact that Ciano refused to comment on such material, especially on that depicting Italy as prepared to go to war with France, was taken great exception to in London. (81) Perth was instructed to let the Italians know that the pipe of appeasement still smouldered and that 'articles in this strain...gravely embarrass the Prime Minister in his work for peace.' (82) Perth obliged but was curtly told to realise that a state of tension existed (83) between France and Italy.

The militancy of the press together with Ciano's refusal to confirm or deny views printed threw a different and dangerous light on the situation as far

Britain was concerned. Halifax, while not believing that Mussolini would resort to arms, thought that the press incitements might lead the Italians 'into a position they could not get out of'. This, he (84) asserted, was the touch-paper of most wars.

The British, so far, had failed in their dealings with Ciano to relieve the tension between France and Italy so they looked in other directions for the answer. Advantage was now taken of the easier atmosphere between London and Berlin to enlist the support of Germany. Halifax let it be known to von Dirksen before his departure for Germany on the 23rd. that:

"any influence that the German Government could exercise on their Axis partner in the direction of reducing the temperature of the treatment of any question between Italy and France would be influence well exerted." (85)

At the same time Perth communicated from Rome his fears that the situation could quickly become perilous and recommended collaboration with the French as a matter of urgency.

"I wonder whether the time has not come when we should thrash out the whole matter with the French Government in order to avoid the possibility of such a catastrophe as that to which I have alluded. If we leave it until too

late, I fear the situation may develop into a crisis when a settlement becomes far more difficult because it is likely to turn on prestige." (86)

The advisability of such action was reinforced on the 27th when Perth reported that Italy was presuming that French military activity in Tunis amounted to preparation for offensive action. (87) Before he received this news Halifax had already despatched a cable to Phipps (88) advising conciliatory action by France. He now thought that if much action was not taken immediately the situation would 'so deteriorate as to become very difficult to control.' (89) It was evidently still British policy to calm troubled waters in Europe! The British approach to France was contained in a single sentence:

"Without attempting to mediate between the French and Italian Governments as to the actual points at issue between them, I am wondering whether the French Government would care to make use of our good offices to induce the Italian Government to refrain from further concentrations in return for some corresponding undertakings of a reasonable character on the part of the French Government." (90)

The French reaction to this prompting was uncooperative. Bonnet claimed that the French troop

movements in Tunis were merely in response to the Italian movements and would only cease when Italy stopped sending reinforcements. Consolation for Britain could, however, be gained from an assurance that the French concentrations were purely defensive and that care was being taken to avoid frontier incidents. (91)

If this reply was unsatisfactory to the British in that it did not implement Halifax's suggestion, it did at least show that the French were handling the situation firmly and were not prepared (so it seemed) to make unconditional concessions to Mussolini. It was patent that any final solution to this problem relied upon the conclusion of the Spanish Civil War which had been so severe a cause of animosity between the two countries, and British policy, rather than attempting to find an alternative solution, had aimed at containing the Italian demands and preventing them from getting out of hand. Although tension had mounted considerably in the last two weeks of February, greater hopes were inspired by signs of an early termination of hostilities in Spain. Barcelona had fallen to Franco on January 26 and at the end of February his conquest of Catalonia resulted in the flight of the republican govern-

ment to France and the resignation of its president. By then the outcome was sufficiently certain to allow of the recognition of Franco's nationalist government by France ⁽⁹²⁾ and England ⁽⁹³⁾. Thus one of the main causes of friction between Italy and France was almost removed giving genuine hope for further reconciliation.

To Chamberlain this turn of events was the signal for much wider optimism - the prospect of appeasement was now brought substantially closer; He wrote on February 19:

"I think we ought to be able to establish excellent relations with Franco, who seems well disposed to us, and then, if the Italians are not in too bad a temper, we might get Franco-Italian conversations going, and if they were reasonably amicable we might advance towards disarmament." (94)

Halifax, it has been seen, was more reserved in his expectations, but could draw a measure of comfort from the quieter mood of Germany during February as compared with January.

"While we are not disposed to under-rate the latest danger in the present international situation, our latest information inclines us to think that Hitler has for the time being abandoned the idea of precipitating an immediate crisis, such as he seemed to be contemplating at the beginning of the year." (95)

This extract is from a communication dated February 27 to Lindsay in Washington. Collaboration with that capital had been continued into February with Halifax submitting almost weekly reviews of the European situation to the State Department. (96) Although this Anglo-American concert was resented in Germany it was, from the British point of view, a valuable steady influence on Europe. (97)

February really marks a delicate, but distinct swing in the angle of the appeasers' policy. As the chance of success for the method of personal contact had dwindled so drastically since Munich Chamberlain was now endeavouring, through demonstrations of solidarity between Britain, France and the United States, to create an atmosphere in Europe which would deter the totalitarian states from lightly committing any act which would consume Europe in war. It was a line he could take because he felt that Britain was militarily in a stronger position than she had been. It was a logical extension of the rearmament side of his policy which did not deny his continuing hopes that Hitler and Mussolini could in time be brought to settle outstanding problems round the conference table. It was, to Chamberlain's mind, the

necessary insurance policy that the business man takes out against possible catastrophe. Here, in Halifax's words, was the 'umbrella' that 'helps to keep the rain away'.⁽⁹⁸⁾ Thus it will be shown that when in March the European situation had deteriorated to such an extent that Britain began to extend guarantees to several East European states, this was not such a violent change in British policy as many observers have wished to think.

Chamberlain's announcement concerning Britain's support for France marks the real publication of this policy. It was an announcement which removed any doubts that Britain, though passionately concerned to preserve peace, would under certain circumstances fight. But this, in essence, was nothing radically new. Chamberlain had asserted as much at Birmingham on January 28 and in the House of Commons on the 31st.⁽⁹⁹⁾ Implications from Halifax on February 3 had also been quite definite that Britain's desire for peace did not amount to pacifism.

"However much British people may want peace, they feel instinctively that there are things without which life as they know it would not be worth living. They would not be slow if need arose to make up their minds

what these things are, remembering that for them the life of the nation consists not only in material possessions, but in the assurance of independence and freedom to live that life according to the fashion they desire."(100)

What was so important about Chamberlain's February 6 statement was that it marked a departure from such generalities as quoted above and indicated specific circumstances which would see Britain in arms. The vague threats of earlier days had been translated into a definite promise. While the subsequent guarantee to Poland represented a further set of conditions which would bring Britain into military support of an East European country, the February promise is of particular importance in that it was the first time Europe was given proof that Britain would go to war. For although the statement to France had been dictated largely by the tension in France-Italian relations and at the time had special significance for that area of European diplomacy, it did not per se exclude the possibility of aggression against France from other quarters - namely Germany. Thus it amounted in effect to a firm stand being taken by Britain against the opponents of peace, a stern warning presented in the context of Anglo-French relations

to Europe and the world.

The fatal shortcoming of this policy in practice, however, was that it was not interpreted as constituting any real innovation in British thinking. It appeared too insular, the new found strength of Britain being related to Western Europe only. This impression was heightened by the fact that Britain continued to employ dulcet tones with Hitler as far as Central and Eastern Europe were concerned. Chamberlain's concern over Czechoslovakia, for instance, was transmitted to Hitler in the form of an enquiry as to the nature of Germany's position with reference to the Guarantee of that state. It was plain that Britain still abided by the basic principle which had guided her policy of appeasement over the past months and thus it was reasonable for Hitler to presume that her declaration to France was little or no evidence of Britain taking a firmer line in Europe generally. Weizsäcker later criticised this psychologically inept approach to Hitler:

"...they did not use the right way of talking to Hitler, which would have been to declare unambiguously that they would put up with no further acts of force.....Instead of getting Hitler to drop any ideas of using force against Prague because this would be too dangerous, they sought to bind him morally." (101)

Had Britain's recuperated strength been extended at this time from France to Czechoslovakia a far more salutary influence would have been exerted on Germany. But it was not yet time for Chamberlain so to abandon appeasement.

The relevance of the February declaration for relations with France is self-evident. February generally witnessed a clarification of the united British and French position with reference to possible German aggression against other West European countries. (102) Arrangements and procedure were agreed upon for the conduct of staff conversations. The scope of the projected talks was indicative of the suspicion with which the dictators were viewed, despite the frantic hopes to which Chamberlain still clung and the alleviation in general European tension that February had brought. Taking the standpoint of a war situation the conversations were to cover all possible theatres of war in which joint Anglo-French operations could take place, including the Far East. They were to proceed by stages:

- "(i) 1st. Stage: Discussion...of...general strategical conception of a war in which Britain and France were engaged as allies against Germany and Italy...
- (ii) 2nd. Stage: Discussion in broad outline of plans in the several theatres of operation.
- (iii) 3rd. Stage: Preparation of detailed joint plans."(103)

The idea of staff talks of this kind had been the product of the anxiety in the latter half of January created by the indications of some impending aggression by Hitler together with the rising tempo of Italian claims. A matter of days now was to show that the overall brighter aspect of Europe during February did not obviate the advisability of such action on the part of Britain and France. Henderson, on the last day of February foresaw 'in the immediate future a period of relative calm', (104) but there were other reports prophesying the event that was to take place in a fortnight's time. Ashton-Gwatkin during his visit to Germany had received intimations from Ribbentrop to the effect that 'there was some further task for Germany to do in Central Europe'. (105)

It needed less than an intelligent mind to deduce that such a task involved, again, Czechoslovakia, for

there were indications from both Prague and Bratislava that the ingredients for a crisis were maturing. Although the Czech government were doing all in their power to achieve stable relations with the Reich, greatly increased activity on the part of the German Volksgruppe was umbraging certain elements in the country. Troutbeck, the British minister in Prague, reported that the speeches of Herr Kurdt, leader of the Volksgruppe, together with the hostile attitude of the German press were 'painfully reminiscent of the situation last year'.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ German influence on the Czech government had become particularly marked; it seemed that Krejci, chief of the general staff and 'an ardent supporter of the old tradition' had been forced to resign by German pressure and the Reich was also urging the dismissal of certain members of the cabinet associated with the pre-Munich regime.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ This latter subject had been a cause of friction within Czechoslovakia between the separate central Slovak and Ruthenian Diets, an area where dissension was growing rapidly. Minority problems (which were easily fostered by Germany) were an ever-growing threat to the unity of the country. The predominant split was between Slovakia, which was on very close terms

with the Reich, and the Czechs, who largely showed an
(108)
anti-German bias . This problem was becoming more
intense as a result of the difficult economic position
of Slovakia. A report from Bratislava on February 26
gave cause for concern:

"The financial position of the Government
seems to be growing rapidly worse. The
Czechs are with-holding their financial
support and it looks as if in a few months
a disastrous situation might arise."(109)

The state of affairs in Czechoslovakia was such that
Germany could turn to her own use at any time. This
was a discouraging fact that could not be denied in
Britain, and by the end of February fears for the safety
of the remaining rump of Czechoslovakia from German
action were strongly felt:

"While recent secret information suggests
that any plan for mobilisation early in
March may have been postponed, reports
have recently reached us pointing to the
possibility of a military occupation of
Czechoslovakia."(110)

Such was Halifax's distressing news to Washington on
February 27. It was intelligence that heralded the
destruction of the last vestiges of faith in German good-
will and with it the very structure of post-Munich
appeasement.

It was natural that while such ominous reports had to receive the closest scrutiny by the policy-makers in Britain, their accuracy was to be doubted. Indeed, their accuracy continued to be questioned right up till finally proved. This obstinacy was even to be accompanied by outward shows of satisfaction with the European scene. Such tactics however, disguised a deeper feeling - fear. For, by the end of February most of the genuine optimism in the British approach to Europe which had been generated in the early part of the month, had been dissipated. The healthier state of Britain's defences, the revival of activity in economic appeasement, and the promise held out of an early termination to the conflict in Spain, had all conspired to afford Chamberlain a new lease of life and hope in his search for peace. At no time since Munich had the omens seemed so good. But this optimism had been short-lived. Confidence as the main characteristic of British policy had been overcome by fear. Strength in defences had enabled Chamberlain to adopt, during early February, an attitude of greater strength in Europe, but subsequent events had revealed that a solution to Europe's problems was no closer. The deterioration of Franco-Italian relations

had done much to demonstrate this. It was, however, the explosive nature of affairs within Czechoslovakia together with the menacing suspicions of German designs, that was the most eloquent adviser. For here was a situation uncomfortably reminiscent of the immediately pre-Munich days. At no time during the spate of rumours in mid-January had there been such feasible grounds for concern, for not one of the suspicions aimed at Germany then had been supported by a state of affairs so likely to prove its true foundation as that now presented in Czechoslovakia.

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Chapter nine

Spring Fever

The early part of March was, for the British, a time of evaluation of their policy towards Germany. During the winter the immediate efforts of appeasement had been focused on Italy. But this could never be - and was never intended to be - an end in itself. It was very much a means to an end, for success or failure ultimately lay in the ability to restrain the German Fuhrer from the illegal use of force. Thus towards the end of January and during February attention had been focused again on Germany. Speculation as to Hitler's intentions together with the deterioration in the state of the German economy had assisted this re-orientation but it was inevitable because of the appeasers' desires to make some headway where it mattered most. The stimulus given to economic relations with Germany laid the foundations for hope in this direction. Economic relations, however, like Rome, could be no more than a stepping-stone to that necessary political relation with Germany of sufficient trust, honesty, and soundness to secure a lasting peace. So Britain's economic policy to Germany was, in conception, a vehicle to carry the desired political rapprochement.

During February it had been sufficient to get the vehicle into reasonable running order. But once arrangements had been made for official government economic discussions the question was bound to arise as to the exact relationship of political endeavours to progress in the economic field. The issue was pinpointed by Henderson on March 3. Two possibilities existed as far as he saw it:

- (a) Whether on the economic side His Majesty's Government should refuse to go further in the direction of cooperation with Germany, so long as she pursues her present course of senseless rearmament, on the ground that any assistance would simply be employed for strengthening still further her military position; or
- (b) Whether economic co-operation should be pursued in the hope that the political atmosphere may be improved thereby and Germany may be finally induced to refrain from any political adventures which she might contemplate, and perhaps even desist up to a certain point from the present armaments race."(1)

This was clearly a matter of the highest importance reaching to the heart of appeasement.

Henderson was not prepared to cast his vote definitely in favour of either course. To him there were strong arguments in support of both possibilities; to show unreadiness for economic co-operation might

be interpreted by Germany as a measure of economic encirclement which could incite her to increased armaments activity, while the benefits accruing to her from continued economic dealings with Britain could equally be ploughed into her rearmament programme.

He was therefore inclined to sit on the fence:

"In these circumstances it appears to me that some middle course is the best temporary solution, whereby we could co-operate on a scale which in itself would not be so appreciable as materially to affect German rearmament, but which might be just enough in itself to give the German mind the impression that voluntary renunciation of excessive rearmament might lead to a large measure of co-operation and goodwill from Great Britain."(2)

This whole question had been brought to the fore by a memorandum from Colonel Mason-Macfarlane to Henderson on the military aspect of economic concessions to Germany. Mason-Macfarlane disagreed with Henderson:

"If Germany is given facilities for maintaining her export trade on a sufficient scale, there seems to be but little prospect that we shall see any reduction in the tempo of armament. If she is not given such facilities there is every possibility that a reduction of the speed with which she is rearming and of the scope of her armaments will be forced upon her...
...From the military point of view

concessions made by us to the present regime in Germany are generally to be deplored." (3)

The danger in this policy was that Hitler might be tempted to embark on a major war rather than submit to pressure of this nature from Britain. But Henderson, in his later writings, claimed that he was far from convinced by this argument:

"I was always disinclined to accept the over-simplified theory that Hitler would necessarily be obliged to seek further adventure in order to avoid economic collapse." (4)

If Henderson genuinely believed early in March 1938 that to with-hold economic aid from Germany would not induce her to embark on some further territorial adventure, why did he not agree with Mason-Macfarlane's conclusions and advise his government accordingly? Perhaps the above quotation from Failure of a Mission is an example of wisdom after the event. On the other hand Henderson's behaviour in failing to support Mason-Macfarlane's views although he agreed with them would be understandable if he already strongly suspected that Hitler was, in any case, intending some European adventure in the near future. For then, to relax the one stable element in Anglo-German

relations could be used by Hitler as propaganda in support of his premeditated action. Similarly to confer unconditional economic aid on Germany would serve only to encourage Hitler in any intention he had in mind. Henderson wanted to steer a middle course which would not commit Britain in either direction and this was because he already had a distinct presentiment of what was to happen in less than two weeks' time.

Only three days before Henderson despatched these observations on economic relations with Germany to London, he had reported that he anticipated a period of relative calm in the immediate future. ⁽⁵⁾ His changed opinion (culpably not communicated to Halifax) came about as a result of impressions gained of Hitler at a function on March 1. This was the occasion of a dinner given by Hitler for the Diplomatic Corps. Henderson's account of his feelings at the time, as expressed in his memoirs, is worth quoting in full:

"My first indication of imminent trouble was at the annual banquet which Hitler gave to the diplomatic corps, somewhat later than usual, on March 1st. After dinner Hitler used to remain standing in the drawing room, and would speak for some five or ten minutes in turn to each of the Heads of Missions in the order of their precedence. The apparent friend-

liness which he had shown at the motor exhibition was notably absent at this dinner. At the exhibition he had shaken me by the hand not once, but three times. On this occasion he carefully avoided looking me in the face when he was speaking to me: he kept his eyes fixed over my right shoulder and confined his remarks to general subjects, while stressing the point that it was not Britain's business to interfere with Germany in Central Europe. I had heard it all before, but, though he said nothing new or startling, his attitude left me with a feeling of vague uneasiness. In the light of wisdom after the event, I have no doubt that he was already weighing the various contingencies in regard to Prague, and making his plans for March 15."(6)

While in all fairness it must be admitted that there was nothing tangible here for Henderson to report in evidence of German perfidy the extract shows that he was sufficiently impressed by Hitler's demeanour to warrant genuine suspicion. It was, moreover, a suspicion supported by Weizsäcker's hints to him over the past few weeks:

"Since February I had ventured the guess to Henderson: "Crisis - yes. War - no."(7)

Nothing of this reached the foreign office in London. Henderson's report to Halifax on March 2 was neutral, even slightly optimistic:

"After agreeing on necessity for gradual improvement of atmosphere, Herr Hitler observed with considerable feeling that the only question which still separated

the two countries was the colonial one, that he admired the British Empire, and had no desire to work against its interests, but that the latter in return must recognise the special position of Germany on the continent." (8)

To a suggestion for confidential talks to continue the spirit of Munich 'Herr Hitler bowed but without comment and did not give me the impression that he welcomed the idea.'

This is plainly much less of the truth than Henderson reveals in his book, though his reflections might well contain a strong element of after-thought. Yet it appears that, up to a point, he was certainly trying to mask reality. Why he should have done this needs no great understanding. Henderson was, perhaps, the appeaser ad absurdum. For as the months after Munich had spun out their disparaging tale the main characteristic of the appeasers became hope rather than faith. This has been noted in Chamberlain; it was a shade less true of Halifax. But it was the very life-blood of Henderson - a stubborn hope that refused to despair and could only be discarded through the very extinction of its own object. His willingness to concede to German demands was marked in the dealings of the International

Commission. It is possible that he was galvanised into a virtual 'peace at any price' policy by the might of the German military machine. He described his position at Berlin as 'a soul-scarifying job'.⁽⁹⁾ Feiling describes him as 'clutching at what seemed least unreasonable in an unreasonable world',⁽¹⁰⁾ and his eagerness to anticipate the best while diminishing signs to the contrary was probably a sublimation of his worst fears. In deference to 'the strength of the Nazi movement' he was at this time anxious to avoid all points of friction with Germany 'in which British interests are not directly or vitally involved', even to the extent of producing some kind of 'British neutrality in the event of Germany being engaged in the East'.⁽¹¹⁾ Bearing all this in mind it is not surprising that Henderson's impressions of Hitler, as gained on March 1, were kept private.

Two days later, however, there came more tangible indication of German designs and that Czechoslovakia was the immediate target of Hitler's ambition. This was Ribbentrop's reply to the British and French communications of February 8 enquiring the attitude of the German government to the question of the

guarantee of Czechoslovakia. It amounted to a virtual denial of the existence of such a guarantee accompanied by a sharp rap on the allied knuckles for interfering in a matter which was not really their concern!

"The German Government is...fully aware that fundamentally the general line of development in this European area falls primarily within the sphere of the most important interests of the German Reich, not only from the historical point of view, but in the light of geographical and above all economic necessity." (12)

This was a strong pointer to Hitler's desire to take the initiative in that part of Central Europe without arousing active sympathy from Britain and France. It also comprised yet another denial of the validity of Munich which had specifically provided this guarantee. The German note argued that 'the assumption by England and France of such a guarantee' had come at a very ill-advised time owing to the present differences of opinion between Czechoslovakia and her neighbours, and that it would not provide any safeguard against the development or intensification of these tensions. It was even suggested that to proclaim a guarantee:

"...would rather have the effect of accentuating the differences between that country and the surrounding States." (13)

While dissuading the French and British governments from taking any steps to define a guarantee Germany tacitly excused her own liability in the matter by inferring that the problem of the Polish and Hungarian minorities had not yet been finally settled owing to those differences of opinion still existing. (14)

The British government, apparently, accepted the note without offence or objection. Such reaction is, of course, symptomatic of the prevailing mood of appeasement of letting the sleeping dogs of Central Europe lie, of 'the avoidance of constant and vexatious interference in matters in which British interests are not directly or vitally involved,' (15) to use Henderson's words. But in this particular instance the failure to act reflected anything but credit on the country. Originally Czechoslovakia had only agreed to the Anglo-French Plan of September 19 on the clear understanding that the guarantee of her boundaries against unprovoked aggression formed a specific clause of it. (16) The existence of this guarantee had been used by the government as a powerful argument in defence of the Munich Agreement -

they considered it as 'a moral obligation' (17)

After that their tardiness in raising the question (18) with Germany has already been pointed out. But now that that action had brought a response and shown that Germany was ignoring the existence of any such guarantee and thereby facilitating any future transgression on her part of that country's independence, Britain preferred to remain quiet about it than to fulfill her promises to Czechoslovakia and clarify her position with regard to this 'embarrassing (19) commitment.' Admittedly there had been no request from the Czechs for an elaboration - to them 'the (20) guarantee was apparently in cold storage' but this did not diminish Britain's responsibility in the event of aggression against them. Her silence now, at a time when suspicion of German action in Czechoslovakia was gradually mounting, was a denial of that moral obligation she had undertaken.

Not only was it a dishonourable omission but also one of folly. By acquiescing hopefully in the stated German intention to:

"...await a clarification of the internal development of Czechoslovakia and the improvement of that country's relations with the surrounding states." (21)

Britain encouraged the event she hoped to avert. Passiveness in this case made a mockery of appeasement. For it can be asserted with all confidence that Britain's failure to act upon Germany's note could only have given Hitler good reason to expect that he would not have to reckon with armed opposition from the allied powers if he threatened the independence of Czechoslovakia.

Such reasoning was all the more valid when considered in the context of Britain's recent expression of solidarity with France. A deterioration in relations between France and Italy over the latter's colonial aspirations had brought the spectre of war in Europe much closer and had elicited from Britain a categorical assertion that she would fight if the interests of her ally were threatened. But when Germany refuses to countenance the guarantee of Czechoslovakia's frontiers as being operative, Britain; having previously pledged her support to this guarantee, fails to raise the slightest objection! The logical interpretation for Germany especially at a time when Czechoslovakian politics were in a precarious state was that British concern

for that country had somewhat dwindled. It could even imply a general demarcation of British interest between Western and Central Europe, that Britain was tacitly acknowledging the latter area as one of predominantly German interest. If Hitler was having any doubts as to his ability to successfully plunder the remainder of the Czechoslovak state Britain had relieved him of them. The truth is, of course, that she had never wished to be bound by a serious
(22)
guarantee and the more she suspected German action, the less she wanted it. If Britain had originally entered into the guarantee as a matter of expedience she was soon to suffer the consequences.

The German note was forwarded to Halifax by Henderson on March 3. Henderson refrained from making any personal comment. Five days later news was received that 'relations between Czechs and
(23)
Slovaks seem to be heading for a crisis'. Matters had come to a head over a Slovakian demand for financial assistance, and it was also suspected that the Slovaks were eager for a large measure of independence in army matters. This report was indicative of the way things were going but on the

same day (March 8) Halifax received a second report
from Newton which gave cause for hope. (24) The Czech
press had implied that a virtual capitulation of the
Slovaks was likely. The hope was short-lived. By
the 10th the crisis had erupted with the dismissal
of the Slovak government and arrest of its premier
by the Czech President. (25) Only at this stage, when
the die was cast, would Henderson inform London of
his fears for Czechoslovakia. (26)

It was not until the 10th. that Halifax received
Henderson's original communication regarding Britain's
politico-economic policy to Germany. Economic
relations with Germany were suspended within a few
days as a result of the crisis over Czecho-Slovakia,
so there is no indication of official reaction to the
problem raised. Before the situation had become
acute, however, Henderson had made further observations
in a communication to Halifax in which he gave a full
appraisal of Anglo-German relations. (27) There was
now little doubt in his mind that Britain should push
on with economic appeasement. Convinced that
'Europe will never be stable and peaceful until
Germany is once more prosperous' he argued against

Mason-Macfarlane's desires to restrict trading:

"If there were any apparent constructive value in the policy of standing aloof and keeping Germany lean, one might be prepared to recommend it. It is, however, difficult to see any practical advantage in it, even if we could - which we probably cannot - keep one of our best customers permanently lean... the denial of all help and the refusal of all sympathetic understanding is calculated to produce a feeling of despair which, even if it does not actually bring about the explosion that we fear, will at least leave behind it a heritage of hatred and a desire for revenge." (28)

The policy he advised was aimed at persuading Germany to fall in line with the appeasers for she was, under the circumstances prevailing in Central Europe, faced with two alternative courses:

"...either to misuse her great strength for purposes of political domination and the satisfaction of restless and ever-increasing ambitions; or to abandon jungle law in its cruder forms and gradually to return to normalcy and international co-operation."

Britain's ability to influence this choice was, Henderson thought, considerable:

"...Germany's future course may to a great extent depend on the policy which His Majesty's Government will adopt towards her at this critical time."

He strongly discouraged that 'policy of despair'

which considered that German world domination would be the inevitable result of her 'immensely powerful military organisation', and saw no viable alternative for British policy than to display such generosity to Germany as might convince her of Britain's benevolence. Included in this attitude should be a reticence to concern herself too much with affairs of central Europe; if Germany thought that Britain was prepared to concede a large measure of integrity in this area to the Reich, she would be more likely to 'return to normalcy'. It would also greatly reduce the chances of Hitler precipitating difficulties in the west.

"Germany's continental future lies eastward and it is probably not unfortunate that it should do so. The 'Drang nach Osten' is a reality but the 'Drang nach Westen' will only become so if Germany finds all the avenues to the East blocked or if western opposition is such as to convince Hitler that he cannot go eastward without first having rendered it innocuous." (29)

This was just what Germany had been wanting for some time, what Germany had demanded in her reply about the guarantee, and what Hitler needed to give him ease of movement against Czechoslovakia. Henderson was so sensitive about Hitler's immediate intentions and afraid of their consequences that he would prefer vaguely to dissociate Britain from the turmoil of

Central Europe in the wild hope that Hitler did not entertain the use of illegal force, than to make a move which would deter such methods.

By the time London had received this report from Berlin its whole structure had been demolished by Germany's invasion of Prague. Even up to a few days before this event Chamberlain's hopes for Europe had not suffered and were indeed rising high. He was clinging tenaciously to the prospect of disarmament discussions which he saw promised in the healing of Franco-Italian wounds (30) and which had been assisted by France's recognition of Franco's regime in Spain (31) at the end of February. A calmer attitude in the Italian press was a good sign. (32) Great hopes were invested in Stanley's forthcoming visit to Germany and this spirit of cooperation was being emulated by France who was also approaching Germany on economic (33) topics. Above all, perhaps, Henderson's highly optimistic survey of February 28 which endorsed and increased Chamberlain's own hopes, was a sign that Europe was at last progressing to permanently happier times. Chamberlain gave vent to his enthusiasm at a

conference with lobby press representatives on March 9. Six days before appeasement was to be swept back to its pre-Munich days he confidently asserted that 'Europe is settling down to a period of tranquility' (34) and that the government was hoping to arrange a disarmament conference before the end of the year. It appears that what he had intended to be merely background information was reported verbatim, (35) but it is, none the less, proof of his outlook on the European scene.

It is truly regrettable that at so critical a time the prime mover of appeasement should have been so hidden from reality. His own 'insidious conviction' (36) in the rightness of his policy had certainly clouded things. But had the Czech press given a clearer indication of the degree of tension existing in Czechoslovak politics, (37) and had Henderson reported his uneasiness in the early days of March, Chamberlain would certainly have had a more accurate estimation of the state of affairs in Europe. As things were his insularity of outlook was fatal.

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Chapter ten

Hitler in Hradschin

On March 10 the Home Secretary, Samuel Hoare, taking his cue from the Prime Minister's optimistic tones of the day before, spoke confidently to his constituents at the Chelsea Town Hall of the outlook for Europe. He talked of an approaching 'Golden Age' to be engineered by the four leading statesmen in Europe, Chamberlain, Deladier, Hitler and Stalin who were faced with 'the greatest opportunity that has ever been offered to the leaders of the world'. The European situation was apparently ripe for a glorious harmony to be produced by these statesmen, who:

"if they worked with a singleness of purpose and a unity of action to that end, might in an incredibly short time transform the whole history of the world."

Britain, claimed Hoare, was ready to meet the challenge , for:

"confidence...has returned, hope has taken the place of fear, moral and physical robustness has overcome hysteria and hesitation."(1)

This was a speech which Hoare was later to claim to have been 'misrepresented'. Little wonder, for before he had even started speaking the crisis in Central Europe, which was to reveal the shallowness of his remarks, had been precipitated by the dismissal of

the Slovak government and arrest of its premier by
(3)
the Czech president.

From then events moved swiftly. (4) On March 11
Prague attempted to come to an understanding with the
new Slovak government but at a meeting of the cabinet
that evening appeared Burckel and Seyss-Inquart with
five German generals ordering the government to announce
Slovakian independence. The order was not obeyed as
the new premier, Sidor, wished to continue negotia-
tions with Prague. In the meantime the ex-premier,
Tiso, was escorted to Germany for an interview with
Hitler, while a large number of German troops concentra-
ted near the Czech frontier. At the same time the
German press swung into violent action against
Czechoslovakia, preparing public opinion for what
was to follow. (5) Tiso met Hitler and an assortment
of German officials in the New Reich Chancellry on the
evening of the 13th. Annoyed that his order for
Slovakian independence had not already been obeyed,
Hitler issued Tiso with an ultimatum to the effect that
the Czechs would be 'crushed by the German steam
roller' (6) within eighteen hours unless he proclaimed
Slovakian independence. Tiso assured the Fuhrer he
could rely on Slovakia and claimed he was glad to have

heard the Fuhrer's attitude towards Slovakia at first hand. He rushed back to Bratislava, resumed office as President, and announced Slovakia's independence the following day.

The dissolution of the Czechoslovak state that suited Hitler's needs so admirably, had taken place. The Prague government had been helpless against these German interferences. In this critical situation the President of the Czechs, Hacha, had but one choice - an appeal to Germany. This again fell in with Hitler's design and was, in fact, prompted by him. On the afternoon of the 14th. Hacha and his foreign minister Chvalkovsky were bluntly informed that their presence was required in Berlin. They arrived that evening and the stage was set for the final, dramatic scene.

During these four critical days the foreign office in London was, of course, largely in blissful ignorance of these machinations. But this does not mean that Britain failed to draw logical conclusions from the evidence at her disposal. The dismissal of the Slovak government, the heated German press attack against the Czechs, the incitement of the Slovaks on the Vienna radio, the military activity, and Tiso's

visit to Berlin were all reported to Halifax. On the 10th. Henderson, as a result of reports from his military attache and the vice-consul at Dresden, at last made his worst fears known to his superiors:

"If Herr Hitler seeks adventure the most obvious form which it would be likely to take would be some coup in Czecho-Slovakia...Germany is so situated that it is possible for her to foment almost any intrigue there with success... The present constitutional crisis in Czecho-Slovakia tends to render this matter one of actuality with Germany possibly fishing in troubled waters though with what exact ultimate object I cannot say." (7)

The next day he was resigning himself to the 'unpleasant fact' that 'no solution of the Czech problem will be worth anything unless it has German approval', (8) but the hope that Hitler would not take things into his own hands persisted stubbornly. Henderson advised strongly against Britain adopting any attitude to Hitler which could possibly drive him over the edge:

"...I doubt whether Herr Hitler has yet taken any decision and I consider it therefore highly desirable that nothing should be said or published abroad during the weekend which will excite him to precipitate action." (9)

His advice was taken. Britain waited to see which way the coin would drop.

On the 12th Henderson was still unable to give any concrete evidence that Hitler intended to exploit the situation. Yet it was acknowledged that whatever solution was to be found to the internal troubles of Czechoslovakia, Hitler had an ideal excuse for intervention:

"...he can for purposes of public consumption here base his action either on Germany's right to protect German minority or on Slovak right to self-determination." (10)

There was still no reaction from the British government when on the 13th there were extensive (11) troop movements towards the Czechoslovak frontier, (12) and the violence of the German press was increasing, indicating:

"...that German government is contemplating some form of intervention either by force or by ultimatum under armed menace." (13)

Newton in Prague now expected serious trouble within (14) forty-eight hours.

The policy behind the continuing British silence is contained in a foreign office memorandum dated March 13. It amounted virtually to a carte blanche for Hitler's future action claiming Britain's inability to prevent him from acting as he desired,

and absolving Britain of any responsibility
towards Czechoslovakia:

"If the internal situation in Germany has convinced him that some action is essential in Czecho-Slovakia there is nothing we can do to stop him short of war. As is well known, the Germans have always maintained that Czecho-Slovakia is no concern of H.M.G. and it is certainly the case that we should only have any locus standi for making a protest at Berlin if Germany were guilty of territorial aggression against the Czecho-Slovak State. In that event it might be held that we were bound by our undertaking in the annex to the Munich Agreement to stand by our offer in the Anglo-French proposals of September 19 to join in an international guarantee of the new boundaries of the Czecho-Slovak state against unprovoked aggression. We could not, however, take any effective action unless the French Government also decided to take action and as the German Government have hitherto refused to bring the general international guarantee into force by implementing their own Munich pledge, it seems to me most unlikely that France would wish to take any action in the matter." (15)

British concern was directed entirely towards good relations being preserved with Germany. It was therefore decided not to make any protest that the government was not prepared to implement, and also to refrain from making any statement which would, it was thought, be ineffective in every respect apart from

irritating Hitler. Providing that Germany avoided direct territorial aggression the situation would remain 'technically an internal constitutional question with which we are not directly concerned' (16)

Britain's silence throughout the increasing tension was evidence of her virtual abandoning of Czechoslovakia and as such could only encourage Hitler in his determination to reduce the country to a German protectorate. This British attitude (17) was quite apparent to the Germans and was, moreover, endorsed by Henderson. Weizsäcker records in his memoirs his conviction at the time:

"...they were not prepared to come to the assistance of Prague. This was most obvious in a conversation I had with the British Ambassador on March 12 and 13. Henderson was emphatic that Germany had a predominant interest in the Czech area." (18)

This British attitude was equally shared in the Quai d'Orsay where non-intervention was the general policy. On the morning of March 15 Coulondre, the French ambassador in Berlin, delivered a weak objection to the turn of events in Czechoslovakia, (19) but its lack of force was virtually a tacit recognition of the French belief that Czechoslovakia was left clear for Hitler to play the game the way

he chose.

The day before the occupation of Prague there was news that Hitler had made up his mind to take action on the separation of Slovakia from Bohemia. (21) It came from a 'generally well informed source' but Henderson still hoped that no 'final decision' had really been taken. By mid-day of that day he should have been in no doubt as to what was about to happen. For in an interview with Weizsäcker he was given the broadest of hints. Weizsäcker elaborates in his memoirs:

"I was able to give a hint at the last minute to the British Ambassador... I assured him that, whatever might happen, everything would be done in a decent manner, and when Henderson put the direct question whether the German Army had been assigned any part in the business, I answered that the German Army always behaved decently. I could go no further than this." (22)

Henderson corroborates this story in his own memoirs and recounts how he was filled with 'the gloomiest forebodings'. Yet, as can be seen from his report on this interview to Halifax, he still endeavoured to hope for the best: 'Any general impression was that no definite line of action has been decided upon' (24) Thus, when he was in receipt of sufficient (23)

indications to forecast definite German action against Czechoslovakia, he condescended to report merely that 'the use of force was certainly not excluded if Prague Government proved recalcitrant'. (25)

Later the same day (March 14) it was reported that the Slovak government had voted for complete independence (26) and that Hacha and Chvalkovsky were en route for Berlin. (27) Henderson had encouraged them to go (28) for 'the Czech Government was alone in a position to save itself by its action.' (29) Had they gone before 'things might have turned out differently'; he maintained later. But he knew it was now 'too late' (30) and that 'all was lost'.

Only now did the British government attempt to restrain Hitler, to halt the remorseless signs which were coming in from Central Europe. At 8.30p.m. on the 14th (a bare four and a half hours before the fatal Hitler/Hacha meeting) Halifax despatched the following instructions to Henderson:

"Please take earliest possible opportunity of conveying following message to the German Government.
His Majesty's Government have no desire to interfere unnecessarily in matters with which other Governments may be more directly concerned than this country.
They are however, as the German

Government will surely appreciate, deeply concerned for the success of all efforts to restore confidence and a relaxation of tension in Europe. This seems to them more particularly desirable at a moment when a start is being made with discussions on economic subjects to which, as His Majesty's Government believe, the German Government attach no less importance than they do themselves, and the fruitful development of which depends so directly upon general state of confidence.

From that point of view they would deplore any action in Central Europe which would cause a setback to the growth of this general confidence on which all improvement in the economic situation depends and to which such improvement might in its turn contribute." (31)

This pathetic appeal to Hitler to be a good boy was quite out of keeping with the reality of the situation and is symptomatic of the wild hopes of the appeasers that Hitler would not finally reverse his pledges and ridicule their policy. Henderson later admitted that 'nothing but the direct and immediate threat of war would have stopped Hitler at that stage.' (32)

The nature of the British appeal would have been entirely ineffective. The occupation of Bohemia at 6.00a.m. the following morning made the delivery of the note little more than a formality.

The events of the night of March 14-15 in the New Reich Chancellery need not be dealt with at length. Hitler prepared the setting for the meeting with the Czech President in meticulous detail so that everything conspired to extort Hacha's signature to Czechoslovakia's death warrant. (33) After a three hours' ordeal the aged Czech President having faced a fierce tirade from Hitler, been hounded pitilessly by Goring and Ribbentrop around the conference table for his signature, been threatened with a bomb attack on Prague, and twice been revived from faints by doctors' injections, finally capitulated to the German demands. Before doing so he had sought the consent of the Prague cabinet by telephone and ordered that no resistance should be offered to the invading German forces.

Not only had Hitler enforced his will on the Czechs, but by securing Hacha's signature to the 'treaty' he was also able to give his coup a pseudo-legal context. Czechoslovakia (or Czechia as it became known by the Germans for a short time) had become a German protectorate.

At 10.35a.m. the text of the Agreement which made it such, was received at the foreign office in Britain:

"...The Czecho-Slovak President declared that ...he placed the destiny of the Czech people and country with confidence in the hands of the Fuhrer of the German Reich.

The Fuhrer accepted this declaration and expressed his determination to take the Czech people under the protection of the German Reich and to guarantee to it an autonomous development of its national life in accordance with its particular characteristics." (34)

Hitler had meanwhile journeyed to Prague and in a proclamation to the German people made from the upper windows of the Hradschin Palace issued the memorable words "Czechoslovakia has ceased to exist." (35) On the following day Slovakia placed herself under the protection of the Reich, (36) and Ruthenia was over-run by Hungarian troops. (37)

In Britain the appeasers reflected upon the crisis in the same way they had anticipated it. Their concern was still for Anglo-German relations rather than the fate of Czechoslovakia. When von Dirksen officially presented Halifax with the text of the declaration Halifax:

"...expressed regret that the events of the last few days had created fresh unrest and upheavals and had interrupted the process already begun of a general pacification...In Anglo-German relations the clock had been put back considerably." (38)

As a mark of Britain's feelings the visit of Stanley and Henderson to Berlin was postponed - in view of the circumstances prevailing it was decided 'inopportune'. (39)

Immediately upon the occupation of Prague the French ambassador in Berlin had drafted a note of protest against the action of the German government regarding

(40)
Czechoslovakia. In response to a query from the

French ambassador in London as to whether the British government was going to make any official move in Berlin, Halifax stated that the government 'had not contemplated anything further in this sense at the present time, not seeing what useful purpose would be

(41)
immediately served'. Even the method Hitler had used in obtaining Hacha's 'request' for protection, the gist of which was known in the foreign office, (42) did not elicit any British protest.

In the House of Commons Chamberlain exhibited no sympathy for the Czechs and avoided putting any blame on Hitler:

"I have so often heard charges of breach of faith banded about which did not seem to me to be founded upon sufficient premises, that I do not wish to associate myself today with any charges of that character." (43)

He read out the official government statement which explained in clear terms the position that was adopted vis a vis Czechoslovakia, taking full advantage of the Slovak excuse.

"In our opinion the situation has radically altered since the Slovak Diet declared the independence of Slovakia. The effect of this declaration put an end by internal disruption to the State whose frontiers we had proposed to guarantee...and His Majesty's Government cannot accordingly hold themselves any longer bound by this obligation." (44)

Weizsäcker states how Chamberlain 'abandoned the
(45)
Czechs without any signs of feeling'. This is no exaggeration. Chamberlain did not feel obliged to recommend any practical action to parliament. Though he regretted this sign from Hitler which was not 'in accord with the spirit of the Munich Agreement' he would not be deflected from the cause of appeasement, maintaining that it was 'of too great significance to the happiness of mankind for us lightly to give it
(46)
up or set it on one side.'

This was, however, to be far from the final word on the matter. Chamberlain was soon to find out that the country and, indeed, many in his party did not support this view. This latest application of

appeasement transgressed the public conscience. For Prague had shattered the very foundations on which appeasement stood. A pre-requisite of the policy was that the principal person who threatened lasting peace in Europe could be finally persuaded to behave with moderation and to discard the use of force as a diplomatic lever. The Munich crisis had put the likelihood of this very much in doubt, but the ensuing agreement together with Hitler's declaration supporting the method of consultation had given a base for renewed confidence. Hitler's act at that time could also be justified as a reasonable territorial alignment reversing the inequality of the Versailles settlement and returning Germans to their native land. But the events of March 15 could not be excused as conforming with any rights of natural development or self-determination. This fact was fully appreciated and equally rued in certain German circles.

"Politically it was...a cardinal mistake - in fact, an irreparable mistake. Up till then Hitler had successfully operated with the slogan: 'Germans to Germans'. To abandon this principle and to forget so soon his solemn affirmations that his territorial demands were satisfied, inevitably had the effect of making Chamberlain and Deladier appear as dupes." (47)

The march on Prague was the signal for the conversion of many of the previous staunch supporters of appeasement in England. One such was Lord Lothian who was thereby finally convinced of German ambitions:

"Up till then it was possible to believe that Germany was only concerned with recovery of what might be called the normal rights of a great power, but it now seems clear that Hitler is in effect a fanatical gangster who will stop at nothing to beat down all possibility of resistance anywhere to his will." (48)

The person who was to convince Chamberlain of the need for a firmer outlook on Germany was Halifax. He too had seen the light:

"After March and the final rape of Prague it was no longer possible to hope that Hitler's purposes and ambitions were limited by any boundaries of race, and the lust of continental or world mastery seemed to stand out in stark relief." (49)

Even Henderson was presuming that some sterner attitude (50) would be adopted by the government to Germany.

Halifax was not prepared to let the prime minister's obstinacy to ruin the conservative party. He faced him bluntly with the facts. Unless he declared unequivocally what the country's reaction to the German aggression was, there would be a revolt in the House. (51) Chamberlain gradually came round. On the 16th he

informed the House that no protest had yet been sent to Berlin but that Henderson might be recalled for consultation (52) - a tacit way of communicating displeasure to the German government. The prime minister's eyes were further opened by the stormy reception given to Sir John Simon after a speech in which he had advised non-intervention. The indignation of the House could not be related to party lines. It truly reflected public opinion and whatever the rift with Halifax, Chamberlain could not ignore this. Public opinion had been all the more outraged by Hitler's action against the Czechs because it came as such a shock. Up to the news of the invasion the confidences of Chamberlain and Hoare as professed but a few days earlier, were still on the lips of the British public. Indicative of this outlook 'Punch' on March 14 had printed a cartoon depicting John Bull waking up from a distressing nightmare and declaring 'Thank goodness that's over' as an animated war scare vanished out of the window; the editor ironically commented underneath the cartoon: 'Pessimists predicted "another major crisis" in the middle of this month'. Such an outlook was both deeply shocked and greatly outraged by the reverse of the next day. Virtually the whole national press on the

16th strongly denounced the German action. There was such animosity in British opinion that Chamberlain was forced to amend his views - or resign. Von Dirksen recorded the effect of public opinion:

"The stiffening of Britain's attitude did not originate with the Government but with the politically-minded public, with Parliament and the constituencies." (53)

He considered it a factor of 'decisive importance'.

Halifax's advice, supported by this irrefutable evidence, was accepted by Chamberlain. He was due to speak at Birmingham on the 17th and this was his opportunity to repeal himself in British eyes. He completely re-drafted his speech and it was a completely different Chamberlain that was seen and heard that evening. While not regretting the Munich Agreement and maintaining the correctness of his subsequent policy, he petulantly attacked Hitler's recent action.

"Surely as a joint signatory of the Munich Agreement I was entitled, if Herr Hitler thought it ought to be undone, to that consultation which is provided for in the Munich Declaration. Instead of that, he has taken the law into his own hands." (54)

This had changed the whole prospect of Europe. 'Is this the end of an old adventure', he asked, 'or the

beginning of a new?...is this, in fact, a step in the direction of an attempt to dominate the world by force?' Not only did he condemn the aggression but also issue a stern warning to the opponents of peace that Britain's position should not be under-rated. He concluded:

"I feel bound to repeat that, while I am not prepared to engage this country by new and unspecified commitments operating under conditions which cannot be foreseen, yet no greater mistake could be made than to suppose that, because it believes war to be a senseless and cruel thing, this nation has so lost its fibre that it will not take part to the uttermost of its power in resisting such a challenge if it were made." (55)

That these words comprised a pronouncement of government policy was shown by the fact that the speech was broadcast throughout Britain and America.

On the same evening Halifax sent instructions to Henderson to inform the German government of the view Britain had taken of the recent crisis:

"His Majesty's Government...cannot but regard the events of the past few days as a complete repudiation of the Munich Agreement and a denial of the spirit in which the negotiators of that Agreement bound themselves to co-operate for a peaceful settlement. His Majesty's Government must also...protest against the changes effected in Czecho-Slovakia by German military action, which are in their view devoid of any basis of legality." (56)

Weizsäcker had received instructions from headquarters 'to reject all such protests brusquely'. (57) He had already had a disagreeable meeting with Coulondre who had tried to lodge a French protest with him. To avoid a similar incident with Henderson he telephoned him to say that the German government was not accepting protests and that any communication had better be in writing. (58) Henderson obliged. The following day he left Berlin 'to report' (59) to London having been recalled on the 17th. This action amounted to a virtual breaking off of relations with Berlin.

The reaction in France to the crisis had been similar to that in England. The general line taken by the press on the 16th was that Germany had 'torn the Munich Agreement to shreds, and destroyed the hopes of appeasement'. (60) But Daladier, like Chamberlain, was slow either to denounce Germany or to agree to a re-appraisal of France's policy. On the first day of the debate in the Chamber he failed even to mention Czechoslovakia and on the second only expressed his sympathy for the Czech people. (61) Britain and France agreed to inform each other before any decisive action was taken in Berlin. (62)

As ideas on the issues at stake became clarified Coulondre, like Henderson, was instructed to lodge a protest denouncing Prague as 'a flagrant violation of both the letter and the spirit of the Agreement signed in Munich'.⁽⁶³⁾ Thus Britain and France had jointly denoted that their foreign policies were no longer based on the optimistic tones created by Munich but were directed with reference to an aggressive Germany whose actions put the peace of Europe in complete jeopardy. As Ribbentrop later discerned, 'the British and French protests opened a new phase in European affairs'⁽⁶⁴⁾ - a phase precipitated, of course, by the German coup.

The question soon arose in the Anglo-French camp as to what effect recent events would have on future Italian policy. On the 13th. Halifax had drawn the attention of Grandi to the deterioration in atmosphere since he and Chamberlain had visited Rome.⁽⁶⁵⁾ His fears resulting from the Franco-Italian pressure point in Tunis and Ciano's refusal to deny any echo of official government policy in the warlike statements of the Italian press⁽⁶⁶⁾ had been mounting. The attitude of Grandi, however, gave him a 'measure of reassurance',

if only slight. The issue was still very much in the balance, and speculation was increased as a result of Hitler's gains in Czechoslovakia. The possible repercussions on Italy were of deep concern to France.

"It was impossible that Signor Mussolini could be very pleased at what had occurred, and it must increase the temptation upon him to try and get something to redress the balance between the Axis partners. The Italian people would surely think it very strange if all the benefits of the partnership continued to go one way." (67)

Perth warned Halifax of the danger of confusing the wholly illegitimate actions of Germany with the comparatively legitimate aspirations of Italy, especially if this confusion were evident in the press. To take it for granted that Mussolini would behave as outrageously as Hitler:

"may be the most likely way of making him feel that only by so doing can he attain what he regards as his justifiable ends." (68)

The wisest policy, Perth thought, would be somehow for Mussolini to receive 'public or private assurances' that his claims would be given fair consideration. Certainly should no action be taken with regard to the Franco-Italian dispute that might amount to provocation of Mussolini to emulate the Hitler method. As can be

(69)
seen from Ciano's diary, Mussolini had been greatly shocked by Hitler's coup, and disappointed that he had not been taken into the Fuhrer's confidence. He was, in fact, very gloomy about the idea of alliance with Germany. As far as France and Britain were concerned a more definite attitude would be adopted towards Italy after Mussolini's reactions had been more accurately estimated from a speech he was due to make on March 26. (70)

By March 27 British policy in Europe stood at the cross-roads. Chamberlain had described an attitude to the recent crisis and shown determination to resist any further attacks on peace, but the exact form of future active policy was a matter for speculation. As yet there was no indication of the degree of support to be offered to other possible victims of German aggression or of any closer collaboration with other major powers in order to dissuade Germany from giving a repeat performance.

One thing, however, was certain. Chamberlain had been forced to re-assess his policy and to harden his attitude. His resolution in appeasement had received a shattering blow. Yet his basic purpose

stood firm. If he were forced to change his tactics he would still fight the same battle. The last fortnight of March witnessed the evolution of a new plan to promote peace.

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Chapter eleven

Appeasement in Eclipse

One thing was abundantly clear to Chamberlain as he reflected on the March crisis; his future policy in Europe could no longer be formulated in the context of Munich:

"As soon as I had time to think I saw that it was impossible to deal with Hitler after he had thrown all his own assurances to the winds."(1)

He had lost all faith in Hitler. But this did mean that his tenacity for appeasement would falter anymore than it did after Munich. He would never submit to what he called the 'bleak and barren policy of the inevitability of war.'⁽²⁾ If Prague had seemed to bring the prospect of war closer to Europe there were still ways in which he might restrain Hitler from that final act that would make it a reality. He was already laying the basis of a new approach in Europe. He wrote on the 19th:

"I have worked out a plan which a few ministers have accepted today, and which I shall put to the Cabinet tomorrow. It is pretty bold and startling, but I feel that something of the kind is needed, and though I can't predict the reactions in Berlin, I have an idea that it won't bring us to an acute crisis, at any rate at once....As always I want to gain time, for I never accept the view that war is inevitable."(3)

That the fallacy of appeasement in its previous form had been exposed by Prague was the basic reason for a new plan. But there were other promptings. Chamberlain in the past few days had been faced with a crisis of opinion not only in his own party but in the country as a whole. His Birmingham statement of the 17th had saved him in the eyes of many and disposed of a situation which amounted to virtual political defeat. There was, however, still an influential section of Tory opinion pressing for a swift and decisive re-orientation of Britain's foreign policy which needed to be passified - not only so that Chamberlain's political position might be made the more secure, but also because his mission in Europe must be continued, and their policy viewed war as a certainty.

Hence the need for a scheme which would maintain reasonable calm within the party ranks while aiming to deter Hitler from further superior acts. The enhanced German strategic, military and industrial position also needed to be reckoned with:

"Strategically Germany has placed herself between Poland and Hungary.. (Germany) commands the gateway to Krakow...and the Russian Ukraine.

Her new position now places her armies on three sides of Poland... with respect to Hungary. Germany also threatens Budapest from the north and west and her armies are in a position to march directly into the fertile plains of Hungary, or through Hungary to Roumania." (5)

As a result of the complete disbandment of the Czech army, the armament, equipment and war reserves for a considerable proportion of the ex-Czechoslovak army had fallen into German hands, increasing her fighting power on land 'by probably much more than 25 per cent.' (6) Vast supplies of raw materials had also been funnelled (7) into the Reich.

These factors were the greater spur to action for Chamberlain at a time when reports were coming in that Hitler was expected to strike again soon. Even before he had spoken at Birmingham, Tilea, the Roumanian Ambassador in London had told Halifax that the Roumanian government had received 'something very much like an ultimatum' (8) from Germany. Tilea wished to know the attitude of the British government in the event of German aggression against Roumania, (9) Military opinion in France thought that Hitler would strike first at Hungary and then at Roumania and that events would 'move quickly'. (10) At the same time

information was received from Lithuania that Germany was sending arms to Memel and that a German coup was expected 'any day'.
(11)

Such indications that Prague had, in fact, been the beginning of a new adventure for Germany impressed on Chamberlain the need for devising some plan to deter Hitler from going through with it. The more apparent became the threat to peace, the greater were his efforts to salvage it. His policy now resided in the hope that Hitler would be dissuaded from rupturing the stability of Europe by the creation of an alignment of European opinion opposing his aims. The idea was described as:

"...the organisation of mutual support on the part of all those who realise the necessity of protecting international society from further violation of fundamental laws on which it rests." (12)

It was with this idea in mind that the British Ambassador in Moscow, Sir William Seeds, was instructed to find out whether the Soviet government would if requested by the Roumanian government 'actively help the latter to resist German aggression.'
(13)

A similar enquiry was put to the government of other powers likely to be directly concerned with future German activity in Central and Eastern Europe -

(14)

Turkey, Greece, Yugoslavia and Poland. Seeds
saw Litvinov, the People's Commissar for Foreign
Affairs, early on the evening of the 18th (15) and
later the same evening received the official Soviet
reply. The U.S.S.R. considered that the best way to
combat the German menace was by immediately calling a
conference. The view was taken that:

"...no good purpose would be served by various governments enquiring of each other in turn what action others would take before making up their own minds. Soviet Government therefore proposed that delegates appointed by British, Soviet, French, Polish and Roumanian Governments should meet to discuss possibilities of common action." (16)

This practical suggestion, though in harmony with the British desire to organise mutual support for the resistance of aggression, was not agreed to. Chamberlain, it appears, was very dubious about entering too closely into negotiations with the Bolsheviks. Suspicion of Soviet political intentions was one of the main factors:

"I must confess to the most profound distrust of Russia. I have no belief whatever in her ability to maintain an effective offensive, even if she wanted to. And I distrust her motives, which seem to me to have little connection with our ideas of liberty, and to be concerned only with getting everyone else by the ears." (17)

An organised discussion was therefore to be avoided.

Ivan Maisky, Soviet Ambassador in London at the time, has attempted in his book 'Who Helped Hitler?' to show that Chamberlain's unwillingness to deal with the U.S.S.R. was motivated by his expectation of a war between Germany and Russia which would exhaust both powers and reduce, with one stone, the two threats to Europe of German domination and Communist infiltration.

"If the British Prime Minister had really been concerned for the maintenance of peace, as he repeatedly declared, he would gladly have seized upon the proposal made to him by the Soviet Union on March 18." (18)

But from the British point of view, despite distrust of Russia, there was the possibility that the Soviet proposal would lead to those 'unspecified commitments operating under circumstances which cannot be foreseen' (19) which Chamberlain had guarded against at Birmingham.

Halifax saw Maisky on the afternoon of the 19th after the cabinet had discussed the Soviet proposal. He told Maisky that it presented two difficulties which made it undesirable to Britain:

"First, we could hardly in present circumstances manage to send a responsible Minister to take part

in the conference, and if this were not possible, the desired advantage in the way of quick decision would not, in fact, be obtained. Secondly, and perhaps more important, we thought that to hold such a conference as M. Litvinov suggested without a certainty that it would be successful was dangerous." (20)

It seems hardly credible that no responsible British minister could be spared and these watery excuses were made so that an alternative British proposal could soon be put forward. At the meeting with Maisky Halifax hinted at a 'proposal not altogether dissimilar' which was under consideration by the British government. Chamberlain's new idea was surfacing. The intention, as he himself described it, was:

"to get a declaration signed by the four Powers, Britain, France, Russia and Poland, that they would act together in the event of further signs of German aggressive ambitions. I drafted the formula myself." (21)

The necessity for such a sign of solidarity was not diminished by a report from Bucharest that there had at no time, in fact, been any question of a German ultimatum to Roumania. There was no doubt, however, that Germany had made unpalatable proposals to Roumania which would give the former a 'large measure

of control over all branches of Roumanian economy.' (23)
While this in itself did not contribute to aggression it was an ominous indication of Germany's vaulting ambition which Chamberlain's declaration aimed at curbing.

The Memel situation, on the other hand, had evidently worsened. Ogilvie-Forbes reported from Berlin on the 20th that he had heard that Ribbentrop had ordered the Lithuanian government to hand over Memel under the threat that unless this happened the matter might not end at the Memel territorial (24) frontier. On the following afternoon it was learned in the foreign office that the Lithuanian foreign minister, who had been summoned to Berlin had described the situation as 'very serious'. (25) This latest German encroachment was clearly an infraction of the Memel Convention of 1924 and although Britain, as a signatory of that Convention, had informed Lithuania that she would not intervene 'in any (26) unforeseen developments' as regards Memel, the (27) 'Anschluss' that took place on the 22nd. was disturbing news in the context of the general European situation.

Indicative of the anxiety with which Chamberlain viewed the German menace was his appeal for help to Mussolini on March 20. (28) The idea that the Prime Minister should send a personal and confidential letter to Mussolini originated with the foreign office as a result of the fear that Italy might be proposing to emulate the German method. (29) It was intended that the letter, stressing Anglo-French solidarity and refusing to countenance the Hitler technique, should act as a deterrent to any embryonic Italian ultimatum. The letter as finally sent was far from this. Much of 'Chamberlain' is apparent in it and it echoes his belief that he had achieved success with Mussolini at Rome in January. Far from taking a firm line with the Italians it constituted no more than an amicable appeal abounding in Munich appeasement and typical of the line customarily adopted by Perth.

"You told me that your policy was one of peace and that you would at any time be willing to use your influence in that direction. I earnestly hope that you may feel it possible, in any way that may be open to you, to take such action in these anxious days as may allay present tension and do something to restore the confidence that has been shattered."

Such tones certainly exhibit Chamberlain's deep concern at the passage of events in Europe and bear witness to his anxious desire to produce some scheme to prevent their deteriorating further. From a practical point of view the letter was of no value. As it had been feared in the foreign office a letter which did not amount to a warning would only be interpreted as a sign of weakness. Ciano made a note in his diary that it 'strengthened his (Mussolini's) decision to act because in it he finds another proof of the inertia of the democracies.' (30) It was nearly a fortnight before the Duce replied.

While there was sufficient cause for concern in Europe there were at least signs that support for the British proposal as envisaged by Chamberlain would be forthcoming. The U.S.S.R. had shown in definite terms that they were in agreement with some form of organised opposition to German ambition. The U.S.A. had approved the line taken by Chamberlain on the 17th and it seemed certain that they would uphold any decision to obstruct German aggressive aims. (31) Of vital importance was the decision of the French government to give active support to Roumania in the

event of her being the object of German military
(32)
attack.

It was thus amid reasonable enquiries that Chamberlain's plan saw the light of the diplomatic world on March 21. It was proposed that a declaration should be signed by the British, French, Soviet and Polish governments on the following lines:

"We the undersigned, duly authorised to that effect, hereby declare that, inasmuch as peace and security in Europe are matters of common interest and concern, and since European peace and security may be affected by any action which constitutes a threat to the political independence of any European State, our respective Governments hereby undertake immediately to consult together as to what steps should be taken to offer joint resistance to any such action." (33)

This proposal was handed to the governments of the three powers concerned and other governments were not to be approached 'before the four Powers are agreed on the Declaration'.

The full co-operation of the French in this plan was essential and it was appropriate that its publication coincided with the state visit of the President of the French Republic (accompanied by Bonnet) to Britain. Anglo-French conversations (34) were held on the 21st. and 22nd. to discuss the implications of the proposed declaration and to sell

the idea to the French. The talks certainly produced a close alignment of opinion between the two powers and the validity of the idea of a declaration as a means of issuing a danger warning to German and Italian aggression while at the same time being a rallying point for the smaller countries was endorsed. Much of the discussion at both meetings centered around the practical difficulties facing the particular declaration proposed. Bonnet was no less wary of dealing with Russia than were the British.

"M. Bonnet...stated that the Russians needed watching. They liked to make declarations for propaganda purposes which did not correspond with their real intentions." (35)

For this reason it was essential that each signatory power should state exactly what assistance it would provide in the event of hostilities breaking out which would bring the declaration into action.

This, however, was a minor point compared with the main obstacle to the successful adoption of the declaration. This concerned the participation of Poland. To Bonnet 'it was absolutely essential to get Poland in'. (36) While the strategic wisdom of this attitude could not be doubted, its realisation

posed considerable difficulty. Halifax's less dogmatic advice is, no doubt, tacit admission of this problem:

"...if France and Great Britain were prepared to take a very firm line, even without the certainty of Polish support at the outset, this very fact would be likely to bring Poland in." (37)

It was frankly admitted that Poland would probably try to avoid any commitment that would destroy the balance she had kept up to the present between Germany and the Soviet Union. Participation in the Declaration would place Poland definitely in the Soviet camp which might arouse serious reaction in Germany. (38)

Yet the value of Russia's signature to the declaration relied very greatly on Poland's decision:

"Russian help would only be effective if Poland were collaborating. If Poland collaborated, Russia could give very great assistance; if not, Russia could give much less." (39)

This situation surely raises doubts as to Chamberlain's sincerity in proposing this declaration, for from the outset it seemed to be doomed. He himself stated during these talks that:

"...the value of the declaration lay in it being signed by four Powers. If two of the four refused to sign, it would not carry the same weight. The

participation of the Soviet Union in a public declaration made the participation of Poland and others very difficult." (40)

Halifax was equally aware, and convinced of the
(41)
improbability of uniting Russia and Poland.

Was Chamberlain genuinely concerned to give Britain this new anti-German role, or merely the appearance of it? The News Chronicle gave space to this question on March 22:

"There is, in fact, a suspicion in many embassies and legations that all this talk about a strong line is not much more than an attempt to silence criticism by a show of activity on the part of ministers."

Chamberlain had carefully thought out a plan which itself contained serious obstacles to its own success. The Russian suggestion for a conference to determine a basis for common action against further aggression had been declined. He might have lost all faith in Hitler but he was not yet prepared to see Europe partitioned into opposing camps. This attitude can be seen in a statement of his on the 23rd. to the effect that he was not:

"anxious to set up in Europe opposing blocks of countries with different ideas about the form of their internal administration." (42)

He still clung to the hope that Hitler would not risk a European war to satisfy his ambitions, and despised any anti-German coalition which might encourage Hitler to act as soon as possible. Chamberlain's sincerity with reference to the declaration proposal might be proved if, in the words of Bonnet, he had been prepared to 'go to the utmost limit, even to the extent of threats, to bring Poland in', ⁽⁴³⁾ but it will be seen that he was not.

Official reaction to the declaration on the part of the governments directly concerned was much as expected. France's reply was 'without reserve or comment in the affirmative'. ⁽⁴⁴⁾ The Soviet Government also agreed to the proposal and stated they would sign as soon as both France and Poland had promised their signatures. ⁽⁴⁵⁾ In order to give the declaration as much weight as possible the U.S.S.R. proposed that it should be signed by the prime ministers of the respective governments as well as by the foreign ministers. Hesitation on the part of Poland was, however, immediately apparent. Beck, the Polish foreign minister, told Kennard that it 'clearly demanded very serious consideration'. ⁽⁴⁶⁾ There seemed little chance that Poland would associate

herself definitely with Russia in a declaration of the sort proposed.

"M. Beck implied that the participation of the Soviet Government in any such declaration might lead to difficulties but that Poland might be able to associate herself with England and France if Soviet Russia were omitted." (47)

Poland was in a very delicate position. She already possessed pacts of non-aggression both with Germany and Russia, and treaties of alliance with France. The additional security of a pact with Great Britain would be very welcome, but this had been offered in the form of a declaration aimed against Germany and supported by Russia. Beck wished to take advantage of collaboration with Britain but did not want to 'be compelled openly to insist on exclusion of the Soviets from any joint declaration',⁽⁴⁸⁾ In this situation he proposed:

"that His Majesty's Government should consent, as an exceptional measure in view of the special circumstances, to the conclusion of a confidential bilateral understanding between the two countries by which the two Governments would undertake to act in accordance with the terms of the proposed declaration." (49)

By such means the association of Poland with Russia in a public declaration would be avoided and the

secret nature of the envisaged agreement would prevent its becoming general knowledge.

The British Government were now themselves faced with an awkward situation and their reaction to it is significant. The Four-Power declaration was plainly being put in jeopardy by the Polish attitude towards Russia. Poland had however, made a proposal which while diminishing the psychological value of the declaration would go some way to retaining its effectiveness. But Britain could not really entertain such secret negotiations because they 'might create an awkward position between His Majesty's Government and the French Government.'⁽⁵⁰⁾ Under these circumstances it would seem that Britain should either bring pressure to bear on Poland to agree to the original proposal or else go ahead without Poland. No such effort was made.

Had the immediate situation in central Europe, as far as Chamberlain saw it, been more explosive an attempt to press Poland to sign might have been made. For the declaration had been particularly desirable to deter Hitler from taking aggressive measures against Roumania. A denial of the German ultimatum

had since been made by Roumania and on March 23 a trade agreement between the two countries had been signed. Thus tension in this direction had been relaxed and Chamberlain did not look upon this German economic expansion with concern. He stated in the House of Commons that the government had, 'no desire to stand in the way of any reasonable efforts on the part of Germany to expand her export trade.' (51)

Moreover, opinion within Roumania was not enthusiastic about the proposed declaration. The British ambassador in Bucharest had reported on the 21st:

"They deprecate suggestion of general pact of mutual assistance as possibly provocative to Germans and also because opinion in Poland, Yugoslavia and, to some extent, in Roumania would be opposed at any rate for the present to inclusion of Russia." (52)

There were further signs that the declaration was not good strategy. Mussolini had recently fully supported German policy and had reaffirmed, 'particularly at this moment' the 'full adherence' of Italy to the policy of the Rome-Berlin Axis. Perth reported that the fact of Britain's intended association with Russia had had considerable influence on this Italian attitude and that he had been told by (53)

'a prominent Roman' that 'if Great Britain entered into any arrangement with Soviet Russia, Italy would be lost to her for ever.'⁽⁵⁴⁾

There was also a more general danger in the declaration to which Ogilvie-Forbes drew attention. Following the customary practice of those controlling the government of totalitarian states to represent reactions abroad in a light as unfavourable as possible to their own people, the intentions of Britain with reference to the proposed declaration were being translated as a revival of the pre-war policy of encirclement. This was dangerous in that it gave rise to much popular annoyance with Britain in Germany and helped to bring the German people closer to Hitler's way of thinking. Ogilvie-Forbes was very perturbed about this side-effect:

"I feel that the catchword 'encirclement' will have a more damaging effect on public opinion towards Great Britain than the resentment at the daily reports of foreign press attacks on Germany, and is actually making a deep impression on all Germans regardless of class and political opinion." (55)

There were thus several factors which argued against continuing negotiations for the declaration in its original form; if, of course, Chamberlain had ever intended that it should be realised.

Kennard advised acceptance of Poland's offer of secret discussions on the grounds that they could be used to convert Poland to sign the declaration. (56)

The French, necessarily unaware of the new Polish suggestion, continued to urge that Britain should 'press her proposal on the Polish Government with clear and firm language'. (57) For four days the British government hesitated - a delay which was to evoke comment from both Russia and France. M. Corbin asked Cadogan on the 25th whether the Polish government wished Britain to give them a 'more binding and effective guarantee than would be afforded by the declaration'. (58) Seeds reported from Moscow that Litvinov was 'quietly awaiting further news of our intentions'. (59) and was obviously gaining a certain amount of satisfaction from the fact that the course of events had justified his suggestion of a conference as the only practical method of dealing with the situation. (60) Russia was told that 'no final answer' had come from Poland.

The hiatus came to an end on the 27th. when the Polish and Roumania embassies were informed by Halifax that 'it will not be possible to proceed without

modification with the proposed Four Power Declaration' and that "some alternative method of approach must be sought." (61) Britain had chosen deference to Poland rather than co-operation with Russia who was not directly engaged in the revised proposals. Roumania, however, was. Halifax explained the re-directed policy by the argument that:

"In any scheme, the inclusion of Poland is vital as the one strong Power bordering on Germany in the East, and the inclusion of Roumania is also of the first importance, since Roumania may be the State primarily menaced by Germany's plans for Eastern expansion." (62)

Poland was to become the pivot of British foreign policy while Russia faded out of the picture. The new approach to be made to the Polish and Roumanian governments was as follows:

- "(a) Germany may either directly attack Poland or Roumania, or may undermine either country's independence... Are Poland and Roumania respectively prepared actively to resist if their own independence is threatened...?
- (b) If so, Great Britain and France would be prepared to come to the help of the threatened State... Poland and Roumania would keep Great Britain and France fully and promptly informed of any developments threatening their independence.

(c) The assurance offered in (b) is dependent upon Poland coming to the help of Roumania if the latter is the threatened State...

(d) The undertaking given by Great Britain and France to Poland under (b) would be given as part of a reciprocal arrangement by which if Great Britain or France were attacked by Germany, or if they went to war with Germany to resist German aggression anywhere in Western Europe or Yugoslavia, Poland would come to their help." (63)

Russia is in no way affected in this immediate plan though it was maintained that it was 'desirable to preserve the interest of the Soviet Union in this scheme'. It was intended to inform Russia of the above proposals, at some convenient moment in the discussions. In the meantime Halifax would consider 'how best to retain their close interest'.

The Quai d'Orsay was informed of the details of the new approach to be made to Poland and Roumania (64) on the same day, and French agreement to the plan was received by Halifax on the 29th. (65) Kennard and Hoare were then instructed to contact the respective governments. In approaching Beck, Kennard was to say that Britain had been 'much interested' in the suggestion for a bilateral agreement but that it

would have raised 'considerable difficulties' for Britain and that it was thought the alternative plan being submitted was 'better designed to meet the present situation'.⁽⁶⁶⁾ To turn down Poland's proposal and supply another was a much easier task than to inform Russia that her co-operation in an anti-aggression declaration was now, after all, not immediately required.

It is not quite clear just when Halifax had intended to get in touch with Russia, but the contact was incidentally precipitated on March 29 by a statement of Chamberlain's in the House of Commons. When urged to 'maintain the closest possible touch and co-operation', with Russia, Chamberlain replied by saying that 'the Government are in touch with the Government of the Soviet Union.'⁽⁶⁷⁾ The answer implied agreement with the question and on the following day Maisky visited Halifax to establish what Chamberlain had really meant. The embarrassment had to be faced; the Soviet ambassador was flatly told that 'His Majesty's Government were not pursuing idea of Four-Power declaration' and 'had been considering what other line they could take'.⁽⁶⁸⁾ A rough outline of the new policy

was drawn by Halifax and Maisky was informed that Russian help would no doubt be appreciated if the worst came to the worst.

"If these countries (Poland and Roumania) were determined to resist, and were ultimately engaged in a conflict with Germany, they would no doubt be glad of the sympathy and indeed of the active assistance of the Soviet Union, in whatever way might seem most suitable and effective." (69)

The situation amounted to little less than a snub after Moscow's tentative approval of the original British plan. Perhaps the most short-sighted aspect of this policy was that it aroused a certain scepticism towards Britain in Russia. Seeds reported Litinov's opinion as expressed on April 1, that 'Soviet Government had had enough and would henceforward stand apart free of any commitments' (70) Russia could hardly be blamed for viewing any new proposal from London warily.

Halifax later claimed that the Polish and Roumanian attitude to Russia predisposed any British move in the Soviet direction at this time:

"Unless the British and French Governments had been prepared to over-ride the fears of two friendly Governments on a matter these judged vital to their safety, a limit was imposed beyond which diplomacy could not go." (71)

He continued his explanation of Britain's new policy by citing doubts as to Russian policy and strength as additional influences. But at the end of March 1939 it was these doubts that were by far the weightier factors in forming British policy, for Halifax's opinion of Russia's value to the anti-aggression coalition was much lower than appears from his later writing. The following is a record of his views as expressed to Ambassador Kennedy:

"Lord Halifax believed that Poland was of more value to the democratic tie-up than Russia because his information showed the Russian air force 'to be very weak, old and short-ranged', the army 'poor', and its industrial background 'frightful'... The most that could be expected from Russia, assuming that Russia wanted to be of help, would be 'some ammunition to Poland in the event of trouble.'" (72)

That the importance of Russia to stability in Europe was so underrated at this time by the policy-makers in Britain was to receive its penalty in the months that lay ahead, culminating in the Soviet volte-face by the conclusion of a non-aggression pact with Germany.

Opinion in Britain was not unaware of this swing away from Moscow. The Daily Mail stated on March 29 that 'it is quite clear that at this stage

Soviet Russia is not being sought as a partner in the contemplated alliance,' but believed she 'may be invited to join at a later stage.' The direction of foreign policy was not viewed with concern but what did cause a certain amount of misgiving was the delay in reaching some concrete agreement to oppose German ambitions, for the indignation aroused by Prague was still running high. On March 26 the Observer had shown impatience with the apparent lack of headway being made:

"The ironic situation was reached yesterday that the discussion of the proposal for immediate action is postponed for ten days." for progress seemed to be awaiting the visit of the Polish foreign minister to London on April 3.

Scepticism, however, gave way to alarm during the last days of March with rumours that Germany was preparing for some definite action in the direction of Poland. Some stern warning was looked for from the government and it was this situation that was to determine Poland's position unequivocally as the pivot of British policy in Europe.

The fortnight that followed Prague had brought several new and vital factors into the formulation of British foreign policy. Of tantamount importance

was Chamberlain's decision to relinquish his grip on post-Munich appeasement and to find a new direction for his peace hunt phrased in the context of Prague. He had been coerced to this decision rather than accepted it willingly, for the strength of opinion both in the party and the country as a whole against the German destruction of Czechoslovakia could not be safely ignored. But while Chamberlain appreciated the need to invest British policy in Europe with greater resolution to resist further Nazi encroachment he would not so far abandon his hope of bringing Hitler to heel as to foster the formation of firm agreement with Russia. Propose it he might have done but to have concluded the same would have pushed Hitler out of reach. Therefore a certain amount of marking time had been done while it was decided how Britain's involvement in central Europe could be most effectively, yet safely, expressed. Poland eventually emerged as the anchorage of this expanded policy but although this expansion involved a completely new ingredient in Britain's approach to Europe, it was not a denial of those principals which had guided foreign policy since Munich, but rather a further interpretation of them.

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Chapter twelve

guarantee to Poland - Revolution or Evolution?

The preparations after Prague for some form of united opposition to Hitler's ambitions had been particularly desirable in view of expected aggression against Roumania. However, while negotiations had been proceeding the centre of attention had shifted from Roumania to Poland. The Roumanian front appeared comparatively calm following the conclusion of the trade agreement with Germany. Memel had fallen and it needed little imagination to deduce that Hitler would next sue for the return of Danzig. The British Government's views on Danzig were much the same as they had been on Memel. If the Polish government could come to some agreement with Germany over the question of Danzig, all well and good. If, however, it became apparent that Germany might be intending to use Danzig as a lever to introduce claims against Polish independence, this would constitute a matter which Britain would oppose. (1) As March wore on it became increasingly likely in London that the latter course was the one destined to see the light. There were persistent rumours of unreasonable German demands against Poland. Kennard believed such demands had

been made but could not substantiate his belief. (2)
An air of mystery surrounded the whole affair, to which the Polish foreign minister contributed in no little measure. He was persistently cagey about the German demands and Kennard reported that it was 'extremely difficult to get straightforward answers' from him. (3)
Germany had certainly waited for Poland to join the anti-Commintern Pact. So much was known, together with the fact that Poland had refused. (4) The rest was very much a subject of speculation.

Beck's evasiveness contributed to the suspicion that German - Polish relations were an explosive powder keg, a suspicion which mounted with reports of Polish military preparations. On March 24 Kennard reported that approximately 10,000 reservists had been called up, (5) but on the following day he received information that put the figure at 750,000. (6) On the 28th the Polish Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs told Kennard that there was 'reason to believe that Germans may demand the more drastic solution of annexation 'of Danzig, but there was still no indication of any 'threatening attitude on the part of Germany'. (7)
But information was reaching London from other sources

at this time that pointed quite definitely towards a German coup. Halifax told the cabinet on the 30th that the Berlin correspondent of the 'News Chronicle' had been informed by various sources in Germany that Poland was next on the list in Germany's programme of aggression. (8) This report was the more credible because it was supported by a good deal of detailed information concerning German preparations to this end. The United States ambassador at Warsaw also had reason to believe that Ribbentrop was 'pressing for immediate action against Poland' being convinced that Britain and France would fail to support Poland and that such failure 'would alienate American opinion from Britain and France'. (9)

The situation was met with alarm in London. (10) Von Dirksen refers to the 'hysterical state of mind' of Britain at the time. The cabinet met daily to review the situation. Chamberlain later admitted the urgency of the time:

"We did not know that Poland might not be invaded within a term which could be measured by hours and not by days." (11)

On March 29 a full cabinet meeting was suddenly called and sat for three hours. It met again the following

morning. A question had been tabled in the House of Commons for March 31 suggesting that a German attack on Poland was imminent and asking what action the government would take in such an eventuality. By the afternoon of the 30th decision had been reached; pending the conclusion of consultations between Britain, France, Poland and Roumania the British government would give Poland an interim assurance of support in the event of attack by Germany on her independence. That evening the cabinet committee on foreign policy sat, presumably to discuss the official statement that Chamberlain, Halifax and Cadogan had drafted during the afternoon. (12) It met again the following morning (March 31) immediately prior to the Prime Minister's announcement in the Commons.

It was desirable that the guarantee should not appear as an impromptu measure but as a consistent element in the European plan to thwart aggression. To this end Chamberlain needed the support of France, and, if possible, Russia. Approval by France was immediately and urgently sought. Phipps was instructed by Halifax to find out:

"...whether French Government would authorise me to say tomorrow, as I propose, that in this matter their attitude is identical with our own." (13)

Halifax received such authorisation five hours later. (14)

There was not, however, any similar hasty contact between London and Moscow, in fact no contact at all. A matter of two or three hours before Chamberlain was due to make his statement, Maisky was approached about the guarantee in London (15) and was asked whether it could be said that it met with the approval of the Soviet government. (16) Maisky took exception to this 'unceremoniousness' and pointed out that it was physically impossible for him to ascertain his government's views in time before the announcement was made. (17) He refused to give such authorisation but Chamberlain, nevertheless, stated that afternoon that he had 'no doubt that the principles upon which we are acting are fully understood and appreciated by the Soviet Government.' (18) This manner of approach to Russia had served only to increase her scepticism of British diplomacy.

Naturally the approval of Poland was essential. (19) Chamberlain himself drafted the telegram to Kennard. When it arrived in Warsaw Kennard was in discussion with Beck on the British proposal of March 24. The meeting was interrupted by an embassy official who

delivered the British note. Beck did not even confer with his government, for this latest offer from Britain met with all the requirements of the earlier Polish request - Britain would guarantee Poland's independence and did not even demand any reciprocal undertaking on the part of Poland. Beck 'accepted without hesitation', ⁽²⁰⁾ making up his mind (as he later told a friend) between two flicks of the ash ⁽²¹⁾ off his cigarette.

Thus the stage was set for Chamberlain's announcement, though - almost as a second thought, it appears - he decided at the last minute to inform Mussolini and to impress upon him that the 'sole purpose' of the announcement was 'to avoid any disturbance of the peace'. ⁽²²⁾ It seems that Chamberlain was afraid of unbragging Mussolini by not forewarning him of the British initiative, especially having regard, as the message went 'to the cordial relations that exist between us'.

March 31 was a Friday and the House met at 11.00a.m. Greenwood, the acting leader of the opposition, asked a question about the European situation, alluding to

(23)

'the wild rumours which are floating round'.

Chamberlain was evasive, replied that the rumours were 'not confirmed by any official information,' and said he would make a statement on the adjournment. At 2.55p.m. Chamberlain rose to his feet to make his announcement. After restating the general policy of the government in Europe and maintaining that 'there should be no question incapable of solution by peaceful means,' he issued the fateful words that were to take Britain into war against Germany in less than six months time:

"As the House is aware, certain consultations are now proceeding with other Governments. In order to make perfectly clear the position of His Majesty's Government in the meantime before those consultations are concluded, I now have to inform the House that during that period, in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect." (24)

He added that the French government had authorised him to make it plain that they stood in the same position as the British government.

This guarantee to Poland received almost unanimous approval from the main powers interested in deterring Fascist aggression. In Britain the announcement was well received by the Opposition and the debate on the guarantee in Parliament on April 3 demonstrated general approval, though some members emphasised the need for the government to secure Russian adhesion. (25) It was reassuring news to Poland, though the Polish Ambassador in London felt that the text of the declaration might give a wrong impression to those who wished to minimise its importance. (26) The immediate reaction in Germany was, nevertheless restrained but mainly so because Hitler was due to speak at Wilhelmshaven and his tone was awaited. (27) Across the Atlantic the United States genuinely appreciated this display of strength from Britain:

"The President...thought the statement excellent and said that in his judgement it would have a very great effect." (28)

The main black spot in reaction abroad was Russia where, maintained Seeds, the British government's action was 'misunderstood and not at all appreciated'. (29) Litvinov showed a certain resentment at the fact that

in response to recent Soviet approaches Britain was now 'of their own initiative ...engaged on a new plan of which he knew little.' 'From now on,' he asserted, 'Soviet Government would stand aside - a course which might possibly be in their best interests' - (30 a reaction, as already mentioned, not altogether unwarranted.

At the time, the revelation of the British assurance to Poland created, naturally enough, quite a stir, for Chamberlain had so far departed from that 'far away country' attitude of the previous September as to involve Britain quite intimately in the affairs of central Europe. In retrospect, however, did his March 31 announcement really mark such a drastic and immediate change in British foreign policy? To come to a fair answer to this question an assessment should first be made of the real meaning of the guarantee. It certainly amounted to a crucial involvement in the affairs of central Europe. On the other hand the promise of support to Poland was not absolute. It was conditional. There were two conditions under which Britain would go to war in defence of Poland. Firstly, that there was a definite threat to Polish independence. It was

left largely to the British government to determine, if the case arose, whether such a threat was in existence. The decision to go to war was retained in British hands. Poland would not be able to rely on Britain's support unless the guarantor was convinced that the first condition was present. Even if it was Britain would not go to war until a second condition was fulfilled, namely that Poland first put up armed resistance to the threat against her independence. Technically Germany could occupy Poland on the pretext, say, of defending her against Soviet intrigue and unless Poland forcibly objected Britain would not be bound to oppose this further Nazi inroad on Europe.

That the British guarantee to Poland was so worded was no accident. Poland was not, in the words of Hoare, to be given 'a blank cheque'.⁽³¹⁾ Chamberlain had been primarily instrumental in the drafting of the declaration⁽³²⁾ and being reluctant to give it⁽³³⁾ purposely retained a majority of the decision as to when Britain should become involved in war. Only under the ultimate circumstances would that war that he dreaded become a reality.

More important than this technical hair-splitting in assessing the meaning of the Polish guarantee for British foreign policy is an understanding of the context in which it was given. The guarantee was not a piece of isolated policy. While it was aimed at meeting immediate circumstances it was intended to become in the near future just one element in a three or four power declaration. It was an 'improvisation' (34) an almost snap decision which had not run the normal gamut of military and political advisers but was drafted by Chamberlain, Halifax and Cadogan a mere twenty-four hours before its issue as an answer to an awkward question in Parliament. (35) Its intended temporary nature is contained in Chamberlain's description of it as 'a cover note issued in advance of the complete insurance policy'. (36) The British government were particularly concerned that Poland should understand it as being 'an interim measure' (37) pending the conclusion of the consultations already in progress. This character of the guarantee was also emphasised at the time of its announcement in the Commons. It is important therefore not to take the guarantee out of its context in British foreign policy but to consider it in its proper perspective.

The germs of the Polish guarantee can be seen in the government's declaration to France seven weeks before, for the attitude of mind behind both of these assurances was very similar and the intention was the same. Both statements were issued at a time of grave apprehension as to Hitler's immediate designs in Europe with the intention of dissuading him from precipitating war. On February 7 Chamberlain had for the first time in threatening terms laid down conditions that would involve Britain in war. On March 31 he was issuing further conditions. And the Polish guarantee was, as Chamberlain himself insisted, no indication that he had become a man of war.

"I am no more a man of war today than I was in September...I trust that our actions begun, but not concluded, will prove to be the turning point not towards war, which wins nothing, cures nothing, ends nothing, but towards a more wholesome era, when reason will take the place of force."(38)

The guarantee was intended as a means of staying Hitler's hand, a method of appeasement as much as the declaration to France.

Why then, it will be asked, had there been no comparable statement with reference to the Czechs at the time of Prague? The answer to this is

straightforward. Apart from the fact that even up to hours before the Prague coup Britain's suspicions were of the most speculative nature, there were still grounds, however slight, for belief in the validity of Germany's expressions at Munich and that any deterrent action might serve only to drive Hitler into a final and complete repudiation of those expressions. The appeasers had not been prepared to sacrifice this last thread of hope. After the occupation of Czech territory, however, British foreign policy could no longer be measured against the yardstick of Munich so that further German expansion in non-German racial areas could be anticipated without charges of loss of faith against Britain. Hence the negotiations for an arrangement to resist such expansion and the specific guarantee to Poland when the storm clouds lowered upon that country. Britain was by then fully justified in discarding her insular approach to the conditions on which she would go to war (the February 7 declaration had envisaged an attack on France as a threat to British interests) and to widen her influence in opposing German aggression.

Thus the guarantee to Poland viewed in its context did not, of itself, constitute a violent swing in foreign policy. This thesis is substantiated by a closer examination of the motive behind it. During the six months since Munich Chamberlain and his colleagues had been endeavouring to ensure a long period of peace for Europe by the appeasement of the prime threat to it - Germany. The Polish guarantee does not mark any real break with this policy. The predominant aim behind it was to maintain peace in Europe by deterring Hitler from provoking a crisis which would jeopardise that peace. It was a further active measure in the search for peace on the deterrent side of British policy which had started soon after Munich. Chamberlain gave voice to his continuing hope in peace immediately prior to announcing the guarantee when he stated that there should be no question incapable of solution by peaceful means. ⁽³⁹⁾ Speaking in the House of Lords on April 19 Halifax stressed that the actions of the government in the field of foreign policy were 'purely defensive in their nature'. ⁽⁴⁰⁾ The principles of peace and freedom were consistent with the present policy in Europe:

"...the efforts which His Majesty's Government are making to resist further aggressive actions involve no departure from the principles of policy which I have tried to lay down. On the contrary it would be our hope that the policy that we are pursuing will in time lead to a reaffirmation of those principles, and a return from the technique of aggression to methods of friendly discussion and negotiation." (41)

During the debate on the Polish guarantee Chamberlain underlined the defensive nature of the present policy by asserting that the discussions in progress with other governments at the time of the guarantee 'contain no threat to Germany as long as Germany will be a good neighbour'.⁽⁴²⁾ British policy was still appeasement - minded. The guarantee to Poland, far from being viewed as a final commitment to war, was an expression of this attitude.

Chamberlain still hoped that he might be able to come to terms with Hitler despite the stark evidence of Prague. That this was so is shown by the fact that he still held hopes for economic appeasement and would press on with that policy until the unwillingness of Germany to take the bait proved it to be impractical. Virtually upto the German invasion of Poland the appeasers tried to induce some kind of rapprochement

with Germany. To this end Chamberlain refused to reconstitute his government. To bring, say, Churchill or Eden in from the cold would have been a popular move both with the party and the public but Chamberlain resisted the temptation in deference to foreign opinion.

Chamberlain's denial of the inevitability of war was absolute. Absolute, but not purblind. The validity of his deterrent policy relied on strength. Prague had underlined the need for taking rearmament even more seriously than before as it had 'made the danger of German raids more formidable.'⁽⁴³⁾ Hore-Belisha was confirmed in his conviction that conscription was essential but Chamberlain still resisted his demands on the grounds that it was 'impracticable'⁽⁴⁴⁾ for political reasons. Yet he agreed that some suitable action should be taken to show that the government was determined to resist aggression. Halifax⁽⁴⁵⁾ demanded as much. The immediate plan was to double the size of the territorial army. It was decided that the announcement of this intention should be made by the prime minister rather than Hore-Belisha in order that it should have maximum effect abroad. His words, however, delivered in the Commons on March 29 still echo his desire not to umbrage the Nazis:

"...His Majesty's Government have been impressed with the need for availing themselves still further of the spirit of voluntary service which is manifest throughout the country. In particular they feel that they cannot allow would-be recruits for the Territorial Army to be refused because the units to which they apply are already over strength." (46)

By this time the question of supply had become more pressing for the government had decided to build up its field-force to thirty-two divisions. It was thus that on April 20 Chamberlain announced the government's intention to set up a Ministry of Supply. (47) At the end of that month Chamberlain finally submitted to pressure for conscription; there was to be limited training for men of 20 and 21 years of age. (48) Chamberlain decided on this measure with regret and had been considerably influenced by the French who were insistent that conscription would be the only real evidence of Britain's earnestness in opposing Fascist aggression. (49)

By such means then was Chamberlain's deterrent policy supported. It was a degree of support that had been foreshadowed in the days immediately following Munich when appeasement had first begun to be seriously associated with rearmament. Since then the emphasis on the rearmament angle of this twin policy had been

increased. Prague had necessitated even greater attention to military preparations by throwing appeasement off-balance. It had also necessitated a reassessment of appeasement, for the structure of Munich had been shattered together with its attendant prospects for European collaboration. Chamberlain had had to reshape his policy in Europe. His greater attention to rearmament was a reflection not only of the additional weight Prague had given to the arguments of those who demanded that England must prepare for war but also of his appreciation that appeasement in its original context had been discredited.

This did not mean, however, that he had come to believe appeasement was wrong. But it did mean that a new angle on appeasement needed to be found. The Polish guarantee represented not a revolution in his thinking of British foreign policy but a new trend in policy operating from the same principles as immediate post-Munich appeasement. The guiding light of foreign policy had not altered. Neither the guarantee itself nor the wider scheme in which it was envisaged was a drastic change in policy. It was aimed at dissuading Hitler from further aggression and is symptomatic of the

emphasis now to be put on the deterrent side of Chamberlain's policy.

In fine, the guarantee is significant on three main counts. Firstly, it announced a definite British concern in eastern Europe where Britain was now prepared to counter aggression with force. Secondly, it meant that Britain had chosen deference to the political sensitivity of Poland rather than agreement with Russia. Lastly, it is important to understand that Britain did not think of the guarantee as a final commitment to war but as a further dam to Germany's ambitions. It was a dam which in the course of the next few weeks (and especially in view of the fact that Mussolini revealed his true colours by the seizure of Albania on April 7) was to be bolstered up by unilateral guarantees given by Britain to Greece and Roumania (April 13) then to Denmark, Holland and Switzerland (April 16).

From the declaration to France on February 7 this policy might appear to resemble that of the inept chess player who incapable of formulating his tactics in advance merely responds as best he can to each separate move his opponent makes. In effect, these guarantees,

while meeting specific circumstances as they arose were an intrinsic part of a central and wide theme of British policy in Europe which had been inspired by Munich and which would not finally be abandoned until that European war it tried to avert had at last become reality.

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1. BD, v.IV, no. 432.
2. *ibid*, no. 564.
3. *ibid*.
4. *ibid*, no. 520.
5. *ibid*, no. 515, note 4.
6. *ibid*, no. 523.
7. *ibid*, no. 547.
8. *ibid*, no. 566.
9. *ibid*, no. 571.
10. DM, v.II, no. 29, p.172.
11. HCD, v.351, cols. 1876-7.
12. Strang, Home and Abroad, p.161.
13. BD, v.IV, no. 566.
14. *ibid*, no. 574.
15. Maisky claims that he was first informed of the guarantee by Chamberlain (Who Helped Hitler? p.107), while the British documents record a meeting at which the guarantee was revealed to the Soviet ambassador by Halifax (v.IV, no. 589).
16. BD, v.IV, no. 589.
17. Maisky, *op. cit.* p.108.
18. HCD, v.345, col. 2416.
19. BD, v.IV, no. 568.
20. *ibid*, no. 573.
21. Namier, Diplomatic Prelude, p.107.
22. BD, v.IV, no. 581.
23. HCD, v.345, col. 2343.
24. *ibid*, col. 2415.
25. *ibid*, cols. 2475-2588.
26. BD, v.IV, no. 598.
27. *ibid*, no. 594.
28. *ibid*, no. 586.
29. *ibid*, no. 597.
30. *ibid*.
31. Templewood, Nine Troubled Years, p.348.
32. Strang, *op. cit.* p.161.
33. Langer and Gleason, The Challenge to Isolation, p.75.
34. Strang, *op. cit.* p.161.
35. *ibid*.
36. Namier, *op. cit.* p.109.
37. BD, v.IV, no. 584.
38. HCD, v.345, cols. 2484, 2486.
39. *supra*, p.331.
40. Halifax, Speeches on Foreign Policy, p.262.
41. *ibid*, p.263.

42. HCD, v.345, col. 2485.
43. Templewood, op. cit. p.335.
44. Minney, The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha, p.187.
45. ibid.
46. HCD, v.345, col. 2048.
47. ibid, v.346, col. 496.
48. ibid, col. 1343.
49. BD, v.V, no. 218. American pressure for
conscription had also been felt, ibid, no. 227.

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