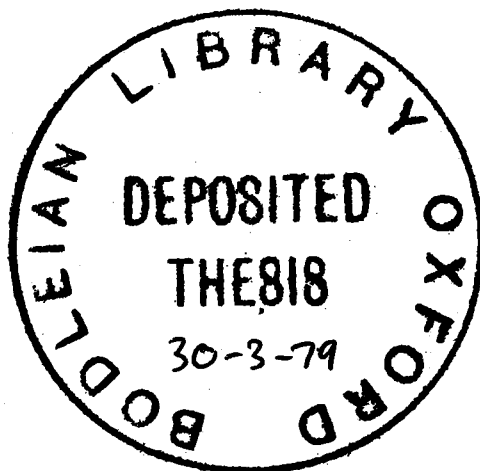


THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN RELATION
TO BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY, 1938-1941.



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requirements of the Degree of Doctor of
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Abstract:

The purpose of this thesis is to provide a case-study in the making of British foreign policy by relating a substantial body of historical evidence to problems raised by a comparative and analytical perspective. The particular period between Munich and the German invasion of the Soviet Union has been chosen because of its intrinsic interest and because it allows us to observe a democracy facing up to the most fundamental question of external relations, that of war or peace.

The thesis focusses on the political aspects of decision-making, at three levels: the Cabinet, at the apex of the system; the press, as the most extensive of all lobbies; and public opinion, arguably the ultimate source of legitimacy in British politics. The aim is to reveal the role of domestic factors in British foreign policy, which are usually acknowledged but not dwelt upon, and thereby to peel back some layers of the complex process of causation in history. The main hinge of the thesis is therefore the argument that neither the 'logic of events', nor some self-evident rationality, explains why the British Government entered and remained in the war between 1939-41. While their importance must not be exaggerated, such decision-making factors as the operation of the Cabinet and the character of public debate, also helped to determine the British position towards Germany.

The other main theme of the thesis is the relative weakness of power-based explanations of decision-making. The roles of Prime Minister and Cabinet are not best described in terms of either's dominance; the press is sufficient of an insider in policy-making circles to complicate immensely any assessment of its separate influence; public opinion can barely be distinguished from the perceptions of politicians who defer to it. Some alternative interpretations are presented for the period under review; those working in different areas may find them suggestive.

Abbreviations used in the text and footnotes

B.E.F.	British Expeditionary Force
B.I.P.O.	British Institute of Public Opinion
CAB.	Cabinet Records
CM.	Cabinet Minutes
C.O.S.	Chiefs of Staff (and Chiefs of Staff Sub-Committee of the Committee of Imperial Defence)
CP.	Cabinet Paper
D Notices	Defence Notices
D.B.F.P.:III	<u>Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-39 Third Series, Edited by E.L. Woodward and Rohan Butler</u>
Dilks.	David Dilks (Ed.): <u>The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938-45</u>
F.O.	Foreign Office
F.P.C.	Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet
F.R.P.S.	Foreign Research and Press Service (of the Royal Institute of International Affairs)
Harvey	John Harvey (Ed.): <u>The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937-40</u>
INF.	Records of the Ministry of Information
M.O.	Mass Observation
N.P.A.	Newspaper Proprietors' Association
P.Q.	Parliamentary Question
PREM.	Records of the Prime Minister's Office
W.M.	War Cabinet Minutes
W.P.	War Cabinet Paper

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This thesis contains c. 104,000 words.

Chapter I: INTRODUCTION: THE PROBLEM

It is impossible to study modern history without being interested in the origins of the second world war. On the surface the war is easily explicable but on contemplation it reveals endless difficulties, well beyond that of explaining how it was that a psychopath came to control a modern nation like Germany. When the problem is broken down into the entries into the war of the various countries involved, even the character of Hitler, although more important than any other single factor, soon becomes an insufficient datum. In the case of Britain, for instance, it is hard to take for granted the common assumption that a declaration of war on Germany was completely inevitable and desirable, both in the long view and in terms of the specific circumstances in which it was made. British diplomacy during 1938-9 has been one of the most bitterly disputed episodes in the whole history of international relations, and only now, as perspectives lengthen, are the hostilities beginning to lose their intensity. But whether the argument is political or academic, it centres on why Neville Chamberlain's Cabinet reacted in the specific ways that they did to the initiatives taken by Hitler towards Austria, Czechoslovakia and Poland; acts of commission like the Munich settlement, or the wooing of Franco and Mussolini, and of omission like coolness towards the USSR or the turning of a blind eye to the remilitarisation of the Rhineland, are equally controversial.¹

1 The argument has been mapped over the years by D.C. Watt in 'Appeasement: The rise of a Revisionist School', Political Quarterly, Vol.36, No.2 (April-June 1965), pp.191-213, and 'The Historiography of Appeasement', in Crisis and Controversy: Essays in Honour of A.J.P. Taylor, edited by Chris Cook and Alan Sked (London, Macmillan, 1976).

The desire to explain these decisions rather than to justify or denigrate them has predominated since the opening up of the Public Records from 1967. Historians have not been slow to produce careful accounts of the evolution of British foreign policy in the 1930s which have succeeded in revising many conventional wisdoms, such as the notion that Chamberlain and his colleagues were anxious to encourage a Nazi attack on the Soviet Union, or on the other side of the view that Germany enjoyed an overwhelming and decisive preponderance of air-power in 1938-39.¹

However, in some important respects our understanding of British policy in this period is still deficient. Although most accounts, for example, make statements in passing about the roles of Prime Minister, Cabinet, Foreign Office or Chiefs of Staff, no systematic analysis exists of the respective influences of these and other elements in the policy-making process. Chamberlain is usually said to have dominated his Ministers, but others have implied that it was really Lord Halifax who took the important initiatives in 1939.² Sometimes the Foreign Office is portrayed as a centre of opposition to appeasement, and sometimes as an eager supporter of the policies which were pursued.³ Equally, some regard public opinion as having acted as a pacific constraint on any government desire to 'stand up to the dictators', but others see opinion

1 For misconceptions about relative air-power, see N.H. Gibbs, Official History of the Second World War, Grand Strategy, Vol. I, 1919-39, (London, HMSO, 1976), pp.597-600, and S. Roskill: Hankey, Man of Secrets, Vol. III, (London, Collins, 1974), pp.664-5.

2 For example, M. Cowling: The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy, 1933-40, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975) pp, 9, 303, 393 and S. Newman: The British Guarantee to Poland, (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1976), pp. 150-1.

3 For the one view see Christopher Thorne: The Approach of War, 1938-9, (London, Macmillan, 1967), pp.28-30, for the other, D. Lammers: 'From Whitehall after Munich: The Foreign Office and the Future Course of British Policy', The Historical Journal, XVI,4(1973) pp.831-56. It should be said that both writers are suitably cautious, in the absence of any full-length study of the Foreign Office.

as having been 'ahead' of the policy of appeasement in realising that Hitler would never be satisfied with compromise.¹ In other words there is both some confusion and some argument over the relative contributions to policy of the important groups and institutions involved. Different interpretations could also be cited for the critics of the government (the 'anti-appeasers'), for the professional military, and for almost any other set of participants. This is partly inevitable - there will always be disagreement - but more obviously it is due to the fact that no-one has shown much direct interest in this kind of question. Despite early advocacy by D.C. Watt,² an analysis of decision-making has very much taken second place to the writing of chronological history, whether in the form of day-to-day description of events or explanation of the broad themes of British foreign policy at the time.³

A focus on policy-making is necessary not simply for its own sake but because it positively complements the more usual approach, in three distinct ways. First, it simply concentrates on the process by which decisions emerged, rather than on the impact of the decisions on the wider scene of international relations. As indicated above, few people take institutions at face value. Most of us are sceptical of claims that a department of state or a legislative assembly is working as smoothly or correctly as intended (although in Britain it is sometimes difficult to know exactly what is 'intended', given the lack of a written constitution). It is therefore important to establish how the machinery

1 Keith Middlemas: Diplomacy of Illusion, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), pp.455-6, takes the former view. For the latter we need to go back to the years when appeasement found few defenders. See Winston Churchill: The Second World War, Vol. I, The Gathering Storm, (London, Cassell, 1948), pp.258, 279-80.

2 D.C. Watt: Personalities and Policies: Studies in the Formulation of British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century, (London, Longmans, 1965).

3 Middlemas, op.cit. p.8, is one of the few at least to recognise the existence of policy analysis, and explicitly confines himself to 'a plain historical analysis'.

of government does work in practice, and this can only be done by frontal assault; it is hardly enough to generalise from random insights generated in the course of other kinds of enquiries.¹ For British foreign policy in the late thirties, we have a fairly large body of writing on the overall course of events - the seamless web - and even on the attitudes of various participants at different times. But we have no systematic analysis of how politicians and administrators behaved when sifting information, formulating alternatives, and taking or implementing decisions. These are problems which are now attracting attention wherever organisations or small groups exist to take action, whether in politics, industry, or personal relations, for the answers are neither trivial nor self-evident,² and the decisions which led Britain into war in 1939 are certainly important enough to repay similar attention. Indeed, general interest in decision-making has itself been stimulated by studies of other foreign policy cases, so that we are not entering upon untested ground.³

The second way in which a policy-making perspective can help us to understand the history of the 'appeasement' years is by clarifying the issue of responsibility. The doctrine of collective responsibility tells us that the members of the Cabinet were all answerable for foreign policies conducted overtly by the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. This does not say very much. Were the Cabinet led willy-nilly through

1 The need for an explicit treatment of decision-making is argued at length in J.N. Rosenau: The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy, (New York, The Free Press, 1971), especially chapters V and IX, and the pioneering Foreign Policy Decision-Making, edited by R.C. Snyder, H.W. Bruck and Burton Sapin, (New York, The Free Press, 1962, but first printed in 1954).

2 For evidence of the growth of interest in decision-making throughout the social sciences, see R.J. Audley et.al. Decision-Making (London, British Broadcasting Corporation, 1967), and F.G. Castles, D.G. Murray and D.C. Potter (Eds.) Decisions, Organizations and Society (Harmondsworth, Penguin for The Open University, 1971).

3 In particular by G.Allison: Essence of Decision, (Boston, Little, Brown, 1971) and M.Halperin: Bureaucratic Politics and Foreign Policy, (Washington, D.C., The Brookings Institution, 1974).

the intricacies of diplomacy by the forceful character of Chamberlain, ultimately being willing to defer to his judgement and intellect? Or were they a group of like-minded men, responding collectively to the painful dilemmas imposed by Hitler's revisionism? Alternatively, were officials in the Foreign Office pushing strongly for any particular policy at this time? Did they advise clearly on the non plus ultra of British compliance to Hitler's demands, and on the point at which Britain should be willing to risk a war? Did Chamberlain's military advisers encourage a war for Poland, and at the time at which it broke out? Outside the Government, how extensive was disagreement with British policy? Was the Government's Parliamentary majority in 1939 beginning to become as unsteady as it proved in May 1940? Did the press mount campaigns of hostile criticism, or did they help to preserve a united front to the outside world?

Although in one sense these questions are about dead controversies, in another they are of great importance. Almost all history which is interesting is so because of its moral undertones and because we empathise with figures from the past. We are naturally concerned with who precisely was responsible for what, and whether there were alternative actions available which might have had "better" consequences, even if we restrict ourselves to the premises of those acting at the time, and exclude our own preferences. This is true whether we are thinking about the conditions of slaves in the young United States, the revolution which overthrew the Tsar in 1917, or the rise to power of Hitler. The 'whys' cannot entirely be answered without reference to the 'what if

nots' of history.¹ As for British foreign policy just before the Second World War, while we no longer wish to harangue 'Guilty Men', we will always be concerned to disentangle the different stances and different powers, of those involved in the argument. At present, our knowledge is detailed but not pursued in these directions. If there were important distinctions of view within the circles of decision-making, and if one set of opinions did prevail over the others, whether by argument or the exercise of authority, we are still only dimly aware of how or why this occurred.²

The third contribution of policy analysis to the study of this period lies in its assumption that the nature and practice of decision-making procedures may themselves significantly affect the outcome of events. At the simplest level this is just the truism that an inefficient secretariat or intelligence service makes realistic decisions difficult. Less obviously, it points towards the distortion of rational policy-making that can result from such phenomena as intra-bureaucratic competition or cognitive dissonance, and from the very nature of choice and decision itself.³

There exist two extreme and opposing interpretations of political choice, to which few people subscribe fully, but which act as simplified

1 'Counterfactual analysis' is a matter of great controversy among historians. The comments by E.H. Hunt and G.R. Hawke on the work of R.W. Fogel illuminate some of the logical and methodological problems raised by such 'speculation' in history. 'The New Economic History: Professor Fogel's Study of American Railways', and Comment; History, Vol.53, No.177, (February, 1968), pp.3-23.

2 Recent accounts have if anything been too anxious to avoid generalisations even about individual institutions.

3 One of the first and most interesting explanations of how what went on inside the decision-making 'black box' affected the content of policy was J. Frankel: The Making of Foreign Policy, (London, OUP, 1963).

yard-sticks of belief. One view is voluntarist, seeing decisions as the product of free minds applying themselves rationally to the problems confronting them. Historians seeking to understand events, therefore, should concentrate on rehearsing the arguments used by those involved in making the policies in question. Different conclusions may be reached, but the main focus is still on the intellectual dimension, rather than on the organisational, psychological or historical contexts in which decisions were made. Politicians are to be regarded as fundamentally in control of their own actions.

The alternative view is determinist, and holds that foreign (or any other) policies are essentially the outcrops of deeply-rooted interests or circumstances. The important factors to analyse from the viewpoint of explaining international relations are those of basic structure - whether this be human nature, the domestic regime, balances of power, or the character of economic relationships. Calvinists, Marxists, anti-Communists and neo-Malthusians may all take this line.¹

Both voluntarists and determinists regard the ways in which decisions are made as having only a marginal impact on the ebb and flow of history. More profound reasons are sought to explain great events. Any position between these two extremes, however, must accept to some degree that how men deliberate about their actions, whom they consult, and whom they do not, what prejudices they display and how thoroughly they examine their information, will affect what they do. Decisions

1 E.H. Carr discusses the determinist viewpoint far more subtly than he has been given credit for. See What is History?, (Harmendsworth, Penguin. 1964). especially pp. 44-55, and 93-108.

are not merely the superstructural product of ratiocination or impersonal forces; they are part of a complex process of causation in which change results from interaction between many different actors, inside organisational and intellectual settings that are continually reinterpreted with the passage of time. At the international level the actors have principally been states, conducting their relations within an overall 'international system'. At the level of the individual state, action is the result of individuals, organisations, and groups competing for influence and arguing about concrete proposals, within a political system composed of institutions and traditions distinctively influenced by the country's history. From the broad perspective of systems theory, therefore, decision-making is the process that intervenes between the inputs coming from the outside world or from within society, and the outputs which form foreign policy itself. It is at least one among many important potential influences on history, and in particular circumstances, the quality of decision-making may actually be decisive for the future course of events. And this, together with the arguments made previously, amounts to a good case for enquiring into how British decisions leading up to the war with Hitler were made, if simple curiosity is not by itself sufficient justification.

There is another, contrasting, motive behind this thesis, however, apart from an interest in the history of the 1930s and 1940s. This corresponds to what is probably the distinguishing feature of social science from history, namely the urge to generalise. Social scientists, by and large, attempt to work towards theories of behaviour which will be relevant across different time periods, even though they will also have to be hedged about with qualifications in order to cater for the

peculiarities of circumstance.¹ This is essentially the aim of the academic subject of International Relations which, as a branch of political science, aims to make broad statements about how states behave towards each other and about the problems which are thrown up by the international system. Naturally there are substantial disagreements within the subject about how far such generalisations can go, and about the methods which should be employed to achieve them.²

Within International Relations one of the main focuses of interest is foreign policy analysis, or the study of how foreign policies are made and conducted. In the last twenty years this has proved a lively intellectual area, and a body of theoretical work has emerged that has both borrowed from other disciplines and is well worth reading by other social scientists interested in decision-making.³ A main problem of foreign policy analysis, however, is the gap that has existed between the theorists and the historians of particular countries or periods. Many of the former have wasted time with banal propositions and over-elaborate theories, through sheer lack of knowledge of diplomacy in detail.⁴ On the other hand, few historians have shown themselves interested in raising their heads from particular cases, so as to

1 A. Marwick, The Nature of History, (London, Macmillan, 1970), p.106,ff. discusses the relations between history and the social sciences.

2 (Expressed in) K.Knorr and J. Rosenau (Eds) Contending Approaches to International Politics, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1969).

3 A survey of this work can be found in C.J. Hill: 'A Theoretical Introduction', in W.Paterson and W. Wallace (Eds), Foreign Policy-Making in Western Europe: A Comparative Approach (London, Saxon House, 1978).

4 Examples are littered through P. McGowan and H. Shapiro (Eds): The Comparative Study of Foreign Policy, (London, Sage, 1974).

relate their wealth of data to concepts about politics, whether normative or positive. What has been plainly required for some time is work on case-studies of foreign policy-making organised in such a way as to make comparisons possible. These cases have now begun to appear, and this thesis seeks to join their ranks. Agreement is gradually being forged on a broad common framework of analysis to be applied to historical material. As represented in the work of Michael Brecher on Israel, this consists of examining the factors impinging on foreign policy in terms of the varying milieux in which practitioners operate: the external environment, of other states, geography, and the totality of international relations; the domestic environment, of the machinery of government, political conflict, and the pressures of interested groups; and the 'psychological environment', which is a misnomer for the world as seen by decision-makers rather than as it really is (or is seen by others).¹

Such categories are taxonomic devices to enable empirical research to be done on different cases while revolving around similar questions and concentrating on the same phenomena. Some writers prefer to approach decision-making from the opposite end, by formulating a theory or paradigm and testing or interpreting the data against it. Graham Allison and John Steinbruner have produced interesting results with this approach but have also run into its intrinsic weakness - that it tends to produce single-factor explanations which are then difficult to

1 M. Brecher: The Foreign Policy System of Israel, and Decisions in Israel's Foreign Policy, (London OUP 1972 and 1974); the distinction between 'psychological' and 'operational' environments was first drawn by H. & M. Sprout in 'Environmental Factors in the Study of International Politics', Journal of Conflict Resolution Vol. I, (December 1957,) pp.309-28.

reconcile with each other.¹ The more cautious taxonomic method aims in the first instance just at the orderly collection of data and the facilitating of comparison. It does not pre-judge the extent to which generalisation may or may not be possible. On the other hand it is still sensitive to the need ultimately to consider events in the light of explanatory theories about human behaviour.

The present thesis therefore aligns itself more with Brecher than with Allison, in that it does not seek to outline deductively a 'theory of foreign policy' which may then be tested against the evidence from the 1938-41 period. Rather, it will consider the operations of certain elements of the decision-making process from the point of view of the open-ended questions posed earlier in this Introduction. But it is still concerned, if obviously not to generalise on the basis of one case, at least to provide material for comparison and possible future generalisation, by focusing directly on the processes which interest theorists of decision-making. At the same time the temptation to fashion new theoretical concepts is resisted. If there is little point in replacing idiosyncratic history with idiosyncratic political analysis, then it is important to discuss the foreign policy process in a vocabulary that is comprehensible and useful to others working in the field. The 'environmental' perspective enables us to do this, incorporating as it does both formal institutions and more abstract notions from systems theory, capable of identifying factors that cut across institutional boundaries.

1 Allison, op.cit; J. Steinbruner: The Cybernetic Theory of Decision, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1974). The problems arising from 'competing paradigms' are discussed by R.T. Holt and J.M. Richardson in R.T. Holt and J.E. Turner (Eds): The Methodology of Comparative Research (New York, The Free Press, 1970), pp.23-71.

To restate, there are two main aims behind this thesis, which are complementary but opposite. One is to illuminate an important period of British history by adopting an explicitly analytical approach towards the problem of how decisions were made; the other is to examine a particular case-study with a view to illuminating some of the concepts found in the theoretical study of decision-making and providing data which can be readily used by those concerned with the comparative study of foreign policy. On the one hand theory can help us to probe history, on the other history is the best test for theory.

* * *

If the basic rationale is reasonably clear, its practical application is more problematic. Ideally an exercise of this kind should survey the whole decision-making process, by describing the roles of all its component parts and showing how they interacted. This was the original intention here. Unfortunately, it gradually became clear that to do this in any depth would require an excessively long treatment, since there has been very little preliminary work done by others that will bear synthesis. It would , for example, be possible and justifiable to write at book-length about the part played by the Foreign Office between 1938-41, and indeed it is to be hoped that such a study will not be too long forthcoming. The same is true for the Chiefs of Staff, and Service departments,¹ for the Treasury and the

1 Recent books by M. Howard: The Continental Commitment, (London, Temple Smith, 1972), D.C. Watt: Too Serious a Business, (London, Temple Smith, 1975) and N.H. Gibbs, op.cit., give a full picture of military thinking and problems, but their main interest is not that of the process of decision-making.

whole economic dimension of 'appeasement'. A specialist survey of the contribution of the Dominions to British policy in this period has already appeared.¹ Other influences that deserve fairly detailed investigation include the United States and France in the external environment, and interest groups and opposition parties at home. Important contributions have already been made to these subjects, but in oblique ways, with little weighing of their relative influence on policy-making.

Without this body of comparable work it is hardly realistic to take on the task within the confines of a single thesis. Any such attempt would produce only a catalogue of assertions, in which the available evidence was superficially considered and the argument about policy-making rudimentarily rehearsed. Less than 10,000 words could be allocated to each section. There is an argument for accepting this brevity, on the grounds that it is important to have an overall picture, and one in which the interrelations between the relevant institutions are clearly depicted. After all, even in the special area of foreign policy neither the Cabinet nor the Foreign Office work in isolation. Their deliberations cannot take place without reference to the overall context of the Government's commitments and difficulties. But those works which have sought to present a full picture do not escape the defects of their virtues. A.I. Dawisha's Egypt in the Arab World: The Elements of Foreign Policy, and even Brecher's The Foreign Policy System of Israel have little time to do

1 R. Ovendale: 'Appeasement' in the English Speaking World: Britain, the United States, the Dominions and the Policy of 'Appeasement', (Cardiff, University of Wales Press, 1975).

other than tick off some important elements and briefly describe their activities.¹ The more profound causal problems associated with decision-making analysis are necessarily skipped over. The same is true for Donald Bishop's The Administration of British Foreign Relations.² Although it must be admitted that works of this kind deal with longer periods than the three years focussed on here, the period leading up to the Second World War is so controversial, and now the subject of such detailed historical enquiry, that a check-list approach would still be comparatively superficial and would hardly encourage historians to take political science seriously. Indeed, the most interesting and satisfying books in the general field of foreign policy studies are those which have taken a narrow but deep slice from history, like Zara Steiner's The Foreign Office and British Foreign Policy 1898-1914 and Graham Allison's already-cited work on the Cuban Missile Crisis.³

In consequence it is desirable both to limit the scope of this enquiry and to organise it around some unifying theme. Description and analysis are only valuable when they relate to fairly explicit questions. These can be narrow, as in the case of 'why did Mussolini

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- 1 M. Brecher, Vol. 1, op.cit.; A.I. Dawisha: Egypt and the Arab World, (London, Macmillan, 1976) both books are interesting and important; it is simply in the nature of their approach that they sometimes take on the appearance of a catalogue.
 - 2 D. Bishop: The Administration of British Foreign Relations, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1961); Bishop's is in any case largely a descriptive treatment of institutions.
 - 3 Z. Steiner: The Foreign Office and British Foreign Policy 1898-1914 (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1969). The methodology of this book is historical, in contrast to Allison's, but both authors are essentially interested in the role of bureaucracy in foreign

invade Abyssinia in 1935 (rather than at any other time)?', or broad, such as 'do democratic states pursue peaceful foreign policies', but it is the posing of a problem which enables us to judge whether the subject is important and to what area of knowledge it is contributing. Empiricism is usually at its most sterile and uninteresting when it is 'descriptive' without being clear as to the criteria on which the facts presented are being selected. It is unfortunate that much of the flood of work recently produced about the Chamberlain Cabinet falls into this category. Books such as those by Middlemas, Colvin and Parkinson have the loose coherence inevitably lent by chronology, but otherwise leave the reader to discover for himself what precisely is being illuminated.¹ They do not set out to explain anything very directly as in their different ways both biographies and Braudelien surveys do. Sidney Aster's scholarly book 1939 is a model of its kind, as a day-to-day account, but even he tends to beg the questions of why ultimately the war came about when it did, and whether it was inevitable.²

In this study of decision-making the theme will be broadly that of democracy and foreign policy, and its scope will be limited to the operation of Cabinet government on the one hand and the domestic context of foreign policy on the other. The aim is not to rework the familiar normative arguments about secret diplomacy or Parliamentary

1 K. Middlemas, op.cit.; I. Colvin: The Chamberlain Cabinet, (London, Gollancz, 1971); R. Parkinson: Peace For Our Time, (London, Rupert-Hart-Davis, 1971).

2 S. Aster: 1939: The Making of the Second World War, (London, André Deutsch, 1973). These questions are addressed in the last two paragraphs of the book; otherwise there are no conclusions.

accountability, but instead to show how policy was made by testing, in a general sense, one of the fundamental notions of liberal societies: that power is not monopolised by a small self-interested elite, but shared between rulers and ruled, if not always through physical consultation, then by an implicit agreement to proceed only on the basis of a broad national consensus. This tacit social contract demands a continuing sensitivity on the part of those who govern to the needs and expressed feelings of the mass of people, but it is of especial importance when the basic issue of life and death, war or peace, is at stake. The democratic ethos is also thought to apply vertically throughout the machinery of government, so that what goes on in Cabinet is seen as simply the last stage in an ongoing discussion about policy throughout which different interests or views have the chance to be expressed. Public debate, Parliamentary scrutiny, inter-departmental committees, and finally Ministerial discussion, are all similar stages in a pluralist (and representative) system of government.¹ Conversely, when Chamberlain was criticised for pursuing an 'undemocratic' foreign policy, the odium attached equally and indiscriminately to relations between the

1 Fairly typical modern expressions of this view are to be found in R.M. Punnett: British Government and Politics (2nd Ed.) (London, Heinemann, 1971), pp.420-1, and A.H. Birch: The British System of Government (3rd Ed.) (London, Allen and Unwin, 1973), pp.275-87. It should be said that the present generation of academic writers is rather less wide-eyed about British democracy than their predecessors, while still broadly subscribing to the view outlined above. Politicians and journalists, however, still tend to promulgate what Birch has called 'the liberal model' (p.31), with little qualification.

Cabinet and public opinion, and to the Prime Minister's supposed autocracy within the Cabinet, as well as to the actual content of his policies (having truck with the dictators, etc.).¹

This then, is how the making of foreign policy in Britain is often interpreted; as a process involving sensitivity and consensus rather than strict accountability or delegation of powers. But if we are to make a useful contribution to the debate about how wide was the circle of participation in foreign policy-making and how responsive were those at the top to inputs from outside, we must break down this agreement into its various levels. Otherwise simplifications inevitably follow.

It is not very fruitful (from this point of view of empirical research) to argue about the intrinsic democratic or anti-democratic qualities of a foreign policy. Much time and space has been expended on the proposition that a certain kind of society will be characterised by a certain kind of external posture, but the only clear outcome has been disagreement.² Equally, the notion of a Prime Minister like Chamberlain 'dominating' foreign policy blurs unhelpfully his relations with the contrasting sectors of political life. A leader like Harold Macmillan may keep a tight rein on his colleagues but be highly sensitive to apparent swings in electoral mood. An Edward Heath may

¹ Colvin, op.cit., pp.260-72; M. Gilbert and R. Gott: The Appeasers, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1963), pp.54-8, 240, 257.

² M. Sullivan: International Relations: Theories and Evidence, (New York, Prentice Hall, 1976), pp.102-141, surveys research of this kind. He argues rather unconvincingly that progress is being made.

display opposite characteristics. Either way, the picture is not very straightforward. As a result, what follows here will separate out the question of leadership and participation within the Cabinet - are the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary able to dominate their less knowledgeable colleagues, as is often supposed, or are they genuinely subject to the cross-checking process of collective decisions? - from the relationship of the Government to their public constituency. The latter in turn will be broken down into the press on the one hand, (who are the professional debaters of government policy), and on the other society at large, universally referred to by the nebulous term 'public opinion', but including the activities of pressure-groups and of the people's representatives in Parliament. In this way it is hoped to impose some coherence on the description of decision-making, and to tackle more systematically than has so far been the case the roles of the principal decision-makers of British foreign policy. Within the context of British political life, what does it mean to say that X or Y has the 'power to make foreign policy'? How widely are powers shared, whose views are listened to, and whose prevail? To the extent that we can generalise about these questions even within the limited time-span of 1938-41, we shall be providing some evidence for what ought to be the major preoccupation of all those interested in politics: who governs, how, and by what sanction? Too often historians do not use their expertise to cast light on the issue and too often political scientists drain the life from it by dessicated abstraction or methodologising. This thesis seeks to bridge the two disciplines, if only by a catwalk, and thereby to have the best of both worlds.

The three sections mentioned above, on the Cabinet, Press and Public Opinion, form the heart of the thesis. For reasons already given this means that a crucial part of the decision-making process, the bureaucracy, which in this context mainly refers to the Foreign Office, Treasury and Service departments, is being excluded. This is obviously a major deficiency, but unavoidable within the confines of space. The theme of democracy and foreign policy should not be excessively damaged by the omission, since although civil servants clearly take or influence 'political' decisions regularly, and although there are well known theories which attribute 'real' power to officialdom, in Britain the principle of civil service neutrality means that it is politicians who are ultimately responsible for their own actions before Parliament and the public. It is the political sector which should therefore be the first object of any study of decision taking in a democracy. Likewise, the doctrine of Cabinet collective responsibility, by uniting Ministers behind their joint decisions, helps to make the Cabinet itself the focus of major policy discussion (politicians will rarely agree to support a policy they dislike unless they have been in on the process which produced it) and to prevent intra-bureaucratic disputes (of the kind more prevalent in the United States) monopolising the stage. The Foreign Office, Dominions Office and the like are thus indispensable for any full picture of the formulation and implementation of foreign policy, but not necessarily so for a study of government and responsibility. The role of civil servants is analytically separate from the question of how the political realm is conducted; of the manner in which Ministers debate serious decisions amongst themselves and the degree to which political opinion outside the Cabinet room is audible and influential.

There remains the question of historical context. The period under study is a complex one, in which the substance of policy can hardly be divorced from procedures of decision-making. Each section of the thesis will therefore pay considerable attention to the major arguments and dilemmas of the time, and will not be confined to matters of process. But why study this period, from after Munich until the German invasion of Russia, at all? Superficially these few years of foreign policy seem to be as untypical a period as could be chosen. There are five main reasons for taking 1 October 1938 to 22 June 1941 as a case-study. In the first instance, these dates encompass a period of some considerable unity. It is now a truism that the Second World War only became truly global in 1941, when the USSR, USA and Japan entered the conflict. The previous 21 months, and particularly those of the 'Phoney War', have at least as much in common with the European crisis of 1938-39, as with what followed. The pattern of tension punctuated by German putschs characterises nearly every year from 1935 onwards, if with increasing severity. On the other hand Munich was clearly the apogee of the attempt to accommodate rather than resist Hitler's demands, and the prospects for a lasting peace receded soon afterwards. There are therefore quite natural breaks at both ends of our period. In any case, the controversies over Munich and the Second Front, which lie respectively just beyond each terminal date, are large subjects in their own right and would require more than passing attention if included.

The second reason for choosing the period is that despite its homogeneity it does allow us to look at policy-making in circumstances

of war and of peace. Comparisons between the two should throw light on each and by doing so, indicate whether the ways in which decisions are made are significantly affected by external conditions. Is decision-making particularly autocratic in war-time? In peacetime, albeit when decisions are being taken in an atmosphere of crisis, what are the usual procedures and when are they transformed or laid on one side?

Thirdly, and closely related to this point, is the fact that since the years in question saw the whole decision-making process in action and under strain, they should provide a good litmus-test of the ultimate values and predispositions of politicians in a democracy. For at stake was the fundamental purpose of foreign policy, indeed of the state itself, namely national security, together with the most basic of all policy dilemmas: should the lives of many citizens be sacrificed in war on the assumption that the lives and liberties of all are otherwise at risk? If we really think it is important to find out how decisions are taken in foreign policy, because they concern our ultimate security and well-being, then there is no substitute for turning directly to those years when serious steps were taken which determined the course of war and peace, and in which the basic criteria of a country's foreign policy were revealed. To the criticism that 1938, 39, 40, and 41, are not 'typical' years, and that we should be better served by studying more 'routine' decisions, the rejoinder is therefore clear: these were crucial times, and if in different forms, and for different countries, their problems constantly recur. The stresses of crisis decision-making need to be understood both by practitioners and by society at large.

In any case, what period is 'typical' of British foreign policy in the twentieth century? The fourth reason for choosing these years is that they are not in fact unrepresentative of Britain's recent history, throughout which she has been a major power directly involved in the ordering and re-ordering of international relations. The onset of the Second World War, although clearly unique in what it unleashed, did not make wholly unfamiliar demands of her politicians. It is true that Hitler was an unmanageable phenomenon for almost all his contemporaries, but Chamberlain and his colleagues were not otherwise ill at ease at having to spend so much time on foreign policy and the settlement of Europe's problems. After the withdrawal of the United States from 1919 Britain had indeed remained the main supervisor of world affairs, if with waning power by comparison with the days of Palmerston and Salisbury. If the Polish crisis of 1939 had not resulted in war it would soon have joined the canon of those events in British history which are seen as important but not exceptional, such as Schleswig-Holstein, Fashoda, Chanak, Manchuria, and even after 1945, Suez and Rhodesia. The few years after Munich are untypical of British foreign policy only in that not all crises lead to world wars, fought to a finish.¹

1 Some crises are intrinsically more likely to lead to war than others, of course, but even in 1939 Chamberlain at times felt normality was almost at hand once more, and he certainly resisted the notion that war was completely inevitable. See Chamberlain Papers, NC18/1/1071-91, letter to Ida Chamberlain 26.2.1939, and NC18/1/1092-1118, to Hilda Chamberlain 2 July.

The last motive for choosing this particular period for a case-study is prosaic but still important. When I started work in the area of decision-making the public records were only available up until 1945 - and a purely wartime study, especially for the years 1941-45, would have meant less foreign policy and more military strategy. Almost by definition, decision-making analysis requires knowledge of what was said within the sanctum of private discussions at the top level. It depends on knowing how politicians and their advisers see the world, beyond the ritualised pronouncements of the public platform or replies in Question Time. For the history of the last thirty years in Britain, we can only guess at how decisions were made, without access to the innumerable memoranda and minutes which were the actual stuff of inner debate. The need for the official records is also the reason for taking a relatively short time span for the case-study; the sheer weight of relevant documents now available rules out, for any close-textured scrutiny of policy-making, a period much longer than three years. The alternatives are either inevitable omission and obscurity (as with Maurice Cowling's The Impact of Hitler) or immense length (as with Martin Gilbert's microscopic portrait of Churchill).¹

As indicated above, the major source to be employed for this thesis is the national archive of public papers. More specifically, (since selection is inevitable) the main classes of documents used were the Minutes of Cabinet meetings, and the papers prepared for them; the many files produced by the Cabinet Secretariat in the service of ministerial meetings (CAB 21); the papers of various

1 Cowling, op.cit.; M. Gilbert: Winston S. Churchill, Vols. III, IV, V, with Companions, (London, Heinemann, 1971, 1975, 1976)

Cabinet committees under separate headings, together with many files from the Prime Ministers' Private Office (PREM 1-4); lastly I have examined selected material from the Foreign Office files and from those of the Ministry of Information, as they related to central policy-making on the main issue of war or peace.¹

A wealth of private sources exists to supplement the official records, and these have been extensively surveyed. Cabinet Minutes were rarely complete versions of the discussion that took place, even under the liberal rule of Sir Edward Bridges, and politicians are always more circumspect about those of their thoughts that they commit even to confidential departmental files than about their personal diaries and correspondence. In this respect the available letters or diaries of the three principals of British foreign policy from Munich until mid-1940, at least, are all invaluable - namely the papers of Neville Chamberlain, Lord Halifax, and Sir Alexander Cadogan. It is only a pity that the papers of their successors, Winston Churchill and Anthony Eden are not similarly open to inspection. But a number of other useful collections exist for senior Ministers, such as those of Sir Thomas Inskip, Sir Samuel Hoare, Hugh Dalton and Lord Hankey. Between them, despite a patchiness of quality and relevance, they remind us that policy-making is about personal beliefs and prejudices as well as departmental briefs and the collecting of voices in Cabinet.²

1 Further details of all sources are contained in the Bibliography at the end of the thesis.

2 By themselves private papers would be misleading, but when used in harness with official material they are indispensable.

A source of equal usefulness is the mass of published material increasingly available for students of the foreign policies of the 1930s. These are still primary materials, in the sense of being documents which were produced at the time as part of day-to-day policy-making, but they have been selectively compiled into anthologies meant to represent the most important aspects of the history in question. Of course the interposition of an editor between the student and his materials is intrinsically undesirable, but such collections are important, either as substitutes for the whole archive (as with the German, French or American records, which are either closed, or too distant and too marginal to repay a visit), or as extra syntheses of huge collections of files that even in situ can only be sampled. This is the case with the British Foreign Office records, which have been published in brief but reasonably fair selections, under the title of Documents on British Foreign Policy, Third Series. Apart from edited collections there are of course also freely available records of contemporary activities, such as Hansard and the whole spectrum of newspapers and journals.

As always, there is a profusion of secondary material to back up the major sources. The efflorescence of historical writing on the 1930s has produced a fair number of excellent monographs on which the political scientist can draw, such as Peter Dennis's work on conscription and Paul Addison's on the changing character of party politics under the impact of the war.¹ One category of books on which this thesis will not be leaning, however, is that of memoirs. Many interpretations of the appeasement years have been based on these

1 P. Dennis: Decision by Default, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972); P. Addison: The Road to 1945, (London, Cape, 1975).

apologia, and they are the poorer for it.¹ It is only since the full public records have been opened, and since those who were not themselves engaged in the controversies of the thirties have begun to write, that anything like a sophisticated and truthful picture has begun to emerge. As a general principle it may be said that the memory of practitioners is unreliable historical evidence, both in the technical sense that old men do indeed forget - few of us can remember very precisely the course of even important happenings more than a few years old - and in the sense that they are inevitably attempts at exculpation, and are highly selective in consequence. Those written by Eden, Butler, and Simon are the more obvious of many examples.² Therefore only documents which were produced at the time, and which we can reasonably certain have not been doctored subsequently, have been used as the basis of this research.

This introduction has attempted to explain (i) why a decision-making approach can increase our understanding of particular countries' foreign policies at particular times, and (ii) why detailed case-studies are necessary if the theories of decision-making which have increasingly captured the interest of political scientists over the last twenty years are to reach beyond the status of diverting hypotheses. It has also argued that the period from 1 October 1938 to 22 June 1941 is sufficiently self-contained and important, without being bizarrely untypical, to constitute a good

1 For instance, Gilbert and Gott, op. cit., and A. Furnia: The Diplomacy of Appeasement (Washington, D.C. Georgetown, University Press, 1959).

2 A. Eden (Lord Avon): Memoirs: The Reckoning, (London, Cassell, 1965); R. Butler: The Art of the Possible, (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1971); Viscount Simon: Retrospect, (London, Hutchinson,

test-case for the theorist (the historian needs no other justification than that the period interests him and others), and that the materials exist to make possible a penetrative analysis of complex decisions.

The direction of the analysis is partly towards basic descriptions - how did decision-making take place - but also towards the problem of democracy and foreign policy: of the extent to which terms like democracy, responsibility, and accountability retain their meaning when decisions are being taken on international matters which require special knowledge, discretion, flexibility and often speed of manoeuvre, as invariably seems to be the case with foreign policy. We shall be looking not at how things ought to be, but at how they were, in an effort to clear away some of the rubble which still covers over such issues. The enquiry begins with the Cabinet as the single most important focus of decision and will thereafter extend to those outside the machinery of government who were concerned to play a part in the workings of democracy.

Chapter II: DECISION-MAKING AT THE CENTRE: THE CABINET

The primary task of this Chapter is to assess the roles of the Cabinet and its members in the formulation of those decisions made by the British Government, between Munich and the German invasion of the USSR, which embodied first their reasons for entering the war, and later their strategy and foreign policy as the war developed. The best way of approaching this problem is to start by examining the existing body of academic work on the Cabinet, with a view to extracting the main theories and opinions put forward to explain foreign policy-making in the modern period. These may serve as useful hypotheses to place against the detailed data of our case.

The relevant literature about decisions at the highest level of government falls into three sections. The first is concerned with 'Cabinet Government' in general, which means both the internal operations of the Cabinet and its relations with other centres of political power. The discussion has covered the last one hundred and fifty years of British history, and encompassed the whole range of government business. Part of the work has concentrated on the history of the administrative problems of the Cabinet and its associated bodies.¹ Much of the controversy in the field, however, has been engendered by a dispute over the degree to which the twentieth century Cabinet has joined Bagehot's list of 'dignified' institutions, its authority supplanted by 'Prime

1 For example, H. Daalder: Cabinet Reform in Britain 1914-63, (London O.U.P. 1964).

Ministerial' government.¹ Protagonists have sought to identify the basic pattern of central policy-making. Broadly speaking, although those involved have often been more subtle than they have given each other credit for, the debate has mainly been conducted in terms of the techniques by which Prime Minister or Cabinet may respectively monopolise the finite powers at stake, and the sanctions which each may exert to protect their own position. Analysis has thus been based on the shared assumptions that it is possible to discover the general locus or tendency of 'power', and that to some extent at least, all actors compete between themselves over participation in policy-making - most ministers through their collective role in Cabinet, and the Prime Minister by either by-passing or dominating the Cabinet.² Academic work in this field has conceived of the powers of Prime Minister and Cabinet as separate entities, and has concentrated on trying to mark out the boundary between them.

The second area of commentary relevant here is closely linked to the first. General studies of the British foreign policy process, when dealing with the central machine, have tended to work over the same ground of relations between Cabinet and Prime Minister, describing their mutual checks, balances and freedoms, in the particular context of

1 The point of view of Richard Crossman in his Introduction to Walter Bagehot's The English Constitution, (London, Fontana/Collins, 1963), pp.48-57.

2 The very use of concepts such as threats and sanctions, implies that power is consciously sought after, and more than a mere effect of policy-making. Further relevant works are: D.N. Chester: 'Who Governs Britain?', Parliamentary Affairs, XV:4, Autumn 1962, pp.519-27; Patrick Gordon Walker: The Cabinet, (London, Fontana/Collins, 1972, Revised Edition), A. King (Ed.): The British Prime Minister: A Reader, (London, Macmillan, 1969), J.P. Mackintosh: The British Cabinet, (2nd Ed.) (London, Stevens and Sons, 1968).

external relations.¹ The peculiar contributions of this approach consist mostly in descriptions of the relationship between Prime Ministers and Foreign Secretaries, and of the freedoms from supervision or control which the nature of diplomacy confers upon the two men jointly. Donald Bishop has recently gone further, in suggesting that the weight and complexity of modern government have left the Cabinet simply as a mechanism for the top-level co-ordination of policies, but without making the Prime Minister omnipotent.² Instead, policy originates in different parts of the governmental machine on different occasions. Yet he gives no indication of how this variety is governed. In sum, although these studies define the question more closely, they do not alter its terms of reference. The preoccupation is still with the administrative functions of the Cabinet, and the institutional location of power.

If the focus is narrowed even further, we come to the body of historical work which deals with British foreign policy in the late thirties. Countless books come into this category. Few however, are both academically satisfactory, in terms of having used recently available sources, and relevant to the study of policy-making. At the time of writing only the works by Colvin and Middlemas fulfil the two conditions.³ Both deal with the two years from 1937-9, and are at pains

1 See: D. Bishop: The Administration of British Foreign Relations, Syracuse, Syracuse University Press, 1961), D. Vital: The Making of British Foreign Policy, (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1968), K. Waltz: Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics, (Boston, Mass., Little, Brown, 1967).

2 D. Bishop: 'The Cabinet and Foreign Policy', in R. Boardman and A.J.R. Groom: The Management of Britain's External Relations, (London, Macmillan, 1973).

3 I. Colvin: The Chamberlain Cabinet, and K. Middlemas: Diplomacy of Illusion; Maurice Cowling's long The Impact of Hitler: British Politics and British Policy, 1933-40, does not even contain a reference to the Cabinet in its index.

to stress the personal dominance of Chamberlain over British foreign policy. Yet neither is primarily interested in the question of policy-making; they are concerned to describe the events of 1937-9 chronologically, and to explain the developments in British policy. Views on Cabinet and Prime Minister are generally interspersed with the main narrative, and there is little detailed analysis of decisions outside those of the Munich crisis.

However this is no deterrent to confident generalisation. Colvin's title, The Chamberlain Cabinet, indicates his belief in 'Prime Minister's rule'. We are told that Chamberlain never left the Cabinet room with a conclusion different from that which he had originally tabled; also that 'he was a shy autocrat and made his own policy in silence before he made it Cabinet policy'. A picture is presented of Chamberlain formulating policy alone or with a very small group of intimates, and then securing formal ministerial endorsement. Such explanation as there is of why he was able to do this is couched mainly in terms of personality, manipulation, and the like-mindedness of his colleagues.¹ Middlemas has a similar view, no doubt partly because he too gives great weight to the events of the Munich crisis, where good examples of apparent 'autocracy' are to be found. Diplomacy of Illusion sees Chamberlain as working through 'inner groups' and the Foreign Policy Committee, to the disadvantage of the Cabinet; small numbers were managed more easily, and the agreement of senior ministers was thus secured before other colleagues had access to the discussion. There was a 'lack of genuine tension and argument in the Cabinet', because decision-making was 'Chamberlain's personal province, a rigid satrapy closed against the light of opposition'

1 I. Colvin: op.cit., 167, 191, 261-2, 265, 272.

Consequently, it was Chamberlain's 'ready-made strategy' of 1937 which 'was directly responsible for the policy which the Cabinet followed down to March 1939'.¹ Colvin and Middlemas together, therefore, present us with the specific components of the 'Prime Ministerial government' hypothesis, as applied to the late 1930's; personal diplomacy, the weighting of argument, inner groupings, and the subordination of the Foreign Policy Committee, are put forward as the most prominent characteristics of central policy-making.

As a whole, the existing body of relevant literature provides us with three sets of hypotheses which are increasingly concrete in their application to our period, but which derive from a fairly narrow interest in administrative arrangements, or the apportionment of power between a Prime Minister and his colleagues. Moreover the standard vocabulary of the analysis - 'patronage', 'the power of the chairman', 'the collecting of voices', 'control over the agenda', - is rarely applied to practical cases of decision, let alone assembled into a convincing description of the general pattern of central government. Accordingly, discussion of Prime Ministerial freedoms, or the lack of them, should not be mistaken for an inclusive syllabus of the questions and explanations which arise from the workings of the Cabinet. The following analysis will focus closely on Cabinet activity in foreign policy, without confining itself to the related assumptions (1) that Cabinet and its executive will necessarily be in competition over resources of 'power'; (2) that an understanding of their behaviour is best achieved by assigning ultimate primacy to one or other pole in the relationship. It will be concerned

1 K. Middlemas: op.cit. pp. 59-60-1-2, 140, 240, 447, 451.

more with the flow and texture of policy-making; with the ways in which policies emerge, develop and are resolved at this highest level of political authority, and with the dynamics of collective discussion inside a committee format - in other words, with the questions raised by a decision-making approach.¹

All these problems may be best examined by considering the policy-making process in action at intervals of time, over various issues concerned with the circumstances in which Britain might enter, or leave, a war with Nazi Germany. These points of reference will be dealt with at varying lengths, according to need. They are:

1. The reaction to the German invasion of Bohemia, and the formation of the policy of 'guarantees'; March-April 1939.
2. The issue of whether, and how, to negotiate a foreign policy agreement with the USSR between April-August 1939.
3. The decision to implement the guarantee to Poland; August-September 1939.
4. Attitudes to the possibility of a compromise peace during the first months of isolation; May-July 1940.

Although some of these vignettes involve much historical detail, their basic purpose is analytical, to serve as indicators of trends or variations in the process of central policy-making. The use of detailed and chronologically spaced examples should enable us to build up a broad explanation, and to incorporate the qualifications which arise from particular circumstances without falling into the usual trap of beginning

1 Only Gordon Walker, (op.cit), touches on these questions, in his reconstructed debates (pp.135-57), but he does not analyse the examples presented.

with a general proposition which is then inductively supported by disparate illustrations, themselves often open to much historical dispute. Moreover these instances have been so chosen as to balance out decisions involving urgent choice over a period of a few days, with those where equally important decisions are come to over weeks or months. The former is exemplified here by the Polish Guarantee, and by the decision to go to war in September 1939. The latter is represented by the question of the Soviet alliance in 1939, and the choice in 1940 between fighting on alone or seeking a compromise.

In the course of looking at these sub-cases, a number of familiar questions will arise. How difficult was it for Cabinet Ministers to make positive contributions to foreign policy-making? How decisive was the requirement of secret and flexible diplomacy in determining the Cabinet's role? What was the relationship between specific decisions and the longer-term orientations of foreign policy adhered to by the Government as a whole? Did the institution of the War Cabinet augment or diminish Prime Ministerial freedom of movement? These and other issues should become clearer as the period unfolds.

As a preface, it may be useful to examine the area of activity which was undeniably the domain of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, namely the special functions of policy implementation. (The Prime Minister naturally shared in the practical business of day-to-day external relations, by virtue of the need for heads of government to represent and embody their country in relations with other states, although by no means all British Prime Ministers had been interested in international affairs). Clearly they both enjoyed a unique role in the foreign policy process, merely through the historical fact that in international relations the mode of negotiations between very small

groups has evolved as the most efficient form of dealing with many types of disputes and difficulties. Bargaining has been usually thought to require that each actor represent a fairly defined and consistent position, so that the problem is not complicated by divisions within the parties as well as between them. Added to this special diplomatic role, the Foreign Secretary and Prime Minister carried out the normal functions of any departmental minister faced with the regular need, on questions of varying importance, to deal with issues which arise unexpectedly, or demand continuing attention between meetings of the Cabinet or its supervisory committees. This straightforward day-to-day activity involved such 'freedoms' as the overseeing of instructions to ambassadors, or replies to foreign governments, and the taking of immediate decisions to break off a negotiation, or press home a momentary advantage.¹ It justifies our referring to Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary in this context as the 'executive'.

There are plenty of examples in the 1938-41 period of these special functions of the executive, some concerning important issues. They echo facets of Chamberlain's behaviour during the Munich crisis, such as his personal and unchecked messages to Hitler and Mussolini on 28 September, offering to visit Germany for an immediate further discussion, and remarking that Hitler could probably 'get all essentials without war and without delay'.² This message, which made possible the Munich Conference and settlement, constituted the very initiative that the previous meeting of the Cabinet had seemed to put out of court - at

1 The roles of Heads of Government and Foreign Minister are outlined in general terms in J. Frankel: The Making of Foreign Policy, pp.20-24.

2 British Documents on Foreign Policy, Third Series, Vol.II, Nos. 1158, 1159, p.587. Halifax to Neville Henderson and the Earl of Perth. For the details of the relevant diplomacy, see Thorne (op.cit.) pp.80-2, and Middlemas, op.cit. pp.399-401, also R. Parkinson: Peace for our Time, pp.54-7.

least until further discussion.¹ By sending the dispatch the next morning, the Prime Minister had pre-empted any discussion, and had put the onus on his colleagues to disavow the action in the midst of what must have seemed an exceedingly fast-moving and complicated diplomatic scenario. The two notes were written alone before breakfast, briefly sent to the Foreign Office for approval, and dispatched in a hurry at 11.30 a.m. Mrs Chamberlain recalled in 1940:

'The interesting thing is that they were written out just on either side of one sheet of paper without a single change of word and there was no alteration of any kind² made by the Foreign Office before transmission'.

Faced with Chamberlain's decisive initiative, the Office had been left with little time or scope for manoeuvre. The Cabinet had been left with none.

By no means did such personal diplomacy inevitably arouse resentment or protest. The Cabinet, in its next meeting on 30 September, queried neither the Prime Minister's procedure nor the result of the conference.³ This can be explained by the first flush of relief after Munich, in which ministers undoubtedly believed for a short time that they had achieved their twin desiderata; peace and the preservation of Czech integrity. Yet it is clear that even after euphoria had passed away, the Cabinet felt no antagonism towards the Prime Minister for his independent initiatives. Chamberlain himself showed no regret.

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- 1 CAB 23/95.^{CM}/46(38) 27 September 1938. The general tenor of this meeting, which Chamberlain had accepted, had been that pressure should not be exerted on the Czechs, and that Hitler's last letter 'would require examination before any final conclusion could be expressed upon it'.
 - 2 Mrs Anne Chamberlain - Lord Zetland. 15.12.1940. Zetland Papers: 'Selected Letters'.
 - 3 CAB 23/95 (38) 30 September 1938. (Parkinson op.cit. pp.63-4; Middlemas op.cit. pp.405-6). Although Stanley, as well as Duff Cooper, complained, it is clear that there was no concerted or enduring feeling in the Cabinet that Chamberlain must behave differently in the future.

Similar instances occurred in the first few months of 1939. The recognition of the Franco regime in Spain in February 1939 illustrates what may be termed the inevitable scope for decision of the foreign policy executive; as such, indeed, it attracted the notice of Opposition leaders, who argued in the House of Commons that the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary had enjoyed too much freedom from Cabinet control.¹ The Cabinet had decided on 15 February that recognition was necessary and inevitable, and had left the timing of the action to Chamberlain and Halifax.² Not only did the delegation of exact timing involve important responsibilities, (since it might well affect the assessment of Britain's general intentions in European politics made by Germany and Italy), but the initial decision to recognise was itself the result of a clear lead given by Lord Halifax and the Prime Minister. From the beginning of the year Halifax and Chamberlain had made clear their opinion that 'it was in our interests that the war in Spain should come to an end as soon as possible',³ and that since the Republican side was clearly going to lose, 'the sooner this country got on terms with General Franco and made up lost ground the better'.⁴ Sir Robert Vansittart and Oliver Stanley challenged this view in the Foreign Policy Committee on 23 January, and the meeting ended by agreeing to continue the existing policy of non-intervention, and the avoidance of pressure on France to grant entry to Republican refugees.⁵ The question was not discussed at the next two meetings of the committee, which then, for whatever reason, did not meet again until 27 March, nearly seven weeks later.

1 Hansard, 5th Series, 1939, Vol.344, 28 February. Speeches by Attlee and Sinclair.

2 CAB 23/97: 15.2.1939. CM 7 (39).

3 The PM's opinion. CAB 23/97. CM 2 (39), 18 January 1939.

4 Halifax's view. CAB 23/97, CM 6 (39), 8 February 1939.

5 CAB 27/624. FP (36) 35th Mtg. 21.1.39. 3.00 p.m.

In the interim, Britain recognised Franco as the legitimate head of government in Spain.¹ Halifax had taken the question to the full Cabinet on 15 February, presenting a memorandum which argued that as the main purpose of British policy in the area was to exclude German and Italian influence, 'there was very much more to be gained than be risked by early recognition of General Franco, which should be unconditional'.² The ensuing discussion, in which 9 of the remaining 20 ministers spoke, centred on procedural questions, such as whether recognition should be de facto or de jure, and whether it should be accompanied by the granting of belligerent rights, rather than on that of the desirability of recognition. In this it resembled the previous two discussions about Spain in Cabinet during 1939. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary provided the initiative, set the tone, and engineered an explicit decision on the issue. Their only obstacle, after Vansittart's sole opportunity in the Foreign Policy Committee of combining with Stanley against recognition, was inertia. Chamberlain easily overcame this, after Halifax's formal paper had introduced the question and had recommended recognition, by a positive summary of opinion:

'he thought the view of the Cabinet was clearly that His Majesty's Government should recognise General Franco's government very soon',

and suggested that the timing should be left to himself and Halifax. The Cabinet endorsed this, and on 22 February Halifax reached agreement with the French Government that the move should be made on the 27th.³

1 The Committee met again on 26 January and 8 February. CAB 27/624 FP (36) 36th and 37th Mtgs. Recognition was announced on 27 February. See p.70 below for the delay in calling the FPC.

2 CP 46 (39). CAB 23/97, CM 7 (39), 15 February 1939.

3 See D. Dilks, (Ed.): The Diaries of Sir Alexander Cadogan, 1938-45, (London, Cassell, 1971), pp.149-50, 154.

On the 22 the Cabinet held its next weekly meeting, but it had only to give formal authorisation to what had been already settled.¹

Chamberlain had a particularly strong urge for personal diplomatic activity. It was an idee fixe of his that matters of dispute could be dealt with to a large degree by personal contacts between heads of government, in quasi-monarchical style. The use of this technique was restrained increasingly through 1939 by the changing basis of British foreign policy in general, towards a less conciliatory attitude towards Hitler, but for Chamberlain it was a style of diplomacy only to be relinquished reluctantly. In the week after the invasion of Bohemia, he urged that he should write a personal letter to Mussolini, as 'probably the only person who could put a brake on Herr Hitler'.² The Cabinet gave general approval to this letter, probably because they could see no compelling reason to object to it. In such a way the executive may often have acquired important freedoms of action, since opposition to steps whose effects could only be conjectured, would have to have based itself more on an active concern for ministerial accountability than on objections of substance. And as we shall see, the desire to restrain executives on principle was not a prevalent concern in the Cabinet of 1938-41, if in any during British political history.

This point is nicely illustrated by a small episode during the Prague crisis. On 15 March Halifax asked the Cabinet to consider whether Henderson should be recalled from Berlin. Personally, he could see arguments on either side. After a short discussion, 'the general view

1 CAB 23/97, CM 8 (39), 22 February 1939. There was no further discussion.

2 CAB 23/98: CM 13(39) 20 March 1939. For the potential and actual importance of this letter, see Dilks, p.162 and Parkinson op.cit. p.119. Cadogan wrote that he had struggled with Chamberlain's drafts, 'which all looked much too much like asking for another Munich'.

of the cabinet was that the step suggested was premature'. It was thus formally agreed to reserve the question for later consideration. Yet forty-eight hours later, and before the next Cabinet, Henderson was recalled. Halifax merely reported this action to his colleagues the next day; no-one demurred.¹

The same proclivity for independent operations characterised Winston Churchill's Premiership. His special concern, as Minister of Defence, with the military direction of the war, did not deter him from close involvement in important foreign policy problems, notably in relations with the United States. Soon after becoming Prime Minister, Churchill sent a personal message to President Roosevelt which the War Cabinet approved subject only 'to certain minor amendments'.² Thus began in continuance of Churchill's previous private correspondence with the President, the famous series of 'Former Naval Person' letters and telegrams which continued throughout the war at an average of nearly four a week, on many and varied subjects.³ It was an important relationship, since it enabled a deliberate cultivation of the United States at a crucial time for the confidence of decision-makers on both sides of the Atlantic about British prospects for survival and victory. For Churchill's messages made important presumptions about the content and consistency of his Government's policy at this time. On 15 May he asserted that 'If necessary, we shall continue the war alone', and went further on 18 May in stating that 'We are determined to persevere

1 CAB 23/98, CM 11(39) 15 March 1935; CM 12(39) 18 March 1939. See also DBFP III:4 No.308 Halifax to Sir N. Henderson, p.291, note.

2 CAB 65/7. WM 130(40), 19 May 1940.

3 See W.S. Churchill: 'The Second World War', Vol.2, Their Finest Hour, (London, Cassell, 1949) pp.21-2. Churchill says he sent Roosevelt 950 messages, and received 800 in return. Also, Joseph P. Lash : Roosevelt and Churchill, 1939-41, (New York, W.W. Norton, 1976), pp.21-24, 62; F.L. Loewenheim, H.D. Langley, M.Jones (Eds.): Roosevelt and Churchill: Their Secret War-time Correspondence, (London, Barrie & Jenkins 1975), pp.94-7.

to the very end, whatever the result of the great battle ranging in France may be'. Churchill reiterated this determination two days later with the argument that any British 'parley' with the Germans could only take place after the fall of the present administration, since 'in no conceivable circumstances will we consent to surrender'.¹

Clearly these gestures of defiance were in part calculated to encourage Roosevelt into giving Britain diplomatic support - and in particular to entice steel, destroyers and ammunition from the USA. Moreover Churchill could not technically commit his government to acting in the way that he had badly outlined. He could impose no physical constraints on future choices, such as those which might be imposed by irrevocable steps like a declaration of war, or a running down of the armaments industry. But this is not to say that the declarations were devoid of commitment, in terms either of Anglo-American relations, or of the thinking of his own colleagues about the future of the war. Just as the Anglo-French military conversations of 1905 and beyond created an increasing expectation in France of alliance with Britain, and helped to impregnate the minds of Asquith, Grey, and Haldane with the same belief,² so Churchill's solitary diplomacy fostered an increasing closeness of Anglo-American relations that in its turn may have encouraged his fellow ministers to hope first for survival, through the prospect of endless material supplies, and then for victory, through a reliance on an American entry into the war.

1 Churchill, op.cit., pp.22-3, 49-50.

2 See Samuel R. Williamson: The Politics of Grand Strategy, (Cambridge, Mass., 1969, pp.367-372).

Furthermore, Churchill's automatic assumption that future policy would be to continue the war, and of his right to anticipate it, was a difficult initiative to resist, for both tactical and psychological reasons. By asserting firstly that Britain would continue to fight despite the likely defeat of France, and then that the present government would not consider compromise in any form, despite her apparently desperate military situation, Churchill was placing the onus on his colleagues to challenge his prejudgement of the issue, while at the same time directing their attention away from any balanced consideration of the pros and cons. Through presenting his opinions as facts and moral imperatives, the Prime Minister created a momentum for his interpretation of British interests that would have required a major confrontation within the Cabinet to stop. With the implication that argument was unthinkable, Churchill had begun to pre-empt his government's decision on the issue of fighting alone.¹

We have looked at these specific cases of executive activity primarily because they represent a major part of the foreign policy process, but also to illustrate the ultimate sterility of an approach which simply catalogues instances to fit a general observation. For all that the above examples can prove, were they to be multiplied threefold, is that the executive is often capable of considerable influence over significant decisions, particularly in the realm of implementation. This is not a very surprising conclusion. While each illustration gives us important insights into how executive discretion operated in practice, together they are far from being able to go beyond this to prove that a narrow circle was structurally

¹ For an expansion of this theme, see below, section (iv).

predominant in the making of foreign policy, (although the logical jump is often made). A list of such examples does not explain why it is that many vital decisions seem to have been subject to a much wider circle of participation, and that equally striking lists can be compiled of these decisions. The Anglo-Soviet negotiations, the crisis of September 1939, and deliberation over war aims in 1939 and 1940, are examples which occur in this period alone.¹

It is clear that a compilation of examples of the various types or trends in policy-making, gets us no further than the realisation that there is such a variety. It does not help us to understand why some decisions involve genuine ministerial discussion and why others are either perceived to be, or are actually, beyond the efficient functioning of a collective body; why executive licence is interpreted and exploited widely at some times and narrowly at others. Anomalies like these may be explained by unpredictable factors such as the oscillating preferences of different personalities, or the accident of special historical circumstances. But if less random forces are at work, it is worth looking for those rules or patterns which may be governing the variations in forms of policy-making. The major issues which we shall investigate should throw up a more detailed picture of how certain influences came to be dominant in some cases and not others, than could ever be provided by the aggregation of numerous small-scale illustrations of an initial hypothesis.

1 Analysis of the discussions over war aims has been omitted for reasons of space.

(i) The Making of the Polish Guarantee:

The first of these investigations concerns reactions in the British government to the destruction of Czechoslovakia on 15 March 1939. The German move was not a total surprise to the Cabinet. On 4 October 1938 the Chiefs of Staff had advised the Cabinet that no military action by the West short of 'a prolonged struggle' would be able to prevent any German absorption of Bohemia and Moravia.¹ And Halifax and some of his advisers even became for a short time inured to the prospect that 'henceforth we must count with German predominance in Central Europe'.² Thus when intelligence reports in February 1939 started to list Czechoslovakia among the possible targets for what seemed an increasingly likely new strike by Hitler, the emptiness of Munich was simply being spelt out with brutal clarity.³ Nonetheless, despite what seems with hindsight the ample need for contingency planning, at the highest levels there seems to have been no forethought as to what direction British policy should take if the worst case actually occurred. It is an interesting comment on the style of British foreign policy-making in this period that although such a major event as the tearing up of the Munich settlement had been foreseen (if not fully expected), little had been done to cater for the eventuality. In passing, indeed,

1 Cos 765 (Revise); Quoted in Dilks, p.108.

2 DBFP: III: 3, pp.252-3, Halifax to Sir E. Phipps, 1 November 1938; Sinclair Papers; B/72, Sir Percy Hains M.P. to Sinclair, 15 October 1938, reporting a conversation with Halifax. 'In confidence Halifax seemed to think there was every possibility that Czechoslovakia would now be inside the German orbit'. A series of memoranda which illustrate almost isolationist attitudes are brought together in 'Possible future course of British Policy' (FO 371/21659). They are analysed at length by D. Lammers: 'From Whitehall after Munich: The Foreign Office and the Future Course of British Policy', The Historical Journal, XVI: (1973), pp.831-56.

3 Dilks, pp.152-3, 158. Also BDFP III:4 pp.160-1, Halifax to Sir R. Lindsay, 27 February 1939.

we may note that this case provides a classic illustration of the effects of "cognitive dissonance", the well-documented psychological state that leads to the suppression of information which does not fit in with existing hopes or beliefs.¹ Chamberlain, in particular, ignored the reports passed on by Vansittart from his German contacts, and preferred to believe that Hitler is "searching round for some means of approaching us without the danger of a snub"; and, "all the information I get seems to point in the direction of peace".²

The very decision that a new policy would be necessary in these unpleasant new circumstances emerged slowly and was in large part the result of an executive lead.³ The first Cabinet meeting after the news of the invasion shows no feeling of a watershed in Anglo-German relations. Ministers allowed Chamberlain and Halifax to monopolise the discussion, and confined themselves to factual questions about, for example the role of Hungary in the affair, or the treatment of the Czechoslovak representatives. They seemed to feel no need to analyse the new environment or to suggest shifts in policy, with the exception of one isolated suggestion from Leslie Hore-Belisha, to the effect that Britain should now encourage the closest relations with Turkey, Roumania, and Hungary. This drew no response from his colleagues. Perhaps Chamberlain's formal presentation of the issues influenced the tone of the meeting. He said that the Cabinet had to

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- 1 Expounded in L.Festinger: A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance, (Stanford, Calif., Stanford University Press, 1962).
 - 2 Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1071-91: letter to Ida Chamberlain, 12 February 1939 and letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 19 February 1939.
 - 3 Sir John Simon denied to the House of Commons on 15 March that Britain would take on new commitments. Hansard, 1939, 5th Series, Vol.345, cols. 545-59.

decide: (1) Whether Oliver Stanley should still visit Germany. (2) What the Government should say in the Commons about the now defunct guarantee to Czechoslovakia. (3) The future of the loan to Czechoslovakia. (4) Whether to recall Henderson. All these questions related either to Czechoslovakia or to issues of purely short-term significance. All were retrospective, and not concerned with the evolution of future policy. Although this Cabinet met at 11 a.m. on 15 March, and so had little time in which to assimilate the recent events, the condition applied no less to the Foreign Secretary, who did display the beginnings of a positive reaction. He stressed that Germany had made a deliberate choice to use force rather than negotiation, and that the occasion was significant, as for the first time Hitler had achieved the subjugation of non-Germans. He advocated the use of language which would warn Germany that she was now on a dangerous path.¹

Further indications that a new policy might be in the making continued to come from the executive. On 17 March, after the scares about an economic ultimatum to Roumania, which Virgil Tilea had relayed to Sir Orme Sargent and to Halifax, the latter dispatched telegrams to Britain's representatives in Poland, Russia, Turkey, Greece and Yugoslavia, asking about the attitude which the governments of these countries would take up in the event of Germany attacking Roumania - this information being a precondition of the formulation of any British attitude.² And on the same evening, the Prime Minister made his famous speech at Birmingham, where he spelt out the serious implications of the

1 CAB 23/98. CM 11(39), 15 March 1939.

2 DBFP III: 4: 17 March 1939, pp.360-1.

conquest of Czechoslovakia, and indicated both that Britain had interests in South-East Europe, and that she would resist 'an attempt to dominate the world by force'.¹

All the available evidence suggests that the telegrams and the "Landmark" speech² in Birmingham were the product of independent activity by Chamberlain and Halifax (and Foreign Office officials). The Cabinet did not meet until the 18th at 5 p.m., nor the Foreign Policy Committee until 27 March. Both Oliver Harvey and Sir Alexander Cadogan described in their diaries the way in which the idea of a British-backed front against aggression in Eastern Europe, was rapidly put into diplomatic circulation by the executive acting alone. They noted Tilea's visit to Halifax on the 17th, and continued respectively: 'As a result of this visit telegrams were sent off...' and 'On that, S. of S., O.S., and I drafted telegram to threatened states...'³ There was, indeed, hardly sufficient time for much consultation outside the Foreign Office. Tilea probably arrived at 5 p.m. and stayed for some time.⁴ The resulting telegrams left Whitehall at 10 p.m.⁵ Halifax told the Rumanian Minister that while an ultimate decision on any

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- 1 Blue Book Miscellaneous No.9 (1939): Documents concerning German-Polish Relations and the outbreak of hostilities between Great Britain and Germany on September 3 1939. Cmd 6106, pp.5-10.
 - 2 The phrase is the second Earl of Birkenhead's. Birkenhead:Halifax. (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1965), p.435. Chamberlain himself gives the impression that the speech was his own work. Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1071-91, Letter to Hilda Chamberlain 19 March 1939.
 - 3 J.Harvey (Ed.): The Diplomatic Diaries of Oliver Harvey, 1937-40, (London, Collins, 1970), p.262. Dilks, op.cit. p.160 (My italics). 'S. of S.' refers to the Secretary of State, (Halifax), and 'O.S.' to Orme Sargent.
 - 4 The British Documents say that Tilea came in the afternoon; (DBFP III:4 Halifax to Sir R.Hoare, 17 March 1939, pp.366-67). Cadogan says the visit was in the evening, (Dilks, p.160). 5-6 p.m. seems a good compromise, especially as Tilea saw the two men separately, (Halifax first), and had a good deal to say.
 - 5 See footnote 2(previous page). The separate telegram to Moscow left at 9.35 p.m.

guarantee would have to be the Cabinet's, he 'anticipated' that his colleagues would want the various countries later contacted, to know about the issue and to give their opinion on the proposal for a guarantee system. In setting in motion this diplomacy the Foreign Secretary was merely using his departmental powers to the full. He had even anticipated the Prime Minister's views, since the latter is nowhere mentioned as having been involved. However, when at 5 p.m. on the next day the Cabinet considered the proposed approach to Eastern Europe, Halifax showed a surprising ignorance of the actions he had authorised. He told ministers that 'he was not certain whether the telegrams had all been dispatched', when in fact they had left nineteen hours previously. Halifax's uncertainty conveniently obscured the fact that he had acted without consulting the Cabinet.¹

As for the important speech by Chamberlain that evening, collective policy-making seems to have gone little further than consultation with Halifax. On 16 March Harvey recorded:

'Prime Minister is speaking in Birmingham tomorrow₂ and Halifax had previously talked to him about it'.

A day later Halifax displayed advance knowledge of the content and importance of the speech to both Tilea and the American Ambassador. He told the former that the Prime Minister was about to deliver to those who might wish to dominate Europe, 'a very unmistakable warning'.³

1 CAB 23/98. CM 12(39) 18 March 1939. In the afternoon before the Cabinet meeting a message had been received from the British Ambassador in Bucharest, requesting the cancellations of the telegrams to "threatened states", on the grounds that Tilea's scare was false. If the replies were coming in before the Cabinet met, then Halifax must have known that the original telegrams have gone out. Cadogan confirms the sequence of events. DBFP III:4: p.369, Sir R. Hoare to Halifax, Nos.397 + 399; Dilks p.160.

2 Harvey, p.262.

3 DBFP III:4: p.367, Halifax to Sir R. Hoare, 17 March 1939.

To Joseph Kennedy he added that the speech would indicate how deeply British political thinking had been affected by recent events, in the direction of leading 'many people' to reconsider 'the advantages of general co-operation' as a means of guaranteeing security.¹ The Foreign Secretary clearly identified himself with the new position expressed in the Prime Minister's speech. But while Halifax and Chamberlain played the prime role in producing the speech, it may still be that other members of the Cabinet were also influential over it. Cadogan's cryptic reference to the Prime Minister hints at this:

'He speaking again at Birmingham tomorrow₂ night. Think he's been binged up to be a bit firmer'.²

Nevertheless the Prime Minister's ignorance in Cabinet on 18 March of his colleagues' opinions of the speech, suggests that the number of Ministers who had the opportunity to 'firm' him up was limited. He asked 'whether the Cabinet agreed generally with the change of policy which he had outlined'. Chamberlain went on to describe how the invasion of Czechoslovakia had disillusioned him of the idea that Germany had limited and negotiable aims:

'He had now come definitely to the conclusion that Herr Hitler's attitude made it impossible to continue to negotiate on the old basis with the Nazi regime'.

He indicated that the formation of this important opinion had probably preceded any consultation:

'...it was on the basis of this conclusion, and after consultation with the Foreign Secretary and others of his colleagues who were immediately available,³ that he had made his speech in Birmingham'.

1 DBFP III:4: p.365, Halifax to Sir R. Lindsay, 17 March 1939.

2 Dilks, 157: S. Aster, 1939, p.62, confirms that the "bingeing up" came from Halifax and the Foreign Office.

3 CAB 23/98, 12(39), 18 March (My italics). It is interesting that Colvin, op.cit. p.188, omits the italicised words without acknowledgment.

None of the available sources specifies which individual politicians (or perhaps officials), might have pressed Chamberlain into a more resolute attitude. It may well be that Cadogan was referring to the effect of public criticism on the Prime Minister, as Keith Feiling's account suggests.¹ And if any of his colleagues did influence Chamberlain here, they were certainly a very small group.

Even so it is not suggested that Chamberlain and Halifax initiated these major developments in British foreign policy behind the back of a Cabinet which held different views. In fact, Ministers applauded Chamberlain's speech when they met on the following day. The argument is rather that while the British Government was very likely to respond to the Prague coup with hostility, the actual form of that response was by no means pre-determined. The fact of Nazi aggression had made an Anglo-German conflict more probable, but it was still an open question as to when, where, and how war might break out. It was hardly obvious that Britain would break away from her traditional mode of waiting on events, and pledge herself to a new system of guarantees in Eastern Europe. The burden of the entire history of modern British foreign policy was that advance commitments would not be made by British Governments, for compelling strategic and constitutional reasons. Indeed, when the March crisis began, ministers still assumed that Britain's vital continental interests went no further than the defence of western Europe and the Mediterranean. Therefore while most ministers probably felt that a new scepticism and resolution would inform future policy towards Germany, it was not a necessary consequence of that feeling for them to expect and demand the guarantees to Poland, Roumania, Greece and Turkey which eventually followed.

1 Keith Feiling, The Life of Neville Chamberlain, (London, Macmillan, 1946, p.400).

On the contrary, ministers were generally thrown into a certain intellectual confusion by the crisis.¹ The apparent urgency over a reformulation of policy made it difficult for the informal processes of collective deliberation to get under way, particularly since there were no obvious or limited courses of action to consider. In June 1940, again during traumatic circumstances, the important choices facing the Cabinet were crude, concrete and unmistakable - those of war or peace. In March 1939, the options for a new policy were relatively open-ended. Various degrees of hostile inaction, a multi-lateral European pact, an alliance with the USSR, were all notional possibilities. In terms of their participation in policy-making therefore, a premium was placed on the clarity with which ministers could perceive the issues, and on the conviction with which they could advocate a positive line of action during the first period of uncertainty. But its very size meant that the Cabinet as a whole was unlikely to forge a clear and strongly-felt new attitude very quickly. By contrast, their immersion in daily diplomacy encouraged the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary to arrive at definite (but not necessarily well-judged) opinions without delay.

In effect, the guarantees were the product of energetic activity by Chamberlain, Halifax, and the officials for whose advice they were responsible to the Cabinet, in constructing a definite course of action out of the confusion caused by the lack of contingency planning. They originated and developed a new and specific policy, obtaining Cabinet approval rather than participation, and secured its implementation before alternative lines of policy could be fully explored and measured as serious options against the guarantee to Poland.

1 This is insufficiently emphasized by Simon Newman: March 1939; The British Guarantee to Poland in his attempt to emphasise the continuities of British foreign policy between 1938-39.

The Cabinet of 18 March, for example, showed enthusiasm for the sentiments publicly expressed by the Prime Minister the night before, but their approval was perforce retrospective. Although Chamberlain made it clear that he regarded his speech 'as a challenge to Germany on the issue of whether or not Germany intended to dominate Europe by force', and therefore as an embodiment of major policy, his request for contributions from other Ministers was slightly disingenuous. While no specific commitment had yet been made, the 'change in policy which he had outlined', had already been made public in a major speech, specially reworked to counter criticism of his "cool and objective interest" in the Commons on 15 March.¹ If the Cabinet had disagreed they would have had to contemplate asking the Prime Minister to go back on this important public pronouncement - an inhibiting if not impossible prospect.

As it was, Ministers showed a collective desire for Britain henceforward to take the lead in warning Germany generally that aggression in Roumania or elsewhere would not go unchecked. Simon and Macdonald simply acquiesced passively with the Prime Minister's view. Most other Ministers, however, made positive contributions - and in all, at least 16 of the 22 present spoke on the subject. The import of their remarks was that a broad-based combination should be formed, of all those states which might resist subsequent German aggression; the more countries that could be involved in this declaration of mutual support, the more obvious would be Britain's new determination, and the greater would be the chances of containing Germany should war actually break out.

1 The original plan, to talk about economic and social matters, was completely set aside. See Blue Book, 1939, op.cit., p.5.

Sir Thomas Inskip, for instance, thought that while Britain could do little immediately:

'if, however, it was possible to organise an effective combination among the states in South Eastern Europe, the position would be greatly changed and improved'.

Lord Chatfield also subscribed to this view, and Lord Stanhope told the Cabinet that the Chiefs of Staff believed that war would at once be less likely and more winnable if a second front could be ensured.

Stanley added that any guarantees should thus be 'joint and several', as the attack might fall elsewhere than Roumania. W.S. Morrison pointed out that if such 'opposition to German aggression' were to be co-ordinated, then only Britain was in a position to organise it.

The Marquess of Zetland took a similar line. Hore-Belisha was more specific; he 'was in favour of reconsidering our policy and contracting frank and open alliances with countries such as Poland and Russia' so as to help define the point at which 'we should make our stand'. Thus the Cabinet approved generally

'the new line of policy proposed by the Prime Minister, namely that we should make approaches to Russia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Turkey, Greece and Roumania with a view to obtaining assurances from them that they would join with us in resisting any act of German aggression aimed at obtaining domination in South East Europe'.

As we have seen, this policy had already been set in motion on 17 March by Halifax and Chamberlain. However, even as the Cabinet were brought into the discussion, and were showing their preference for a generally co-ordinated front against Germany, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary were on the verge of a second stage of policy, involving a narrowing of the scope of Britain's initiative, and the establishing of implicit priorities among the states with whom agreement was desirable. By the end of this same meeting Chamberlain was

indicating his partiality for a more specific solution than 'amateur collective security', as a member of the Foreign Office described the proposals for multi-lateral consultations which had inspired the Cabinet's enthusiasm:¹

'He thought that Poland was very likely the key to the situation, and he suggested that our communications to Poland should probably be to go somewhat further than our communications to other countries'.

In other words Poland should be asked not only for her attitude, but also directly for a promise of resistance.²

Although the Cabinet neither responded to this suggestion, nor embodied it in their conclusions, it was to be the main principle on which Chamberlain acted during the fast-developing diplomacy of the next fortnight- despite the generally expressed ministerial desire for a system of co-operation with and between as many states as possible in Eastern Europe. The concentration on Poland also went against the concern of some ministers for special co-operation with the USSR. Hore-Belisha, in advocating a net of alliances, had specified both Poland and Russia as key members. He was not alone. Chatfield had argued the Chiefs of Staff view, that the joint adhesion of Poland and Russia would make feasible British resistance to German aggression in Roumania. Without it, the only practicable policy would be to obtain the support of Turkey and Greece. The Minister of Health twice urged

1 Roger Makins, recorded by Harvey, p.266. This phrase in fact referred specifically to the later 4-power declaration, but the principle of multi-lateral consultation was the same.

2 CAB 23/98, 12(39), 18 March.

the importance of the USSR. Walter Elliot thought that:

'...it was most important to get in touch with Russia, since Russia's attitude would have¹ a very considerable effect upon the smaller powers'.

There were even two Ministers who voiced qualified doubts about the intrinsic wisdom of increasing the risk of war, by whatever means. Both Lord Maugham and Kingsley Wood accepted that Britain and Germany were converging towards war, but thought 'the right moment' should be chosen; if that moment could be delayed, say until the end of 1939, Britain's position would be stronger. Morrison also urged caution, lest Germany retaliate against 'encirclement'.

It will be apparent that the actual development of British foreign policy during the ensuing two weeks, did not conform very closely to these concerns of the Cabinet on 18 March. On the 19th the group of four² which the Cabinet had delegated to supervise the multiple 'approaches' to South Eastern Europe, met twice, and were confronted with the first replies to the telegrams of 17 March. Unsurprisingly, these acknowledgements contained no firm reactions of any kind, since the governments of Poland, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and the USSR were themselves still formulating reactions to the rumours about Roumania; they in their turn enquired about British intentions.³ Chamberlain, however, saw this as a reason for altering the whole direction of the British démarche. He now proposed a declaration of interest in opposing aggression by Britain, France, Poland and Russia

1 This ironically anticipates later arguments by the opponents of a Soviet alliance, to the effect that it would alienate neutrals. Here Elliot clearly means the opposite.

2 Chamberlain and Halifax, plus Stanley and Simon. That is, the executive and one minister from each side of the coming argument about the USSR. This is relevant to the 'big four' conception, discussed below on p.221, FO 371/22967, C3858-9. Minutes of the Mtgs of Ministers, 19 March 1939.

3 DBFP III:4: pp.370, 372, 374, 384; Nos.400, 403, 406, 407, 420. Dilks, p.161.

alone. This was quickly agreed and drafted. The Foreign Secretary told the Cabinet next day that his small group had decided that Britain ought not to attempt too much too quickly:

'The essential point was to secure¹ the early consent of France, Russia and Poland'.

Consequently, to reassure Poland, they had changed the designation of the area to be protected from 'South East Europe' to the vaguer 'European States'. In other words, as it became clear that Roumania after all was not immediately threatened, (the Prime Minister had actually said in the last Cabinet that he did not think that an immediate attack was likely), the creation of a broadly-based peace front was soon abandoned by the executive group,² under Chamberlain's inspiration, in favour of a declaration which at once involved fewer states and sought to keep promises of support at a high level of generality.³ The formula "left it open what would constitute a 'threat' and what steps we should take in the events of a 'threat'", since the main purpose of the new 4-power declaration was simply to act as an earnest of Britain's determination to stop Germany if the latter continued to show signs 'that she intended to proceed with her march for world domination'.

1 CAB 23/98. CM 13(39). 20 March 1939.

2 Stanley's sympathies for the USSR had little effect principally because although Chamberlain and Halifax effectively ignored the Soviet Union, they did not formally close the door on an arrangement with that country. The meetings' minutes are in FO 371/22967 C38589/15/18. See also Aster, *op.cit.* pp.80-2, and Neville Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1090, Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 19 March 1939; "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..." and letter to Ida Chamberlain, 26 March: "I drafted the formula myself and sent it out".

3 It is fair to add that Halifax envisaged a later extension of diplomacy to the Balkan states, after the 4-power declaration had been achieved as a 'rallying-point'. (DBFP III:4:pp.424, Record of Anglo-French Conversations, 21 March and p.436, Halifax to Sir H. Kennard, 21 March 1939). And guarantees were given later to Roumania, Greece and Turkey. But these delayed bi-lateral agreements were a long way from the regional multi-lateral pact that Ministers seem to have had in mind on 18 March.

Thus the Cabinet found themselves, suddenly and without detailed justification, expected to accept a proposal which explicitly rejected the main planks of their own suggestions at the previous Cabinet. Where on 18 March the discussion had centred on ensuring future co-operation between France, Britain, and the majority of Eastern European states, - which several Ministers hoped would develop into a net of firm alliances or guarantees, - on 20 March Halifax presented a draft declaration which was to apply only to two countries east of Berlin, (and to none in the Balkan peninsular), and which deliberately eschewed formal engagements. It is perhaps a measure of both the built-in expectations of Ministers about the role of the Prime Minister in such situations, and their objective difficulties in forming clear collective opinions during the crisis, that the Cabinet hardly demurred at the switch in policy for which its executive now asked approval. Lord Zetland did suggest that Turkey might be invited to join the declaration, but Halifax and Chamberlain were quick to reply that this could antagonise both Greece and Italy. It was difficult for the average Cabinet member to prevail against such positive and concerted disagreement, arguing as he was only from a general appreciation of the situation, and from the special viewpoint of his own department.¹ Zetland received no support, and his suggestion was consigned to oblivion. This ability to predominate purely by virtue of initiating action which had then to be proven positively undesirable, was further instanced during the same Cabinet. During the discussion of various terminological amendments to the draft declaration, it was suggested that

¹ As Secretary for India, Zetland wanted co-operation with Turkey to provide a buffer for the Middle East and ultimately India.

in the phrase '...European peace and security may be affected by any action which constitutes a threat to the political independence of any European state...', the word 'must' should be substituted for the word 'may'. This was not a trivial matter, but merely by showing strenuous personal opposition and without needing to appeal for general support from his colleagues, Chamberlain succeeded in squashing the idea.¹

Chatfield at least made an attempt to contribute to this new stage in policy-formulation. He argued for more precision in Britain's commitments, lest the Government be forced to admit that they "were prepared to guarantee the independence of practically every state in Europe". The minutes then record that the Prime Minister suggested an alternative draft, which was discussed 'in considerable detail, and various alterations were from time to time suggested'. It is here that we come up against the intrinsic limitations of the Cabinet documents as source-material, with their frequent use of the passive tense, and their unpredictable lacunae. There is no hard evidence for the degree of influence exerted by the Cabinet as a whole during the discussion of the final form of the declaration. By inference, however, we can be fairly sure that the contributions made by Ministers outside the small group which had initiated the 4-power proposal, were relatively superficial. Not only did they accept quite meekly the departure from the path they themselves had approved and developed only two days before, but the declaration as dispatched shows no divergence either from the two principles announced by Halifax at the beginning of the Cabinet, or

1 CAB 23/98, 13(39) 20 March.

from Cadogan's description of it the day before as a 4-power declaration of 'non-desintéressement'.¹ The Foreign Secretary had argued for the limitation of the declaration to France, Britain, Poland and Russia, and said that the draft 'aimed at avoiding specific commitments'. The draft as eventually approved by the Cabinet accepted the concept of 4-power co-operation, and merely pledged the prospective signatories, on the basis of their concern for the 'security and political independence of European States', 'immediately to consult together in the event of any action being taken which appears to constitute a threat to the security or independence of any of them'.² The only 'specific commitment' in this was that to 'consult'; consultation being in any case the normal diplomatic response to an imminent crisis.³ In practice the Cabinet had added nothing to the scheme which had been brought before them, and Chatfield had failed in his attempt to bring more 'precision' to the declaration. As Cadogan noted on the evening of the 20th:

'Saw H. at 12.45...Told me Cabinet had approved draft telegram (subject) to certain amendments.....
We propose to publish a declaration that, in the event of a further outrage, we will consult. Point: c'est tout'.⁴

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1. Dilks's edition of the Cadogan diaries gives the phrase as 'non-intéressement' (Dilks, p.161). This makes no sense at all, and must be a calligraphical or typographical error.
 2. DBFP III:4: Halifax to Mr.Campbell (Paris) 23 March 1939; p.486, note 2.
 3. The final version, as sent off to Paris, Moscow and Warsaw at 11.5 p.m on 20.3.39, was slightly tougher and more specific in that it included the promise to consult about the possibilities of joint resistance to aggression. (DBFP III:4: Halifax to Sir E. Phipps, Sir W. Seeds and Sir H. Kennard, 20 March 1939). However, even this was due to French pressure - see DBFP III:4: FO Memorandum 22 March 1939;p.473. Dilks, p.161 and S. Aster, 1939, p.86.
 4. The word in brackets is not contained in the Dilks text, (p.161), but presumably should be. The italics are Cadogan's.

Moreover by this move Halifax and Chamberlain came yet closer to that focussing on Poland which was to be the final outcome of the March deliberations, in preference to a wider security pact, or an agreement with the USSR. Chamberlain now saw Poland as one of 'the three big powers' and considered that a joint declaration involving her would be 'a bold step and a considerable advance on any action we had previously taken'.¹ As the triumvirate phraseology suggested, Russia was not in the foreground of the picture of events held by Chamberlain and Halifax. The day before Halifax had peremptorily discounted the USSR's proposal for a five-power conference, perhaps in Bucharest, 'to discuss possibilities of common action'.² The suggestion had first reached the Foreign Office at 9.30 a.m on 19 March. At 11.30 a.m. the group of four Ministers had met for the first of that day's two meetings in which the 4-power declaration was forged. In the afternoon, before the second of these, Halifax saw Maisky. He told the Soviet Ambassador that the British Government was in the midst of formulating a plan of their own; he thought that the idea of a conference should be laid on one side for the present, (i.e. in deference to the forthcoming British suggestion), for two reasons: because 'we could hardly in present circumstances manage to send a responsible Minister to take part in the conference', and because the holding of a conference without an advance certainty of its success would be 'dangerous'.³ Thus Halifax, possibly after a brief consultation with the Prime Minister and two other

1 This extraordinary categorisation is to be found in CAB 23/98: CM 13 (39) 20 March. See also DBFP III:4: Halifax to Kennard, 21 March 1939, p.436, where Halifax includes Poland among 'the Great Powers'.

2 The phraseology was Sir William Seeds'. See DBFP:III:4: No.421, Seeds to Halifax, 19 March 1939, p.385.

3 DBFP:III:4:pp.385,392-3,429-30,471-2,574, contain accounts of Anglo-Soviet diplomacy at this time. The British were clearly taking a different view of conference diplomacy from that current in September 1938. See also FO 371/22967, C3859/9. Mtg of Ministers, 4.30 p.m 19 March 1939.

colleagues, rejected the Soviet proposal for vague and unconvincing reasons, only six hours after it had arrived in London. The rest of the Cabinet was not informed until the 22nd, by when the rejection was a fait accompli. Halifax then reported that Litvinov:

'seemed to be somewhat perturbed that we had not been more enthusiastic over his proposals for a conference'.

The Foreign Secretary added that Britain might see whether she could get closer to the Soviet point of view.¹

But during the next five days the policy which in fact took shape was that of an Anglo-French-Polish mutual guarantee, with the 4-Power declaration itself abandoned and the USSR largely excluded from proceedings, as Litvinov complained bitterly on 1 April after the announcement of the Guarantee.² This was the third stage of policy-making after the Prague coup. Moreover while this key new development took place, from 22-27 March, neither the Cabinet nor the Foreign Policy Committee met. Halifax and Chamberlain determined the intellectual direction of policy, by concentrating their attention on Poland and subsequently presenting the Cabinet with proposals which dealt exclusively with that country. They also took steps to implement their preferences, by ceasing to pursue the 4-power declaration, and by treating the Polish Government with particular solicitude:

The first stage in the process came on 22 March, with the second round of Anglo-French talks in London.³ Even on the 21st the germ of the final policy had been present in Halifax's initial conversation with Bonnet, when the two men had 'entirely agreed' that securing Poland's

1 CAB 23/98: CM 14(39) 22 March.

2 DBFP III:4: Seeds to Halifax, 1 April 1939, pp.574-5.

3 DBFP III:4: Record of Anglo-French Conversations, 22 March 1939, pp. 457-63.

co-operation against German aggression, particularly with regard to Roumania, was the highest priority. Halifax had further introduced the idea that Poland might be willing to promise France and Britain aid in the event of the attack falling on the west.¹ Thus emerged for the first time the idea of the Polish guarantee; in other words, the notion that the best response to the destruction of Czechoslovakia would be that of a special arrangement with a single major power - if that power were Poland.² At the meeting on 22 March, with Chamberlain and Corbin additionally present, the seed of this understanding began to germinate. The Foreign Secretary described how Poland's reactions to the proposal for a quadrilateral declaration had been hostile because of her dislike of association with the Soviet Union. Although Halifax said he disliked the possibility of the USSR feeling excluded, he did not suggest exerting further pressure on the Poles, or treating them as of secondary importance. On the contrary, in summing up the meeting's views he argued that the essential precondition of western help to Roumania - the issue which had sparked off the whole consideration of collaboration with Eastern Europe - was the participation of Poland, to the extent that:

'Great Britain and France would have to give Poland a private undertaking that, if Poland came in, they would both come in also'.³

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- 1 DBFP III:4: Record of Anglo-French Conversations 21 March 1939, pp. 422-27. Halifax asked Bonnet whether if the west determined to stop aggression, 'Poland might also be brought to think that it would not be to her interest to see Great Britain and France greatly weakened?'. (p.425).
 - 2 The French concern to bring Poland in was probably an important, reinforcement to the British executive's train of thought, pace Newman's picture of the initiatives flowing from Halifax. March 1939: The British Guarantee to Poland, pp.135-8.
 - 3 DBFP III:4: Anglo-French Conversations, 22 March 1939, pp.459-60. One reason for saying this was that if France went to war for Roumania, the Franco-Polish Treaty would come into operation.

Chamberlain was also concerned above all for the Poles. He said that if Poland's reply to the suggested four-power declaration was:

'...as was to be expected...negative or evasive, the intention would not be to press them any further, but to try the new procedure now proposed'.

That was, to get Poland to join Britain and France in promising assistance to Roumania if attacked, by undertaking to provide the same aid to Poland herself.¹

There was no examination, or even exposition, of why Roumania and Poland were of such over-riding importance that the normal methods of diplomatic pressure could not be applied to 'press' them to adhere to the same declaration as the Soviet Union. Equally, given that a choice between Poland and Russia was in practice being made, there was no attempt to weigh up directly the relative advantages of each as a potential source of co-operation. The basic assumption was that Polish fears of association with the USSR were ineradicable, even understandable, and accordingly that any plan which sought to incorporate both powers was automatically out of court. Moreover there could be no question of ignoring Polish concerns in favour of the wider strategy of an alliance with the Soviet Union, to achieve a generalised deterrent against German aggression wherever it might strike. That option does not seem to have been considered at all.

1 Ibid; p.461. This "new procedure" involved a certain degree of dissimulation with the Labour leaders whom Chamberlain met on the next day, 23 March. He told them that the multilateral declaration was still British policy and that Anglo-Soviet relations were now satisfactory. Dalton Diaries, 20, 23 March 1939.

The reasons behind this bias are complicated and mostly irrelevant to a study of the relations between executive and Cabinet.¹ The essential point as far as the making of policy is concerned, is that Halifax and Chamberlain shaped a new programme for the British Government almost immediately after the Cabinet had accepted a different plan, itself originated by the executive. By representing the government in the talks with Bonnet, which centred almost entirely on guarantees to Poland and Roumania at the expense of the 4-Power declaration, the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary began to commit Britain to liaison with Poland but detachment from the USSR. For not only did the two men determine the general frame of ideas in which discussion took place; they also began to lead Poland to believe that the current deliberations in British government circles would result in the offer of a direct guarantee. Already on 21 March Halifax had told Count Raczynski that if the German-Polish quarrel over Danzig 'should develop in such a way as to threaten Polish independence, then I thought that His Majesty's Government would have to treat it as a question which was of the gravest concern to themselves'.² This probably expressed correctly the general Cabinet feeling about how Britain would react in the contingency of a Polish crisis. But because Halifax revealed its existence to the

1 This failure to clarify the options available has not been satisfactorily noted, let alone explained in the historical literature, except by R. Manne: 'The British Government and the Question of the Soviet Alliance, 15 March - 24 August 1939' Chapter 1. Thesis for the B.Phil. in International Relations, University of Oxford, 1972.

2 DBFP:III:4: Halifax to Sir H. Kennard, 21 March 1939, p.436.

Polish Ambassador, it was also a definite hint that Britain might be about to enter into an advance commitment to Poland, and at that stage, a disincentive to the latter to make the best of her anxieties about the USSR and join in the 4-Power Declaration.¹ The Prime Minister was certainly sensitive and sympathetic to the Polish antipathy to the Soviet Union. He wrote:

'As soon as I appreciated this position fully, I saw that it was unlikely that we could get their signature (to the 4-Power declaration).² Was it worthwhile to go in with Russia in that case?'

Subsequent Polish actions seem to support this interpretation. On 24 March, in the course of a long conversation, Raczynski developed a proposal Beck had made two days before, for a secret understanding between the two countries, in which Britain would promise Poland help if she were threatened over the Danzig issue, while Poland would promise to consult with Britain if she in turn were attacked. Halifax took up this idea, and slightly reformulated it so as to assure Britain of greater reciprocity. Although he implied that the question would need to be considered further, the Foreign Secretary raised no objections to the plan, and appeared mainly concerned to clarify its provisions.³ By accepting these terms of reference Halifax must therefore have given Beck, via his ambassador, the impression that Polish policy could thenceforward be based on the assumption that Britain was near to a bi-lateral agreement, and had abandoned her pressure for a 4-Power

1 This is not to underestimate the strength of Polish hostility to co-operation with the USSR, a phenomenon Dalton also noted after seeing Raczynski and J. Stanczik the Polish Miners leader. Dalton Diaries: 20: 28 and 30 March 1939.

2 Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1091, Letter to Ida Chamberlain, 26 March 1939 (Brackets mine).

3 DBFP III:4: Halifax to Kennard 24 March 1939, pp.500-2.

declaration.¹ In its turn Polish enthusiasts for the British initiative fed back to reinforce Chamberlain's and Halifax's concentration on the Polish connection.

Halifax's personal diplomacy was also important for what it omitted. Britain did not inform the Soviet Union of the abandonment of the plan for a 4-Power declaration until 29 March,² although as we have seen, Halifax and Chamberlain were aware on 22 March, when they met the French, that Poland's reply was likely to be 'negative or evasive' about the proposal.³ Certainly by the 24th, Halifax knew that Poland had definitely refused to participate in the public declaration. In the Raczynski-Halifax conversation noted above, the Polish Ambassador had told the Foreign Secretary explicitly of his country's fear of any link with Russia.⁴ Despite the fact the USSR had informed Britain on 22 March of her willingness to adhere to the declaration, Cadogan did not feel it necessary, when he saw the Soviet Ambassador on the 23rd, to give more than an oblique hint to Maisky that the proposal was likely to fall through. In fact the Under-Secretary came near to dissimulation, as he told Maisky that while Poland was hesitating about joining a bloc which included the Soviet Union she had made no final answer and was still considering a reply. Britain 'would of course keep closely in touch with M. Maisky'. When the latter asked about procedure after the declaration had been made, Cadogan did not mention the emerging

1 This is confirmed by Anna M. Cienciala: Poland and the Western Powers 1938-9, (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1968), pp.216-7.

2 DBFP III:5: p.20, Halifax-Seeds, 4 April 1939. This document relates the sequence of events in Anglo-Soviet relations, 19-31 March 1939.

3 DBFP III:4: pp.457-61.

4 See Footnote 3, previous page).

inclination of Halifax and Chamberlain in the talks with Bonnet, to replace the four-sided scheme by a bi-lateral Anglo-Polish agreement. Instead he replied that the declaration would be followed (i.e. not replaced), by a general exchange of views, and possibly by some specific arrangements 'with certain countries who appeared to be more directly in the road of German advance and who were already organised in some treaty arrangements'. This clearly pointed to Poland, but the impression given by Cadogan was that of the construction of special mottes following on from the completion of a general bailey, and not as actually happened, the total exclusion of the Soviet Union from the important stages in anti-German diplomacy.¹

The policy of the Polish Guarantee was probably finalised during the weekend of 25-6 March, although the data for these two days is limited. By 'finalised', is meant that Halifax and Chamberlain came to commit themselves completely to this course of action, and by doing so inevitably narrowed the scope of policy-making for their colleagues, since the choice they presented for ultimate Cabinet decision consisted only in accepting or rejecting the option of the guarantee. Because the executive's deliberations and diplomacy focussed predominantly on Poland, by the time the Cabinet and its Committee came to examine the situation, ministers were faced with two virtual faits accomplis: the abortion of the previous schemes which they had approved and to some extent participated in; and the pressure to accept the executive's new

1 DBFP:III:4: Halifax-Seeds 28 March 1939, pp.530-2, contains an account of Cadogan's meeting with Maisky on the 23rd. Cadogan's own diary does not appear to cover this discussion (Dilks p.163). Litvinov and Stalin clearly felt that they had been deceived, to judge by Litvinov's interview with Seeds on 1 April. DBFP III:4: Seeds to Halifax, pp. 574-5.

proposal, because a rejection would leave the Government without a policy, or even a plan for a policy, at a time when most ministers felt as a main priority the need for a response to the Prague 'outrage' which would be both dramatic and prophylactic. Moreover the attitudes and expectations of Poland and the USSR towards Britain had been deeply affected by the activities of Halifax and Chamberlain, so that if the Cabinet had wished to alter the direction of policy, it would have had to reckon with two considerable difficulties. Once Britain had indicated an intention to conclude the guarantee, Poland would not easily have co-operated in anything less. Equally, the failure to take the USSR into British confidence could not be conveniently erased from the memory of Soviet policy-makers.

It is evident that during that week-end of 25-6 March, Chamberlain, and particularly Halifax, completed the detailed construction of the guarantee policy in some haste, with the result that a finished product was presented for the rapid approval of the Cabinet. On the 26th itself the Prime Minister wrote:

'the declaration is dead¹ and I am now exploring another possibility'.

The general requirement of urgency had acquired added impetus through the signing of the German -Roumanian Trade Treaty on 23 March. Cadogan noted and complained at, the frenetic pace of policy-making at the time.

'There are neither week-ends, nor nights nor days'.²

1 Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1091, Letter to Ida Chamberlain 26 March 1939.

2 Dilks, p.163. Diary entry of 25 March 1939.

His diary also simply notes a meeting held at noon on 25 March in the Foreign Office, which he attended with Halifax, Sir Robert Vansittart, Sargent, Sir William Malkin, and William Strang, to work out next steps. Harvey was also there, and recorded a long meeting in which Halifax advocated at some length a definite mutual guarantee agreement with Poland and Roumania above any arrangement which included Russia. Because of what he saw as Poland's crucial ability to provide a second front, the Foreign Secretary thought: 'we cannot have Russia in the forefront of the picture'. Polish hostility plus the need not to alienate Italy, whome he still hoped to wean from Hitler, were the justifications for this treatment. The USSR would be useful, Halifax apparently thought, but only in the secondary sense that she could act as an 'arsenal' in any conflict, and might be encouraged to develop the existing Franco-Soviet Pact into a direct defensive alliance.¹

It was on the basis of these attitudes towards Poland and Russia, which had quickly hardened into constants in the minds of Halifax and Chamberlain as deliberation progressed, that Strang prepared a draft summary of the discussions. This was brought to Chamberlain by Halifax, together with R.A. Butler and Cadogan, for a further meeting at 9.30 p.m on 26 March.² The Prime Minister gave his approval to the proposals, which thus solidified into a ready-made programme for Cabinet consideration; unless ministers rejected the proposals in toto, their only means of participation was through amending the details of the scheme. If they

1 Ibid. See also Harvey, p.268, Entry of 25 March. Interestingly, Harvey records the same sentiments about the USSR in his entry of 23 March (p.267), seeing them as one conclusion of the talks with the French over the previous two days.

2 Dilks, pp.163-4, 26 March 1939. It was on this day that Chamberlain put on paper his famous 'most profound distrust of Russia' views, part and parcel of the concentration on Poland. Cited in Keith Feiling: The Life of Neville Chamberlain, (London, Macmillan, 1946), p.403.

were inhibited by the prospect of rejecting the executive's careful preparations, then the creative stage of policy-formulation was over without them ever having fully participated. Cadogan certainly thought that the meeting on the 26th finalised matters. He described his work on the next day:

'In afternoon busy on draft telegrams¹ giving effect to our decisions of last night'.

His only qualification was that he expected certain 'objections' in the Foreign Policy Committee, which he was subsequently surprised not to find. But it is revealing that Cadogan considered the decisions effectively to have been taken even before the Cabinet had met; objections or not, the thought of rejection did not occur to him.

Thus the Cabinet was not drawn into the consideration of the new policy until the executive had discarded alternative lines of action and were strongly committed to a concrete set of proposals. Eventually the Foreign Policy Committee met at 5 p.m on 27 March for the first time in nearly seven weeks. It is difficult to know why it was called at this particular time. The need to take the burden of some business from the full Cabinet cannot have been a major consideration, since as we have seen, the work of policy-construction had already been completed, while the telegrams of implementation had been drafted that afternoon. Moreover the Cabinet itself met two days later, substantially to duplicate the Committee's approval.² One may therefore surmise that Chamberlain called the committee to test the response of other ministers, and

1 Dilks, p.164, 27 March 1939.

2 The power not to call the Cabinet, or to discuss an issue, was of course a limited but definite part of the Prime Ministerial prerogative, discussed in W. Jennings: Cabinet Government (3rd Ed.) (Cambridge, The University Press, 1965), pp.245-9.

possibly to mobilise support in advance of any opposition which might be encountered in the larger and less intimate Cabinet. There is no direct evidence for this theory, which is inferred mainly from the apparent lack of real function for this meeting of the Foreign Policy Committee, and from Cadogan's expectation of some ministerial criticism of the guarantee. Yet it seems a convincing explanation when we look at the Prime Minister's remarks in the Committee itself. Chamberlain reported that:

'He had not thought it expedient to summon an emergency meeting of the Cabinet to consider the new proposals,¹ as this might have caused publicity'.

This accounts for the calling of the Committee simply in terms of a desire for secret diplomacy. But closer examination leads us to suspect the importance attached to avoiding publicity. If a full Cabinet had been called on 27 March, instead of the Foreign Policy Committee, it would have been the first for five days. Normally the Cabinet met once a week, so that in this period of obvious turmoil it would not have attracted too much attention to advance the meeting by two days - especially since the regular Cabinet of 15 March was followed by three more meetings in the four days from 18-22 March. The precedents for emergency Cabinets had been well and truly set by the 27th. Indeed, it would almost have attracted more attention if the Cabinet had not met irregularly. Furthermore, unless the Foreign Policy Committee's meeting could be kept completely secret, (unlikely in the light of the inter-penetration of government and press circles, and the many private contacts between people like Hore-Belisha and Liddell Hart, and Liddell

1 CAB 27/624 FP(36) 38th Mtg. 27 March 1939.

Hart and Maisky),¹ it would have seemed more extraordinary to the outside observer that the Cabinet committee should have a special meeting after such a long hiatus, than that the Cabinet itself should meet a mere two days early. So we may conclude that Chamberlain's explanation for the calling of the Foreign Policy Committee on 27 March was specious. And in the context of the executive's lead in policy-making during the whole episode of the Polish Guarantee, the only plausible explanation which remains is that of the Cabinet-management theory suggested above.

The minutes of this meeting of the Committee illustrate well the way in which the guarantee policy had gathered nearly an unstoppable momentum by the time that other ministers became involved. Chamberlain related the fate of the schemes that the Cabinet had approved at its last meeting, and then seemed to present the committee with a choice between two alternatives, as if they were equally free to choose either:

'It looked therefore, as if a failure to associate with Soviet Russia would give rise to suspicion and difficulty with the Left Wing both in this country and in France, while on the other hand insistence to associate with Soviet Russia would destroy any chance of building² up a solid and united front against German aggression'.

But in practice the Prime Minister had limited the options by beginning from the assumption that a démarche which included both Poland and the Soviet Union was simply not practicable or politic, (a hypothesis which had not been subject to very rigorous test). The problem was presented as an inescapable choice between the two powers, with no other alternatives. It was also fairly clear from the language of the antithesis which option

1 For contacts between government and press circles, see Ch.III below, pp.312-7 ; Examples of the many inevitable contacts between Ministers and politicians outside the Government can be found in B.Liddell Hart: Memoirs, Vol.2, (London, Cassell, 1965), pp.222-8; Harvey p.270, Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1930-9, (London, Collins/Fontana, 1969), p.386, and in The Dalton Diaries, 20. Dalton personally saw the Prime Minister, Vansittart, Raczynski and Maisky in these few days, some of whom were more discreet than others.

2 FP(36) 38th Mtg. 27 March 1939.

Chamberlain intended the Committee to accept. He opposed the destruction of 'a solid and united front against German aggression' only with the disadvantage of left-wing antagonism - a plague which his government had suffered and survived many times previously. Given the consensus of ministers in the Cabinet meetings since Prague, that Hitler had now to be confronted with some kind of defiant gesture, it was hardly likely that the Cabinet Committee of a predominantly Conservative government would rank the guarantee with Poland below good relations with the 'left-wing', whomsoever that might refer to.¹ It was particularly improbable because Chamberlain did not raise the long-term strategic hazards which failure to join forces with the USSR might involve, or conversely the strategic advantages that might accrue from co-operation. Although other members were, of course, free to bring up such questions, Chamberlain's narrow presentation of the issue, with one option cast as obviously the more attractive, constituted a firm lead that could only have been negated by radical questioning of the course of diplomacy from the very beginning of the crisis, as well of the basic assumptions on which the executive had operated.² For those who had been excluded from the intricate daily manoeuvres of foreign policy, and who now possessed far less information than Halifax and Chamberlain, the task of undoing work to which the executive was fully

1 By "the left-wing" Chamberlain probably meant his critics within the Conservative Party as well as those in the Labour movement. However the Prime Minister was well-known for his resistance to criticism. He wrote, on 4 December 1938, to his sister Ida: "The only thing I care about is to be able to carry out the policy I believe, indeed know to be right, and the only distress that criticism or obstruction can cause me is if it prevents my purpose", Chamberlain Papers NC 18/1/1071-91.

2 The psychological difficulties of disagreement in the small groups which usually characterise high-level foreign policy-making are vigorously described by Irving Janis in Victims of Group Think, (Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

committed, would therefore have been formidable, even if there had been no urgency in the situation.

As it was, Chamberlain rapidly exerted positive pressure in favour of the proposed guarantee. He made explicit his own preference by setting out the 'two fronts' argument as proof of the key importance of Poland, and the 'offence to third parties' argument as the compelling reason against inviting the Soviet Union to take part in the plan to guarantee Roumania and Poland. He stressed the need for urgency, and hoped that if the Foreign Policy Committee approved the proposals before it, the draft telegrams could be dispatched that evening. The general tone of Chamberlain's introduction made it plain that he required ratification from the committee, not inputs. In this he was reinforcing his initial remark to ministers that they were to be 'informed of certain conclusions which had been provisionally reached on the previous day'.¹

In the event the executive achieved the requisite authorisation, although after conspicuous dissent in the Committee. Yet their very ability to over-ride this disagreement is further evidence of the strength of the position enjoyed by Halifax and Chamberlain during a crisis atmosphere in which the essential requirement was that of the rapid and creative construction of a new policy to fit a new environment. For the opposition was persistent and fairly out-spoken, in the circumstances a striking indication of the critical stage which British foreign policy had reached; Ministers in home departments were trying, however forlornly, to keep up with the arguments and pace of affairs.

1 FP(36) 38th Mtg. 27 March 1939.

Sir Samuel Hoare in particular emphasized throughout the discussion that it would be counter-productive to leave Russia out of any arrangement. In his opinion there should be further efforts to organise 'some kind of parallel action, vis-à-vis Russia' so as to bring her 'in to the common front'. He was afraid that without this, Britain's policy would be seen 'in many quarters' as having suffered 'a considerable defeat'. Even more important would be the loss of the USSR's military value:

'...Russia constituted the greatest deterrent in the East against German aggression. All experience showed that Russia was undefeatable and he was apprehensive of the possible consequences that might result if at this juncture the enmity of Soviet Russia towards this country was increased'.

Hoare's advocacy of this view may have been lent extra force by his insistence that he had no 'predilections' in favour of the Soviet Union, although it was probably already clear to those present that there was little moral enthusiasm for the USSR in the National Government. If a senior minister did therefore argue the case for close foreign relations with Stalin's government, he must at the least have commanded serious attention.¹ Moreover in this committee of eight, Hoare was supported fully by Oliver Stanley, who also feared 'serious consequences' unless a form of declaration could be found which could accommodate Russia without raising the difficulties outlined by Chamberlain. This combination was an important challenge to the argument which the executive sought to present to the Committee about the inevitability of having to choose between Poland and Russia (although it suffered by arguing on this middle ground, and by not advocating clearly that the USSR should be the first priority).

1 Hoare's support of an arrangement with the Soviet Union is one of the most surprising single facts to emerge from the public records, particularly in view of the lack of any mention of it in his autobiography, Nine Troubled Years, (London, Collins, 1954). It is even at odds with his contemporary image. Captain Harry Crookshank, a junior Minister who nearly resigned over Munich, wrote on 31 March 1939: "I am sure that Hoare and Simon are public menaces". Crookshank Papers, Ms. Eng.Hist. 359, Diary Vol.2.

The pressures against dissent in the making of this policy left Hoare and Stanley alone in their outspokenness. But other ministers were by no means fully convinced by the executive argument. Rather, they seem to have been slightly bemused by the change of events. Of the eight ministerial members, Halifax, Chamberlain, and (insofar as we can decipher their preferences from two relatively marginal comments), Simon and Inskip, argued actively in favour of the proposals brought to the meeting.¹ The remaining two, Chatfield and Morrison, were non-committal. Morrison pointed out that the newness of the latest proposals lay in their willingness to envisage action and not just consultation. But he neither drew any conclusion from this observation nor crossed swords with the Prime Minister when the latter replied by saying that the original proposals for consultation had always been 'with a view to determining the nature of any action that might be taken'. Later in the proceedings Morrison did predict that Russia would 'sulk', but went no further. Morrison was insufficiently sure of his opinions and his information, either to enthuse or complain over Halifax's plan.² Chatfield contributed far more to the discussion, but he too adopted an ambivalent position on the main issue. On the one hand he feared the dangers of involvement with Russia to the extent of risking hostilities with Japan; and in any case he believed that:

'On the whole Poland was, from the military point of view, probably the best of potential eastern allies'.

But he could see the other side of the argument:

'...he thought Soviet Russia would act as a greater deterrent so far as Germany was concerned'.

1 There is a relative lack of private papers for the Ministers concerned. There are none available for Simon or Morrison, and Inskip's diary has no entries between 23 January - 4 May 1939.

2 Morrison was not performing well enough in the Commons to take exposed positions in Cabinet. Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1046-70. Chamberlain to Hilda Chamberlain, 5 March 1939.

Chatfield further criticised the proposals before the Committee, by observing that Roumania was no longer worth her place as a prospective ally, now that she was dependent on Germany for military equipment after the signature of the Commercial Treaty on 23 March.¹

Thus Halifax and Chamberlain were faced with a Committee in which two ministers gave them tepid support, two were relatively neutral, and two were actively critical of their proposals. Yet the telegrams as broadly approved by the Foreign Policy Committee, and dispatched that evening, contained the plan which they had formulated and introduced to their colleagues, with no substantial alteration.² The text of the telegram corresponds closely to the guarantee scheme which Harvey describes as having been finalised between 25-6 March.³ It accepted the exclusion of Russia, and the demise of the 4-power declaration, and provided for Anglo-French help to Roumania and Poland, should they resist attack and Poland undertake to aid both Roumania and the West in the event of the first German attack failing there. Various pieties were expressed as to the need to avoid Soviet isolationism, but the consideration of any action to involve the USSR was postponed until an unspecified date. Halifax conceded that in the event of war, there would be 'good reasons' for trying to ensure at least the 'benevolent

1 In arguing along these lines Chatfield was still obscuring the impact of the Chiefs of Staff appreciation of 18 March (CAB 53/10 Cos 282 - 3 Mtgs 18 March 1939, 11.15 a.m and 3 p.m. which had argued that on military grounds, the Soviet Union was a preferable ally to Poland. See also CAB 23/98 CM(12 (39), 18 March.

2 DBFP III:4: Halifax to Kennard and Sir R. Hoare, 27 March 1939, 11.30 p.m, pp.515-7.

3 Harvey, pp.267-70. Both Harvey and Cadogan record simply that the FPC "approved" the telegrams, with little fuss. They make no mention of the Soviet question. Dilks, p.164.

neutrality' of the USSR: he would consider 'in due course' how best to secure this.¹

Why did the executive carry the Committee with them so successfully, despite the lack of strong support from a majority of members? The answer seems to lie mainly in the holding of the initiative by Halifax and Chamberlain, and in the inability of the opposition to challenge the justifications which the executive made from a position of authority, but which were in fact as much assertions as those made by non-specialist ministers. The guarantee plan may not have commanded the whole-hearted support of the Committee, but equally it did not provoke confident or detailed criticism, for reasons we have outlined earlier.² Halifax and the Prime Minister were faced by only two ministers who called strongly for structural modifications to the scheme. In this numerically balanced dispute, with Simon and Inskip mildly sympathetic to the original proposals,³ there was no way in which Hoare and Stanley could impose their view over that of the ministers constitutionally responsible for foreign policy, who were also the authors of diplomacy during the crisis thus far. Although mutual criticism was perhaps easier in the small group than in an imposing full cabinet,⁴ the executive still had crucial advantages when it came to a stalemate; they possessed ready-made proposals, an air of special authority with which to make judgements on the arcane questions of high diplomacy, and a physical involvement in detailed day-to-day developments. The

1 DBFP III:4: p.517; CAB 27/624 FP(36) 38th Mtg 27 March 1939. In Cabinet on 29 March, Halifax said that he had tried to cater for the Home Secretary's views in paragraph 6 of the telegram. It is this paragraph which contains only the pieties referred to above. CAB 23/98 CM 15(39) 29 March 1939.

2 Supra, pp.57-9.

3 Cadogan was surprised not to find Simon critical of the change in policy, so perhaps the latter's stance was neutral in the FPC. Dilks, p.164.

4 See pp.128-35 below.

combination of these qualities made it possible for Chamberlain to pay obeisance to the views of Hoare and Stanley, without conceding the substance of the argument. He agreed to examine Stanley's suggestion for a form of declaration which could incorporate the USSR, but insisted that no decision could be taken on the issue until Poland had replied to the proposed telegram. In other words, the guarantee proposals were to be accepted as they stood, and made to Poland and Roumania on the existing basis of the exclusion of the Soviet Union, whose role could be re-examined later. But in practice it was highly improbable that Poland would accept any subsequent reformulation of the plan to include Russia once she had been offered the guarantee alone, a fact which Chamberlain must have realised from the breakdown of the declaration proposals. As the future was to confirm, the likely outcome was that events would gather their own momentum once the proposal had been made, that the agreement would be concluded without Soviet participation, and that the options for British foreign policy would narrow as a result. Essentially the Prime Minister had ignored the opposition in the Committee.

In this imperviousness he followed Halifax's more blatant lead. Replying to Hoare's first remarks in the FPC about the importance of the USSR to Britain, the Foreign Secretary had merely asserted without explanation that:

'...if we had to make a choice between Poland and Soviet Russia, it seemed clear that Poland would give the greater value'.

He had also quoted very selectively from military advice about the relative values of Poland and Russia. He had referred to comments made by the British Ambassador in Moscow, and from the Military Attaché in Berlin, neither of which went to show directly that Poland was the

better potential ally, and yet had failed to mention the Chiefs of Staff conclusion of 18 March, that Poland was not only incapable of containing a German attack, but that:

'If the USSR were on our side and Poland¹ neutral, the position would alter in our favour'.

Finally, Halifax had felt it necessary to make only the most cursory responses when Hoare had returned to the charge. On the second of these occasions the Foreign Secretary simply replied that France was not very sympathetic to the Soviet Union at that time. To the last attempt he did not respond at all, but instead raised the different question of Danzig.

Thus Halifax and Chamberlain side-stepped the opposition of two important ministers, by refusing to join argument. Had the debate become more rigorous and more specific others might have been drawn in, and basic premises might have been more critically examined. As it was, the executive repeatedly asserted the rightness of their policy, and capitalised on the general desire to avoid delay. Throughout they treated the guarantee proposal as if it were already adopted policy, open only to amendment. Such confidence forced dissentients into negative criticism of the executive's programme and away from the construction of alternative policies which might have attracted support from the uncommitted. With such diffuse opinions elsewhere, Halifax and Chamberlain were able to confine the argument to their own terms of reference.²

1 See footnote 1, p.77.

2 It is not suggested that Halifax and Chamberlain took a conspiratorial view of the committee and its management; simply that small groups in general, and British Cabinet Committees in particular are susceptible to initiatives from the Chair in certain circumstances. See pp.218-30 below.

The submission of the draft telegrams to the full Cabinet witnessed a repetition of the events in Committee, if in a minor key. Halifax and Chamberlain repeated their previous arguments and assertions. Once again Poland was represented as 'the key to the situation'.¹ Chamberlain continued to adduce assumptions as facts. He thought:

'that it was of the utmost importance to obtain the support of Poland and that it was impossible to secure this if Russia was brought into the declaration'.

The two statements in that sentence expressed principles on which the Guarantee policy was based; but they were principles which had still not been exposed to full questioning and debate, either in Cabinet, or within the executive itself. When a further attempt was made on this occasion to put right the relegation of the Soviet Union which these assumptions implied, and had ensured in practice, Halifax circumvented the issue once more by paying lip-service to the general importance of Russian help, while effectively ignoring the suggestion for specific action. Although the Minister of Health again urged the importance of the Soviet Union, and supported the proposal made by Hoare at the Foreign Policy Committee for a definite reciprocal agreement, Halifax reiterated both Bonnet's distrust of Stalin's regime, and the importance of Poland. In the face of such criticism his strategy was that of immovability. Soon afterwards the discussion petered out, and the draft telegrams were approved, with the vague references in paragraph 6 to obtaining future Soviet support for the guarantees scheme, as the only gesture towards the Cabinet critics.²

1 Halifax stressed that "The essential point was to manage matters so as to secure the support of Poland". CAB 23/98, CM 15/39, 29 March 1939 a.m.

2 The telegrams, which had been sent on the 27th with instructions to hold, were released for communication to the Polish and Roumanian Governments at 9 p.m on 29 March. DBFP III:4, Halifax to Kennard and Hoare, p.541.

For those ministers who favoured a closer liaison with the Soviet Union crucially lacked a definite proposal to place against the telegrams already drafted by the executive. This in its turn was the result of the constant defensive posture imposed on them by Chamberlain's and Halifax's fast-changing initiatives. The vigorous executive lead in discussion therefore led them to accept the compromise of a promised approach to Russia at a later date - and an approach which was to consist only in requests for unilateral Soviet help to Poland and Roumania. As events were to prove, the delay and the half-heartedness in approaching Stalin were always likely to end by alienating the Soviet government and thus making any agreement much more difficult, if not impossible.¹ Thus the compromise won by Hoare and Stanley was chimerical, and thinly disguised a practical decision to court Polish support at almost any cost.

By 29 March the formulation of the guarantee policy had been completed. During the next two days important decisions were taken about the timing and presentation of the policy, but no major alterations of substance ensued. The Cabinet was suddenly called on the morning of 30 March for Halifax to relate the new information from various sources about the possibility of an immediate German move against Poland.²

1 The present state of documentation in Soviet foreign policy makes it impossible to be more than tentative in such statements. It is possible that Stalin never had any intention of co-operating with Britain; on the other hand subsequent Soviet behaviour indicated a clear distrust of British intentions. Sir Samuel Hoare noted: 'The Anglo-Russian negotiations have dragged on, the difficulty being to get the Kremlin to realise that we really are agreed in substance and that their new points are due to quite unnecessary suspicions'. Templewood Papers, X:4 Hoare to W.W. Astor, 12 June 1939.

2 CAB 23/98 CM 16(39) 30 March 1939. The guarantee was thus announced earlier than might otherwise have been the case. Some Ministers, notably Zetland, Maugham and Kingsley Wood, showed signs of hesitating on the brink. Their unwillingness to provoke a war between Germany and Poland by any declaration of support for Beck led to the statement being re-drafted along more general lines but did not halt the increasingly rapid progress towards an irrevocable commitment.

This led him to propose that Britain should announce her guarantee in the very near future, rather than wait for both her own and Germany's negotiations with Poland to run their natural course. The reasons for such action would be precisely those which had governed the formation of the policy in the first instance; the only variable which had changed was the proximity of a new German aggression. The raison d'etre of the new policy was to deter Hitler from attacking Poland, and to ensure a second front if he should fail to be deterred. Thus if an attack was being contemplated at that very moment, the guarantee plan was in danger of becoming superfluous unless it were announced immediately. The Cabinet therefore was asked to approve immediate action, but in effect they were only duplicating their ratification of the previous day. Even here, the definition of the situation as sufficiently serious to require a sudden announcement, which would mean going ahead without full reciprocity or a guarantee for Roumania, was made by Halifax and Chamberlain. In such a fluid and unpredictable environment, they gave impetus, direction, and cohesion to an otherwise disconcerted government. Despite some disquiet in Cabinet about the risks of precipitate action, the guarantee to Poland was announced in the Commons at 3 p.m on 31 March, where it was greeted by Arthur Greenwood as being potentially "as momentous a statement as has been made in this House for a quarter of a century".¹

The evidence from the above case demonstrates a particular type of policy-making, and one in which the Cabinet as a whole took only a peripheral part, displaying little collective unity or purpose. It

1 CAB 23/98 CM 17(39) 31 March 1939 12 noon; this Cabinet decided to announce the new policy the same afternoon; Hansard 5th Series Vol.345, cols. 2415-16.

has been argued that this style correlates strongly with the nature of the problem which was under consideration at the time.

In summary, the crisis of March 1939 was of major importance. It dissolved many of the hopes and views which decision-makers had previously held about Germany and the likelihood of maintaining a viable peace in Europe. On the accepted premise that Britain was vitally interested in the maintenance of European stability, it required a fundamental reformulation of strategic images and possibly a specific new act of policy. It affected foreign policy in a most basic and total way. No area of British national interests could be unaltered by the decisions it demanded about war and peace. It was also felt by those involved that the situation was one of great urgency. The combination of all these demands seems to have favoured a pyramidal form of policy-making in the government, with the executive's creative initiatives and monopoly of information acting upon the confused and malleable opinions of their colleagues. The power of origination devolved upon the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. The consensus finally reached in Cabinet was essentially negative, deriving from the lack of any clear alternatives to falling in with the lead coming from the chair.

(ii) The Soviet Question: April-August, 1939.

The problem of Anglo-Soviet relations in the spring and summer of 1939, usefully provides both a parallel and a contrast to that of the Polish guarantee. It was of equally vital importance to British foreign policy, both objectively and increasingly in terms of the way it was perceived by participants. Its outcomes, whatever they might be, would inevitably affect the military and political balance in Europe, since it involved the consideration of advance commitments to go to war. It was also seen as a pressing issue, although slightly less so than the events of March. Ministers rapidly recognised in April that continued German expansionism meant that relations between Britain and the USSR could no longer remain ill-defined. An immediate attempt to reach some kind of agreement had to be made. However, in contrast to the guarantee to Poland, the salience of this problem did not deeply disturb the central notions of British policy-makers about European politics. For it arose gradually out of the deliberations about Poland, and was not a new or sudden trauma of itself. Once the invasion of Prague had been assimilated, and the guarantee issued to Poland, the idea of concluding a full alliance with the USSR was not so radical as it would have seemed even six months previously. Moreover the proposals that emerged were formal, detailed, and multifaceted. Both procedurally and substantively the contrasts and similarities between the March crisis and the Soviet negotiations throw interesting light on the relationship between policy-making and the problems with which it deals.

From the policy-making viewpoint, the important questions

raised by the case of Anglo-Soviet relations centre on the influences in the British Cabinet which led to:

1. The initiation of negotiations in April.
2. The rejection of the Litvinov proposals of 18 April for a full alliance.
3. The decision after all on 24 May to accept the proposals.
4. The various British bargaining positions during the prolonged negotiations for the alliance from May to August 1939.

Without embarking upon a daily history of British diplomacy in April 1939, it is necessary to sketch the details of how negotiations with the USSR began.¹ Halifax had assured the Cabinet on 29 March that Britain would approach the Soviet Union about the latter's possible contribution to a 'Peace Front', once the guarantee agreement with Poland had been concluded.² After the declaration of 31 March, therefore, the Foreign Secretary dispatched to Moscow on 14 April the ingenuous proposal that the USSR should make a unilateral declaration of support to any of her European neighbours which might require and desire it.³

The responsibility for this démarche cannot be attributed to an executive initiative. Chamberlain at least was still profoundly sceptical of the value of Soviet help. He told the Cabinet on 5 April that:

'he had very considerable distrust of Russia, and had no confidence that we should obtain active and constant support from that country'.

1 R. Manne, op.cit. Ch. 1. and S. Aster op.cit. pp.158-187, both contain full accounts.

2 CAB 23/98 CM 15(39), 29 March 1939.

3 DBFP III:5, Halifax to Seeds, 14 April 1939, pp.205-6.

While if R.S. Hudson's recent conclusions about Russia's lack of an offensive military capacity were correct, he continued:

'...and if an arrangement which included Russia would be likely to cause an explosion, the question of making any arrangement with Russia was obviously one which required a great deal of further consideration'.¹

Obviously the Prime Minister suppressed his doubts and disinclinations.

There were various reasons for this. Some were substantive, like the Italian attack on Albania, a desire to soothe growing public criticism, and his own genuine acceptance of the value - if it could be relied upon - of Soviet military aid to Poland.² But equally important must have been the knowledge that there was a vocal body of opinion within his Cabinet which favoured Anglo-Soviet co-operation at this time, and which had only been contained with difficulty in March despite the great advantages enjoyed by the executive during that crisis. As a result Halifax had made a formal commitment to take steps which would ensure some Soviet support in the event of war, once the Polish guarantee had been concluded. It had been a condition of pacifying Hoare and Stanley, and keeping the Cabinet united in a period of extreme international instability. The price of unity was that Halifax and Chamberlain were left with a sense of obligation to take some action at least towards the Soviet Union, after their previous evasions, and also to create a general expectation among other ministers, of an imminent approach. R.J. Minney gives us the Secretary of War's record of this expectation:

1 CAB 23/98 CM 18(39) 5 April, Halifax agreed with Hudson to whom he wrote on 4 April; "Your impressions confirm the conclusions I have drawn from the reports of the Moscow Embassy", FO 800/322. H/XXX/III-5.

2 The COS had finally approved the Guarantee, but not without making it clear that even British and Soviet aid combined would probably not save Poland from a German attack. CAB 53/47 COS Paper 872 (Revise) 3 April and CAB 23/98 CM 16(39) 30 March.

'Hore-Belisha's notes at this time indicate that the Government was anxious to include Russia in their efforts and negotiations¹ to secure a common front against aggression'.

C. Hendricks, Secretary in the Privy Council Office wrote to his chief Walter Runciman, who was touring the Dominions, that the main difficulty facing British policy was now Russia.² Even Leslie Burgin, who was inclined at first to stress the difficulties facing an Anglo-Soviet arrangement, and whom Dalton described privately as 'a Simonite of the worst type', told the Labour front-bencher that it would be very useful if Britain could take steps to ensure the USSR's neutrality in a future war.³

Despite the fact therefore, that Chamberlain might have been personally willing to allow the question of co-operation to sink slowly from the centre of policy-making debate, the compromise over the Polish guarantee left him in debt to a section of his Cabinet, in a way that he had not been during March, when the executive was able to sketch out policy upon a blank sheet. It was an obligation which Chamberlain could only ignore at the risk of damaging both his own credibility and possibly the internal harmony of the Government. Moreover the Prime Minister could not rely on Halifax's continued opposition to some closer relationship with the Soviet Union. The debates in Cabinet in March had led Halifax to feel that moves should be made at least to involve the USSR in the new diplomacy.⁴ In the first two weeks of April

1 R.J. Minney: The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha, (London, Collins, 1960), p.189.

2 Runciman Papers, R3/32/1-4, C. Hendricks to W. Runciman, 11 April 1939.

3 Dalton Diaries, 20: 13 April 1939.

4 This is not to accept Maurice Cowling's picture of Halifax becoming detached from Chamberlain after Munich. Both men much preferred to concentrate British policy on Poland, rather than the USSR. M. Cowling: The Impact of Hitler, pp.278-83.

the Foreign Secretary showed himself fairly anxious not to appear unreasonable. In Cabinet on 5 April he commented that:

'he thought it might be desirable for him to see the Russian Ambassador rather more frequently than in the past, so as to avoid¹ any suspicion that we were cold-shouldering Russia'.

Indeed the Foreign Secretary called Maisky to the Foreign Office on 6 and 11 April, first to inform him of the general lines of the talks with Beck, and then 'in order that I might keep him in touch with recent developments'.² Another meeting was held three days later, at Maisky's request.³ These three meetings in nine days bear out Harvey's contemporary comments that 'H. is anxious to find a way round the Russian difficulty and is working on the idea of proposing to Stalin that he should make a unilateral declaration of support against aggression on much the same lines as we have.'⁴ In some situations the collective discussions of Cabinet government inevitably detached the two major foreign policy ministers from each other, with the result that any pressure from other groups of ministers, had a greater chance than usual of becoming policy. In early April 1939 the recruitment of Halifax to a more open-minded attitude about moderate co-operation with the USSR certainly ruled out any united executive attempt to evade an approach to that country.

1 CAB 23/98 CM 18(39) 5 April.

2 DBFP III:5: Halifax to Seeds, 5 April, 11 April, pp.53 and 82.

3 DBFP III:5: Halifax to Seeds, 14 April pp.209-10.

4 Harvey, 13 April, p.279. See also CAB 27/627, Halifax-Seeds, 14 April 1939: "I am reluctant to abandon my efforts to secure some measures of co-operation from the Soviet Government".

As a result Chamberlain informed his colleagues on 13 April that he was thinking of telling the Soviet Union frankly to stop talking in general terms, and to make a unilateral declaration of support for any state which might be attacked. The abrasive tone of his remarks suggests that on this occasion the Prime Minister was catching up with the general sense of his Cabinet, not initiating a course for them to follow. Ministers showed no surprise at the proposals and made little comment.¹

The second major stage in the development of Anglo-Soviet relations in 1939 began with the sudden Litvinov proposals of 18 April for a full military pact with France and Britain.² The British Government rejected this plan on 6 May repeated their request to the Soviet Union for a unilateral declaration of support to those countries which might request it.³ How was this important decision made?

The full Cabinet was informed by Halifax of the Soviet proposal the day after its arrival in the Foreign Office.⁴ They agreed that a reply should be formulated in the Foreign Policy Committee, which, as we have seen, was one of the intermittently important Cabinet committees that had proliferated since 1936 to cope with increased work-loads.⁵

1 CAB 23/98 CM 20(39) 13 April.

2 DBFP III:5: Seeds to Halifax, 18 April, pp.228-9.

3 DBFP III:5: Halifax to Seeds, 6 May 1939 pp.448-50. The renewed request for a unilateral declaration was softened by assuring the USSR that their support would only be committed to countries whom Britain and France were already obligated.

4 CAB 23/98 CM 21(39) 19 April

5 S.S. Wilson: The Cabinet Office to 1945, (London, HMSO, 1975), pp.12-15 and 174 describes the growth of these committees.

On this occasion the issue was sufficiently complicated to require fairly detailed consideration; it also invited real ministerial participation. The problem was not urgent, in the very short-term, and more importantly, it did not demand the wholesale formulation of a positive and original course of action to replace an outmoded strategy - as in March. For although the Litvinov proposals were a complete surprise to the Cabinet, in that, as the Foreign Office memorandum reminded the Committee:

'we have taken the attitude that the Soviet preach us sermons on "collective security" but make₁ no practical proposals. They have now made such...'.¹

they were only proposals, not actions which could physically compel a reorientation of views. At a deeper level they upturned none of the strategic or political realities on which governmental attitudes were based, as the fall of France was to do. They did not destroy any key images of the European situation, as the Nazi-Soviet Pact ought to have done. Their effect was rather the opposite; to bring the Cabinet at last to consider in depth its attitude towards co-operation with the USSR against Germany - an issue which had been latent for at least six months. The question had been on the verge of resolution during both the Munich crisis and that of March 1939. Moreover the suggestion for a full alliance did not reverse British conceptions of Soviet interests. It merely made clear what had previously been a reasonable supposition; that the USSR was sufficiently concerned about the threat posed by Hitler to venture out into very new diplomatic pastures.²

1 CAB 27/624, FP(36) 43rd Mtg., 19 April 1939.

2 After all, Foreign Minister Litvinov had been anxious throughout 1938 to achieve an Anti-Nazi front of co-operation with Britain and France over Czechoslovakia. See A. Ulam: Expansion and Co-Existence: The History of Soviet Foreign Policy from 1917-67, (London, Secker and Warburg, 1968), pp.253-7.

The Litvinov proposals were thus surprising but not shocking. They demanded no sudden reformulation of basic attitudes. Consequently the Cabinet were not dependent on creative leadership for their understanding of the problem at hand. Ministers' general picture of the USSR in European politics remained intact, to equip them with at least a basic confidence in their opinions for the discussion which was to follow. The continuity of the views expressed by Hoare and Stanley in both March and May, testifies to this. The nature of the issue did not for once militate against dissent in Cabinet. Together with the executive's foreknowledge of the existing divisions among ministers over the Soviet question, still to be reconciled, this factor lessened the likelihood of Halifax and Chamberlain being able to monopolise the vital initiatives and harness the Cabinet to their own views. In the event, the way that the debate developed through April and May, increasingly imposed positive pressures on the executive to allow the Cabinet (in the form of the Foreign Policy Committee), to operate in a much more democratic manner.

The Foreign Policy Committee met on the same afternoon of the day in which the Cabinet had delegated discussion of the Litvinov proposals to them.¹ Halifax was absent, but approved of a paper prepared by the Foreign Office and read out by Cadogan which set out the arguments on both sides and then came down clearly against acceptance of a triple alliance. The proposal was extremely inconvenient:

'...we are trying to build a "Peace Front" in Europe, and it seems, on balance, better to refuse an offer that may alienate our friends and reinforce the propaganda of our enemies without bringing in exchange any real material contribution to the strength of our Front'.²

1 CAB 27/624 FP(36)43rd Mtg., 19 April 1939.

2 Cadogan seems to have been taking the lead at this stage, with Halifax busy. Dilks, pp.175-6; Harvey pp.281-5. Conscription was the burning domestic issue.

The Prime Minister added his opinion in support of the Foreign Office, giving various sources for the view that 'the Russian fighting services were at present of little military value for offensive purposes', and still ignoring the COS conclusion of 18 March, repeated to this meeting of the FPC, that 'If the USSR were on our side and Poland neutral the position would alter in our favour'. Hoare expressed unhappiness about the situation in Eastern Europe, on the grounds that Poland was militarily impotent, and only the USSR could furnish her with adequate supplies of munitions.¹ But he could still suggest no positive alternative to the current policy, and the Committee drifted unimpeded into acceptance of the Foreign Office view. Inskip and Morrison both professed doubts as to Soviet sincerity in making the offer, whereupon Chamberlain rapidly proceeded to 'collect the voices' in classic style:

'THE PRIME MINISTER said that if this were our view we had to consider how to frame our reply'

By thus seizing the initiative in rather prematurely summarising the collective opinion of the committee, the Prime Minister made it difficult for the doubts of Hoare and Stanley (the latter's were noted by Cadogan in his diary)² to grow into fully-fledged arguments through the process of further discussion. Chamberlain informed the FPC of their own basic conclusion before it had been fully articulated. Nevertheless, it is fairly certain that the majority of ministers present at this stage did share the view that Britain should not enter into an

1 Chamberlain continued to be extraordinarily blind to the COS's expressed wish for Soviet assistance. Chatfield ended the meeting by accepting the view that political arguments outweighed any military advantages of an alliance. FP(36) 43rd Mtg.

2 Dilks, p.175, 19 April.

alliance with the Soviet Union. Those who spoke aligned themselves with Chamberlain, apart from Stanley and Hoare. Of the seven ministerial members of the Committee present apart from the Prime Minister, Inskip, Morrison, and later Chatfield, agreed with the latter's conclusion that the political arguments against a triple alliance were 'irresistible, and such as to outweigh any military advantages'. Cadogan, representing Halifax, had set the example for such a conclusion, and in doing so had been supported by R.A. Butler;¹ Simon and Macdonald seem to have made no contribution. Thus there was a clear majority actively opposed to the Soviet proposals. This was the more easily translated into a formal decision by the fact that the doubts of Hoare and Stanley did not lead them any more than their colleagues into an enthusiasm for the full alliance now in question. They feared for the consequences of alienating the Soviet Union, but preferred some intermediate arrangement whose form they could not see clearly. Even for those ministers sympathetic to association with the USSR, the suggestion for a major alliance came too soon and suddenly. Having failed to win the argument in March on more modest proposals, they did not now welcome having to advocate a radical version of their case. Thus as Cadogan recorded, 'there was general approval' of his advice to refuse the proffered liaison.²

In this way the FPC had at least played a full part in the making of the decision. The issue had immediately been placed before it,

1 R.A. Butler was Parliamentary Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office, and as such attended two-thirds of the meetings of the FPC after Munich, although his contributions were minor, as Chamberlain once noted. Chamberlain Papers, letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 28 May. NC 18/1/1092-1118.

2 Dilks, loc.cit., The Minutes of the FPC record that a draft reply might follow the lines suggested by Chamberlain and Morrison. FP(36) 43rd Mtg.

there had been a fairly full discussion, and the conclusion reached represented the general will of the Committee, although partly by default. On the other side of the coin, the executive had yet again forcefully argued in favour of one side of the case - as indeed, it was probably expected to do. Yet the FPC soon had another opportunity to influence the handling of the problem, at a meeting on 25 April to discuss the latest French response, which substantially accepted the desirability of a general, tripartite, agreement.¹ Halifax and Chamberlain once more made plain their view that this would gravely disrupt the construction of a 'Peace Front' with the other Eastern European countries without obtaining any significant military advantages. The Committee was inclined to agree, although not without some ambivalence. While Chatfield paraphrased the conclusions of the Chiefs of Staff about Soviet military capacity in a way which indicated his opposition to an alliance, and Inskip stressed South Africa's hostility to the proposal, the latter also now pointed out that the Soviet Union might be a potential help to the British position in the Far East, by restraining Japan.² MacDonald went further, in saying that it would be better to have the USSR on Britain's side in a war, than to have her neutral, or an enemy. But essentially the same consideration applied as on 19 April. While some of the committee were by no means as convinced as the executive of the merits of a policy which was based primarily on Poland, when as an alternative they were asked to consider

1 CAB 27/625 FP(36) 44th Mtg. 25 April. The French were themselves pursuing such an ambiguous line on the USSR that the British Cabinet could not have been influenced by Paris. See Anthony Adamthwaite: France and the Coming of the Second World War, (London, Frank Cass, 1977), pp.311-13.

2 This despite his knowledge of the Dominions general hostility to a Soviet alliance. R. Ovendale: Appeasement and the English-Speaking World, pp.267-72.

the commitment of a generalised alliance with the USSR, even these ministers shared Chamberlain's misgivings. Hoare epitomised the way in which those furthest from the Prime Minister's viewpoint still approved of the conclusion which the committee arrived at, viz. to let France know that Britain viewed all proposals involving an alliance as impracticable, since they would impair the erection of 'a barrier against aggression in Eastern Europe on behalf of the States directly menaced by Germany', by impairing the confidence of those states.¹ The Home Secretary said that if the present policy was to fail, the situation would have to be reconsidered, but that in the meantime he was in agreement with the critical reply to Paris. Again Cadogan pithily summarised the meeting's collective view of the Soviet proposals:

'Didn't last long - all agreed to turn them down'.²

Although the Foreign Policy Committee had examined the issue in some detail, its decision was submitted to the Cabinet before implementation.³ Naturally the Cabinet 'expressed general approval of the policy vis-à-vis Soviet Russia', since the ministers who now were given their chance to keep in touch with developments, were given a one-sided and necessarily compressed report by Halifax. Together with the circulated copies of selected telegrams and the paper by the Chiefs of Staff, this second-hand report was the only point of access for these ministers to the main issues, and unsurprisingly it did not equip them with

1 The phrase was Chamberlain's in the FPC of 25 April, FP(36)44, CAB 27/624. The Guarantees given to Greece and Roumania on 13 April were probably still preoccupying the Prime Minister.

2 Dilks, pp.176-7.

3 CAB 23/99, CM 24(39), 26 April, 1939.

sufficient expertise to stimulate an interest in continuing the debate. Accordingly Halifax was able to dispatch a telegram to Sir Eric Phipps in Paris on 28 April which definitely rejected the Litvinov proposals and their later French expression.¹

While the full Cabinet had only fulfilled the function of formal authorisation its off-spring body had fully participated in the making of this decision. And as is explained below, as an institution the F.P.C. was far nearer to representing Cabinet participation throughout these negotiations than it was to being a vehicle for executive elitism.² Its importance, and that of the larger Cabinet, becomes even clearer when we look at the next important stage in the evolution of attitudes towards the Soviet Union.

Between 28 April and 24 May, in the third stage of this phase of decision-making, the British government came to accept that an alliance with the USSR might after all be necessary. This considerable volte-face, (in both the short-term and the longest perspectives of British history), was only achieved by the purgative of constant internal dispute. By the time the Cabinet agreed on 24 May to authorise the conclusion of a mutual guarantee arrangement, there had taken place the conversion of a majority of ministers in the FPC and the Cabinet, from opposition or ambivalence to positive agreement. Chamberlain and Halifax

1 DBFP III:5: Halifax to Phipps, pp.358-9.

2 See pp.128-35 below. To some extent the FPC resembled here the 'partial Cabinet' which P. Gordon Walker in The Cabinet, pp.87-91 describes as a major vehicle of Cabinet control. Unfortunately, we do not yet know enough about post-war Cabinet Committees to bear out the generalisation.

themselves had come from the distaste and disapproval we have already noted to a reluctant acquiescence in the negotiation of an alliance. The course of this development is in essence straightforward, and represents on the surface a classic case of policy-making through argument and counter-argument. In the process of regular and prolonged discussion in both Cabinet and Committee, that minority which advocated the step from the beginning gradually recruited more and more ministers to their group, with every new addition disproportionately increasing the pressure on those still unconverted to change sides, as the numerical balance of the debate was automatically altered.

But why in the first place should sufficient ministers have become converted to the desirability of a Soviet alliance, after it had twice been rejected? How was it that Chamberlain and Halifax, the last to change their minds, but the weightiest foreign policy ministers of all, could not together prevent the drift towards an alliance, or in the final analysis, simply hold out against implementing such a reversal of their policy?¹ To some extent the reasons are clearly to be found in the changing nature of external circumstances. The refusal of the USSR to countenance anything less than a full alliance, and their consequent rejection of all Britain's compromise formulae which involved unilateral Soviet declarations or possible political and military consultations, faced the Government with a direct and narrow choice between, as Cadogan noted on 19 May:

'...Soviet alliance (or pact of mutual assistance)₂
and breakdown - with all consequences'.

1 Even Halifax's last memorandum on 24 May, seemed to find it easier to list the cons than the pros of the alliance. CP 124(39), in CAB 21/551 (copy).

2 Dilks, p.181.

The 'consequences' of the failure of negotiations were outlined by Chamberlain in explaining his own last-minute change of view. They added up to various putative discouraging effects on European public opinion, at a difficult psychological moment after the conclusion of the German-Italian Pact.¹ The details of these factors, and the reasons why they might have combined to make ministers prefer an alliance to breakdown, are effectively dealt with throughout what follows.² Here it is sufficient to note that while some ministers were distinctly unenthusiastic for a positive pursuit of an alliance, none were willing in the last instance to go so far as rupturing the negotiations once they were compelled to acknowledge that there were no alternative forms of agreement available.

Another new factor to be taken into account was a heightened perception of the possibility of a Russo-German agreement. The Chiefs of Staff, in an Aide-Mémoire which Chatfield read to the FPC on 16 May, stressed that a failure to reach agreement with the USSR would have serious repercussions:

'...in that it would have the immediate effect of encouraging Germany to further acts of aggression and of ultimately throwing the USSR into her arms'.³

Halifax took up the point when he announced his own eventual conversion:

'...so far as he had been able to sift the available information, he thought that the idea of some rapprochement between Germany and Russia was not one which could be altogether disregarded'.

1 CAB 23/99 CM 30(39), 24 May 1939.

2 Ibid; especially CP 124(39) (Also in CAB 24, and CAB 21/551). In Summary, they were: concern for the credibility of the Guarantees policy; French concern; the vulnerability of Turkey, with whom an agreement had just been announced.

3 CAB 27/625, FP(36) 45th Mtg. 16 May 1939. The change in the COS view is difficult to explain unless it is seen as a harking back to their view of 18 March, which had preferred the USSR to Poland as an ally (CAB 53/10, COS 282-3), pace N.Gibbs: Grand Strategy, Vol.1, p.727.

This kind of consideration had rarely been mooted in the discussion of Anglo-Soviet relations before May 1939.¹

The final changed circumstances which might have operated to convince the reluctant of the necessity of an alliance, was the possibility that fewer third parties would be alienated from Britain by such a move than had previously been supposed. On 22-23 May, in response to a British enquiry, the governments of Poland and Roumania had replied in substance that they did not wish to cause difficulties for the conclusion of an Anglo-Soviet alliance.² Halifax certainly interpreted their views as such, telling the Cabinet that the two countries did not object 'provided that such an arrangement was concluded without those Governments respectively being consulted or mentioned in the agreement'.³ Thus any fears which there were for the effects of association with the Soviet Union or the Polish second front, thought of as so crucial by Chamberlain and Halifax, were here partly assuaged.

Yet, by themselves these new facts of external relations fall a good deal short of being a satisfactory explanation of the British Government's altered decision over a Soviet alliance. They do not seem to constitute sufficiently pressing or strongly held motives to change what was in Chamberlain, Halifax and Morrison at least, a deep hostility to the prospect of such an unprecedented commitment. The very way in

1 For one example, see DBFP III:4, Minute by Cadogan, 1 February 1939.

2 DBFP III:5, Kennard to Cadogan, 22 May, pp.636-7; Sir R. Hoare to Cadogan, 23 May, pp.652-3. It is ironic that this conclusion could be elicited after the intractabilities of March. The problem of Soviet troops entering Poland was now dodged, which leads one to suppose that the citation of Polish co-operation was more an expost facto rationalisation than a reason for the change in British policy. Poland and Roumania were not asked for their views until 19 May, by when most Ministers were converted to the alliance. DBFP III:5, Halifax to Kennard and Sir R. Hoare, 19 May 1939, pp.597-8.

3 CAB 23/99 30(39) 24 May 1939.

which they had engineered the prompt rejection of both Soviet and French proposals in April, was an indicator of the depth of their conviction. Moreover the antipathy was based on more serious reasons than simple ideological distrust. Chamberlain had privately recorded his agreement with Beck, for example, that association with the USSR might actually provoke a German attack. The Prime Minister essentially regarded 'Russia':

'...as a very unreliable friend...with an enormous irritative power on others'...'I can't believe that she has the same aims or objects as we have'... and, 'the alliance would₁ definitely be a lining up of opposing blocs'.

This view, that an Anglo-Soviet alliance would accelerate the formation of blocs and coming of war, runs right through Chamberlain's argument and was probably his most serious concern.² W.S. Morrison thought along similar lines, and supported the Prime Minister unwaveringly. On 16 May he expressed their joint outlook concisely. Morrison preferred, he said, a more limited agreement, by which:

'we should run much less risk of getting involved in an ideological war than if we entered₃ into a formal military alliance with Russia'.

Halifax also subscribed to the view that the alliance would actually increase the dangers in Europe. He told the Cabinet that 'a tri-partite pact on the lines proposed, would make war inevitable'.⁴ Such

1 K. Feiling: The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.408, which runs together letters of 9 and 29 April 1939. See Chamberlain NC/18/1/1092-1118. It is clear that whatever the merits of Chamberlain's views on the USSR, he had little understanding of Marxism-Leninism.

2 See, for example, Harvey, p.290, 20 May 1939, and Chamberlain letter of 29 April (see footnote above). Russia was "afraid of Germany and Japan and would be delighted to see other people fight them".

3 CAB 27/625 FP(36) 47th Mtg. 16 May 1939.

4 CAB 23/99 CM 26(39) 3 May 1939; Dilks, pp.181-2.

views were presented too consistently in private meetings to have been rhetoric.

But for whatever specific reasons, the executive and other sympathetic ministers would hardly have worked for an alliance with the USSR of their own volition. The new factors we have noted were just not plausible enough to countervail by themselves the basic hostility shown by both Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary, or even the moderate antagonism of some other ministers. For example, the fears for the effects of the breakdown of negotiations, expressed by Chamberlain on 24 May as the reason for his change of heart, seem no more serious than those he had previously presented about the possible alienation of neutrals by an alliance.¹ On 3 May Halifax had been concerned for the 'unfortunate' effect of an alliance on Portugal, Italy, Japan, and 'large numbers of people in Europe'.² Two days later he had argued against 'changing the whole basis of our policy and risking the alienation of our friends', a theme which Chamberlain took up on 16 May when he insisted that any military advantages of the alliance must be weighed against the political disadvantages - such as damage to Dominion sympathies for British policy.³ It is difficult to

1. In his letter to Hilda Chamberlain of 29 April, Chamberlain referred specifically to the 'Balkan powers'. NC 18/1/1092-1118.

2. CAB 23/99 CM 26(39) 3 May 1939. On 4 May, Halifax told Lord Camrose that the obstacles to an alliance included the effects on Japan, Roumania, Poland, British Roman Catholics, Spain, Italy and Portugal. Cited in M. Gilbert: Winston Churchill, Vol. V, p.1068.

3. CAB 27/625 FP(36) 47th Mtg. 16 May 1939. New Zealand were actually in favour of collaboration with Russia. CAB 21/494, Telegram from Governor-General, 12 May 1939.

see how these arguments could logically have been superseded by the concerns for 'public opinion in Europe' and 'a discouraging effect on France and Turkey' that Chamberlain finally cited as the factors which had convinced him not to allow the breakdown of negotiations.¹ There is no intrinsic justification in the arguments themselves, for Chamberlain's transference of his concern for one amorphous group of countries and peoples to another.

Similarly, the spectre raised for the first time in May, of a Russo-German pact, was hardly taken sufficiently seriously by the opponents of a British alliance with Stalin, to cause their defection to the other side of the debate. From a purely numerical point of view, they made few comments in Cabinet or Committee on the possibility or its significance. Although Hore-Belisha, Zetland, and Chatfield brought up the question at various times and with varying degrees of interest,² the only positive response from the executive was made by Halifax on the day that the Cabinet decided to go for an alliance, and even then he would only say that a Russo-German rapprochement 'was not one which could be altogether disregarded'.³ In fact neither he nor Chamberlain seems to have been convinced either that such a liaison would occur, or that it would be of any great importance. On 5 May Halifax had retorted to Chatfield in the FPC, that Litvinov's dismissal might point more to a policy of closer ties with the West, than to co-operation with Germany. The Foreign Secretary even thought that reports

1 CAB 23/99, 30 (39) 24 May 1939.

2 CAB 23/99, 26(39) 3 May; 28(39) 17 May; and CAB 27/625, FP(36) 47th Mtg. 16 May.

3 CAB 23/99, 30(39) 24 May 1939.

of such an eventuality:

'might be spread by persons who wished¹ to drive us into making a pact with Russia'.

Chamberlain was also dubious. When Hore-Belisha and MacDonald had tentatively raised the 'fantastic' idea of an arrangement between Hitler and Stalin the Prime Minister did not respond sympathetically or with any sense of urgency. He thought that 'no decision was called for at the present time'. Negotiations would continue.² Finally, on 24 May, the argument found no place in the PM's canon of reasons for giving way. In short, it is highly unlikely that anticipation of the Nazi-Soviet Pact was a crucial reason for the switch of attitude by the opponents of a Soviet alliance in May 1939.³

Towards the end of this stage of the discussion, those who were in the process of reluctant conversion, began to sprinkle their argument with the point that 'having gone so far it would be right to make an agreement rather than risk a complete breakdown'.⁴ Halifax himself told Harvey that:

'we had gone so far that the little more would not⁵ make much difference in its effect on Hitler'.

The phrase here italicised was perhaps the most often expressed reason for the change of policy by the participants themselves.⁶ It is to be

1 CAB 27/624 FP(36) 45th Mtg. 5 May; CAB 23/99, 27(39)10 May.

2 CAB 23/99, 26(39), 3 May.

3 As late as 21 May he wrote to his sister that the possibility "is a pretty sinister commentary on Russian reliability", Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1092-1118.

4 CAB 23/99, 30(39) 24 May (my italics). The words are Inskip's interpreting the views of the Dominions.

5 Harvey, p.290, 20 May. (My italics).

6 Other instances can be found in CAB 27/625, (36) 48th Mtg. 19 May (Inskip) and CAB 23/30(39) 24 May (Halifax).

found in their arguments only from the 16 May onwards, since it refers to the Foreign Office draft generally approved by the FPC on that day, which sought to avoid a full alliance by proposing instead to the USSR a set of mutual declarations - this virtually equalled an alliance.¹ It was a natural debating point to make for those who had been convinced from the outset of the utility of an alliance with the Soviet Union. However, as an explanation for the retraction of those who had been implacably opposed to the move, it was circular, begging the question of how it was that the latter had been brought 'so far' in the first place. Up to a point the absolute Soviet refusal to accept anything less than a full alliance explains this retreat from earlier positions, but it does not account for the basic inability of the British executive to take up an equally rigid bargaining position where they were undoubtedly inclined on personal grounds to do so. On the contrary, the British Government continued to slide towards the point where its offer of compromise seemed even to Halifax such a large concession to the Soviet viewpoint that the last small step to complete acquiescence might be taken without further detriment.²

It is necessary therefore, to look beyond the 'objective' factors of a changing external environment, beyond the 'logic' of the issue itself, if we are to explain what was an extraordinary upturning of two formal policy decisions not to conclude a Soviet alliance. At a more fundamental level of explanation is the policy-making process itself.

1 CAB 27/627, FP(36)90, and CAB 27/625 47th Mtg. Only the limited casus foederis (Poland and Roumania) and its nomenclature prevented this arrangement from being an alliance proper.

2 Halifax was converted on or around 20 May. See p. 115 below.

The very persistence of debate for so long inside the Cabinet and FPC was a crucial factor towards altering the decision, in that otherwise the executive would have had the opportunity of not prolonging the approach to Russia immediately their own first proposal (for a unilateral Soviet declaration) had been rejected. In the event the Government came to be faced with an alarming choice of extremes, between an alliance and the public breakdown of what by then had grown to be lengthy and substantial negotiations. Without the pressure from within the Cabinet, itself stimulated by outside arguments¹ and made possible by the open-ended, long-term, character of the issue itself, Chamberlain and Halifax would have been much better placed to follow their own views and to resist the demands which came from the USSR, and even the French.² That they were finally coerced more than convinced into an alliance, reinforces the view that the executive would probably have accepted the failure of the negotiations, if left to themselves. Instead, the combination of foreign actors and internal divisions operated to place the two ministers in a very weak bargaining position in both the international and domestic contexts.

This fact found expression in two chronologically distinct phases of argument in Cabinet circles. Firstly, with the help of the external factors we have touched on, the 'pro-Russians' in the Cabinet were able to convert to their viewpoint those ministers whose lack of strong feelings on the issue had previously led them to follow Chamberlain's

1 The growing clamour for an agreement with the Soviet Union is described by N. Thompson: The Anti-Appeasers, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1971), pp.212-5 and J.F. Naylor: Labour's International Policy: The Labour Party in the 1930s, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp.293-8.

2 See footnote 1, p.95.

lead, but who now were subject to the influence of the constant exposure, and resolute argument, which Hoare, Stanley and MacDonald on occasions, brought to discussions of the Soviet question. Where at other times and on other issues the Cabinet might have witnessed only the monologue of an executive report, there was now more likely to be consistent advocacy by several members of a course of action which the fact of formal negotiations laid clearly before them as an option. The written proposals and counter-proposals, made within the ritualised framework of a bargaining relationship, required less transmission and explanation by the executive before the Committee could grasp their nature, and feasibility, than had other types of problem which demanded more originality and speed of agreement.¹ Whereas the crises of both Munich and March 1939 had involved extreme speed of deliberation, and had been subject to a whole range of different British responses, here the type of policy-decision was defined quite narrowly, as a choice of some point along a scale of Anglo-Soviet agreement which reached from a rupture of negotiations at one end to a full alliance on the other. While more open-ended issues often worked against 'Cabinet government', the rather legalistic nature of the debate about the Soviet negotiations tended to increase the number of accessible points of reference on which ministers could form a relatively sophisticated opinion.

1 The dependence even of individuals on known reference points as aids to understanding, was classically stated by Herbert Simon in Administrative Behaviour: A Study of Decision-Making Processes in Administrative Organisation (3rd Ed.), (New York, The Free Press, 1976), pp.79-109.

Indeed the Hoare faction kept up a constant pressure to alter policy. The FPC meeting of 5 May witnessed a long and rigorous argument between Hoare, Stanley, and MacDonald on the one side, and Chamberlain, Halifax, Morrison, and all other contributors on the other. No ground was given by either, and those in favour of an alliance were clearly in the minority. Nevertheless, the latter's introduction of the possibility of a tripartite 'no separate peace agreement', their refusal to allow the general argument to go by default, and their willingness to prolong discussion, were the key factors in bringing a sense of division, seriousness, and unfinished decision to the Committee.¹ The unmistakable split which now emerged was a relatively rare characteristic of Cabinet argument, and its existence was partly the result of the lengthy policy which enabled the normal cross-pressures of a period of crisis to act more consistently and effectively on the opinions of the individual member of the Committee.

Once disagreement with current policy had been seriously voiced, it seems to have had a multiplier effect, in terms of winning piecemeal concessions and thus pushing the executive ever nearer to the Soviet position, and of gradually attracting support from those ministers otherwise diffident about opposing the Prime Minister, but who were potentially receptive to the case for an agreement with the USSR if it were to be given a lengthy hearing and energetic support. The first breach of a taboo always makes subsequent acts of defiance easier. For instance the meeting of 5 May led to the Committee deciding, in

1 CAB 27/624 FP(36) 45th Mtg. 5 May.

deference to the views of Hoare and his allies, that if the USSR showed itself newly sympathetic to the proposal for a unilateral declaration, then Britain would be willing to reconsider the present hostility to a 'no separate peace' agreement to apply in war-time.¹ A much larger concession followed the further fundamental disputes in the FPC of 16 May. It was agreed in principle that an offer of military conversations be made to the Soviet Union, and that a pact be concluded whereby all ^{three} parties would promise mutual support in the event of their going to war for Poland or Roumania.²

By this time the accession of new supporters to the Hoare-Stanley camp had already begun, which itself exerted extra pressure on Chamberlain and Halifax to compromise. At the Cabinet of 10 May, Burgin had shown signs of detachment from the executive view, by joining with MacDonald to urge that the Foreign Secretary should invite Molotov to continue negotiations at their forth-coming co-incidental meeting in Geneva. Moreover six days later he admitted in the FPC (although a new member) that if negotiations were on the point of breakdown, then he would prefer to conclude an agreement. This was advance warning to the Prime Minister of the effect the prolonged negotiations were having on ministers' willingness to envisage an alliance.³

1 Ibid; This was a considerable commitment, as the argument in the FPC indicates. The difficulty was recognised in DBFP III:5, Halifax-Seeds, 6 May 1939, pp.443-4.

2 Military conversations had the prospect of releasing more information about Soviet armed forces. The COS assessment of 24 April had inevitably been speculative. CAB 27/627, FP(36)82.

3 CAB 23/99 CM 27(39) 10 May 1939; CAB 27/625, (36) 47th Mtg. 16 May.

A more crucial conversion was that of Chatfield and the Chiefs of Staff, again revealed on the 16 May. The unresolved debate had led to the military producing a new aide-memoire in which they now concluded that 'we certainly want something better than the bare neutrality of Russia', and that fear for Spain's friendship should no longer be ranked above the military advantages of a pact with the Soviet Union during the consideration of current policy.¹ Chatfield proceeded to support these views vigorously. Qualitatively, the fact that the professional expertise of the military viewpoint was cast suddenly in favour of a full alliance, together with the apparent conviction with which Chatfield now advocated his new cause, obviously gave considerable new impetus to the arguments which Chamberlain and Halifax were resisting. Numerically, Chatfield's turnabout completed the polarisation of the Committee. It meant that five ministers now still opposed an alliance, (the executive, plus Morrison, Inskip, and probably the taciturn Simon),² as against five who were in favour, (Hoare, Stanley, MacDonald,³ Chatfield, and, in the last instance, Burgin). Moreover it was becoming plain that there was a trend among ministers to change their views on the issue. This forced Chamberlain, who was otherwise unmoved by the reasons for Chatfield's new opinion, to argue from a defensive position. His role was now that of a rearguard resistance to

1 Ibid; Euan Wallace wrote afterwards to Halifax that he had been most struck "by the very definite change of view expressed by the Chiefs of Staff", FO 800/322, H/XXXIII/17, 19 May 1939.

2 Simon is not recorded as having spoken. Even Cadogan was not sure of the Chancellor's view. Dilks, p.181. Simon's memoirs sprint through 1939 in less than 5 pages. Viscount Simon: Retrospect, pp.250-4.

3 MacDonald was temporarily absent at this meeting. But he was consistently 'pro-Soviet'.

encroaching, positive, demands from an increasingly coherent and vociferous group of ministers - the reverse of the circumstances obtaining in the formation of the Guarantee policy, where articulate, creative initiatives from the executive found the majority of ministers in a disadvantaged position of passivity, lacking the information and opportunities to form their own positive alternatives.

In its turn, this loss of initiative added to the difficulties from which it sprang, for Chamberlain and Halifax. There could now be no question of suppressing the issue, or ignoring the divisions in the committee, particularly since there was no active additional support for the Prime Minister's view in Cabinet, which might be mobilized if the FPC was divided. Of those ministers in the Cabinet but not the Committee who also had a professional interest in foreign policy, none took up an unqualified position of opposition to the alliance. Zetland was 'impressed' with the difficulties which would accrue from accepting Russian terms, but still agreed 'that we might have to go some way in order to prevent a possible agreement between Russia and Germany'.¹ Kingsley Wood advised that an alliance be of short duration, but actively supported the decision for a pact when made.² Hore-Belisha seems to have made no active contribution on either side, but was close enough to Churchill at this time as to have been pro-alliance.³ Finally even Stanhope, who was opposed to the alliance because of its possibly adverse effects on relations with Spain

1 CAB 23/99 CM 28(37) 17 May 1939.

2 CAB 23/99 CM 30(39) 24 May 1939

3 Churchill himself was in favour of close association with Russia in 1939. Martin Gilbert: Winston Churchill, Vol. V, p.1067.

and Japan, was willing to concede, with regard to what he personally saw as the unlikely event of a Nazi-Soviet agreement, that:

'If however it were a real possibility, then, I feel¹ it would be an over-riding consideration'.

Thus these ministers also failed to display the same refusal to countenance an alliance as Chamberlain. In large part, they took up a mid-way position, lacking root and branch feelings for either cause.

As we have noted already, by the FPC of 16 May the executive was being forced to make concessions of substance. The Cabinet meeting of the following day confirmed that there was now a real degree of self-conscious participation among ministers concerned for an alliance, and a resolve to continue to exert pressure until the arguments had been fully exposed and all possible support had been marshalled. In discussion, the view was expressed that the Cabinet should themselves see the latest COS report which Chatfield had just paraphrased, together with the minutes of the FPC, and the relevant draft telegrams. The opinion was also voiced that only the Cabinet should decide between a full military alliance and the breakdown of negotiations. The Cabinet were beginning to assert themselves as an a factor independent of executive initiative. In consequence Chamberlain accepted these conditions, having little grounds on which to refuse, and stressed that it was his intention that:

'there should be full opportunity for discussion'.²

1 PREM 1/409: Stanhope to Halifax, 19 May 1939. The Prime Minister had a copy of this letter with him for the decisive Cabinet of 24 May.

2 CAB 23/99 CM 28(39) 17 May. That Chamberlain was to be held to this commitment is indicated by The Minister of Transport's smooth reminder to Halifax on 19 May. FO 800/322; H/XXXIII/17.

In this way, as the Prime Minister encountered substantial informed and self-confident opposition, his style of positive leadership, which had flourished in other circumstances, with its clear opinions and recommendations, increasingly dissolved. The next FPC meeting was not opened by Halifax or Chamberlain making their usual statement of assessment and direct advocacy of the line which ministers ought to take. Instead, the Prime Minister said that he thought it necessary for the Committee to decide on the next step. Caught between his persistent distaste for an alliance, and an increasing realisation that dissentient colleagues would not allow the question to be dropped, Chamberlain found himself forced to allow the debate to take its full and natural course.

It was at this meeting on 19 May, that two more antagonists of the alliance policy gave indications of their increasing sympathy for the arguments of Hoare and company. Sir Thomas Inskip considered that Hitler would not be likely to draw any distinction in his reactions between an Anglo-Soviet alliance, and a lesser agreement. The obvious implication was that if Hitler would be alienated by any kind of pact, then Britain might as well benefit from the security of a full alliance. Cadogan's diary confirms this change in Inskip's opinion, as the Dominions Secretary is included in the list given in the entry for 19 May, of ministers in favour of a triple alliance.¹ Moreover the Committee's minutes record that while Chamberlain reacted strongly against Inskip's remark, Simon expressed agreement with it. Cadogan

1 CAB 27/625, (36) 48th Mtg. 19 May; Dilks, p.181.

placed a question mark by Simon's inclusion in his list of ministers still hostile to an alliance, so that it must have been clear that the Chancellor of the Exchequer was also moving away from implacable opposition to the Hoare-Stanley view. In simple terms of the number of sympathisers, the latter now dominated the Foreign Policy Committee. They held a majority of six to three, with Simon's position uncertain. Only Morrison still shared the views of Chamberlain and Halifax, and he was no heavy-weight in Cabinet.¹

This situation precipitated the second chronological phase of debate between 19-24 May, a period of only five days in which the resistance of the three die-hard opponents of an alliance quickly disintegrated under the sheer pressure of having demonstrably lost their support and been placed irrevocably in the minority position. Thus this second phase consisted essentially in the coercion of the core opponents of an alliance, whereas the first had been characterised by the persuasion of the relatively uncommitted through the opening up and prolongation of the debate. The rigorous initial arguments had allowed a coherent group to form in Cabinet around an opinion that for once had not been introduced or advocated by the executive. Chamberlain perhaps tacitly admitted his loss of support on 19 May when he told the Committee that a decision must be reserved for the Cabinet. Had the FPC been in agreement with him, the Prime Minister might not have been so concerned for constitutional propriety. But Halifax was

1 In 1939 W.S. Morrison's political career had entered a trough from which it was not to emerge. Maurice Cowling: The Impact of Hitler, pp.318-20.

the first to decide that it was no longer possible to hold out against an alliance. As late as the 19th he had expressed:

'...the strongest possible distaste for a policy which meant¹ our acquiescence in Soviet blackmail and bluff'.

Yet this very outburst may have derived from a sense that the policy distasteful to him was now inevitable. On 18 May he had written to Chamberlain about the latest Foreign Office draft, to which he reluctantly subscribed:

'This, you will observe, gives the Russians what they want, though an attempt is made to dress it up with some appearance of conformity with² the policy we have hitherto been pursuing'.

The following day Halifax developed the point to his Private Secretary en route for Geneva:

'He himself took the view that we had gone so far that the little more would³ not make much difference in its effect on Hitler'.

Cadogan also noticed Halifax's change of mind. On the 19 May he had noted the Foreign Secretary's continuing opposition to a Soviet agreement. But on the 20th he recorded, à propos an alliance:

'I am, on balance, in favour of it. So, I think is H.'⁴

This is the background to Halifax's announcement in Cabinet on 24 May, that he had finally come to accept the necessity of an alliance. The conversion was sufficiently rapid and unheralded to suggest that the

1 CAB 27/625 (36) 48th Mtg. 19 May.

2 PREM 1/409, Halifax to Chamberlain, 18 May 1939.

3 Harvey, p.290.

4 Dilks, pp.181-2.

Foreign Secretary had been more impressed by his loss of support in Cabinet, than by a sudden appreciation of the arguments themselves. The tone of his remarks did not suggest enthusiasm.

It is certainly clear that the Prime Minister was constrained into acquiescence. Halifax told Harvey that Chamberlain was 'very reluctant to agree to full tripartite alliance', and Cadogan wrote that 'P.M. hates it'...and 'In his present mood PM says he will resign rather than sign alliance with Soviet'. Even on 23 May, Halifax was 'still doubtful whether the PM will agree at Cabinet tomorrow'. Yet in the event Chamberlain found it 'impossible to stand out against the conclusion of an agreement', and the Cabinet took a formal decision to pursue an alliance.¹ Both he and Halifax gave various reasons of policy for their change of view. As we have seen above, however, the arguments given hardly provide a satisfactory explanation of this major reversal of policy.² The timetable of the changing balance of argument in Cabinet and Committee, together with the relatively trivial nature of such new factors which had impinged on the situation, make it clear that the primary cause of the success of the 'pro-Russians' in winning over the moderates, and compelling the executive to relinquish their strongly-held opinions, was the degree and intensity of Cabinet argument. The high level of ministerial participation in this debate, itself deriving from the nature of the problem under analysis, largely prevented the executive from transposing their own preferences into policy-outcomes. The logical merits of the case were allowed full exposure, which is by no means always the case in policy-making, for

1 Harvey, pp.290-1, 20 and 23 May; Dilks, pp.181-2, 19-20 May; CAB 23/99, CM 30(39) 24 May 1939.

2 Supra, pp.100-8.

reasons of time, partiality, psychology and the like. This in its turn made possible (but not, of course, inevitable) the growth of dissent in Cabinet, which finally proved irresistible. That the reasons given by Halifax and Chamberlain for accepting an alliance were indeed rationalisations of other pressures, is aptly summed up in Cadogan's description - 'PM apparently resigned to idea of Soviet alliance, but depressed'.¹

As a post-script, one may perhaps speculate on the consequences if Chamberlain had continued to hold out against an alliance and had threatened the Cabinet with the resignation which he seemed willing to contemplate on 20 May. It is possible that such a determinedly autocratic strategy would have succeeded in preventing the change in policy, and thus accorded a degree of negative power to the Prime Minister, in that his Cabinet might have ranked their desire for a particular decision below the damaging effects to the Government of such a resignation in a period of general crisis. But this hypothesis runs into two damaging ripostes. The first is that Prime Ministers are unlikely to be so completely unaffected by the solidarity of their colleagues, (and the defection of their Foreign Secretary), as to wish to incur hostility and distrust for the sake of a single policy-preference or a demonstration of ultimate authority over their Cabinets. Secondly, as it happened, Chamberlain was forced to concede the argument, and did not feel able to threaten the Cabinet with the blackmail of resignation.² There was no occasion on which the Prime Minister boldly confronted ministers, who were after all intimate acquaintances whose good-will was essential to the harmonious running of the vast govern-

1 Dilks, p.184, 24 May.

2 There is no mention of the possibility in the Chamberlain letters.

mental process, with considerations of rank. In any event, it is not impossible that the Cabinet might have accepted a proffered resignation. Speculation cuts both ways.

The last stage of policy-making towards the Soviet Union in 1939 - the negotiations for the alliance itself, running from 24.5-22.8.39 - is difficult to analyse in terms of tracing influence and participation through the various stages of bargaining.¹ The process was so prolonged, and the issues so complicated, that it is impossible to disentangle the proposals which the FPC knew about and wanted, from those they did not, let alone to assess the degrees of importance of each twist and turn of the negotiations. The same questions can be answered in a much shorter way, by a general and semi-statistical appreciation of the overall regularity and business of Foreign Policy Committee meetings in the months of the Soviet issue, particularly in comparison to the preceding period.

Between the date of the first FPC meeting after Munich (14 November), and the outbreak of war on 3 September 1939, the Committee's business fell, broadly speaking, into five main divisions, both of chronology and subject-matter.

1. 14.11-6.12.38: three meetings on the general state of Anglo-German relations, and the future of Czechoslovakia after Munich.
2. 23.1.-8.2.39: three meetings to consider new information that a German attack on the Low Countries might be imminent, and to formulate an attitude to such action.

1 N. Gibbs: Grand Strategy, Vol.I, pp.737-57, provides a historical

3. 27.3.-31.3.39: three meetings near the end of the making of the Polish Guarantee policy, mainly concerned with the accelerated announcement of that policy.
4. 10-11.4.39: two meetings in which a reaction to the Italian move against Albania was discussed, together with the further guarantees to Greece and Turkey.
5. 19.4.-1.8.39: eighteen meetings, fourteen of which, (interspersed by occasional meetings on such other subjects as Tientsin, the purchase of Greek tobacco, and Danzig), dealt with the negotiations for a diplomatic agreement with USSR.

Other questions than those above were discussed in the Foreign Policy Committee, but not with the same detail or continuity that characterised the five principal preoccupations.

It will be seen that all of the five topics were of crucial foreign policy importance; it is meaningless to attempt to rank them in terms of the seriousness with which the FPC might have regarded each issue, and correspondingly allocated their time. A more obvious and real distinction may be made between the degrees of physical attention paid by the Committee to the various questions. While the subjects of the first four divisions all occupied two or three meetings, the Anglo-Soviet negotiations took up fourteen, or nearly half the total of thirty meetings in this whole period. This was three more than the other four issues, of equal a priori importance, added together. Clearly at one level this was simply due to the fact that the Anglo-Soviet negotiations took longer to conclude than policy on the previous issues, none of which in the event required long-term discussion. But this

very fact begs two related questions about the reasons for certain subjects involving prolonged consideration and not others, and about the implications of such variations for the degree of Cabinet participation in policy-making.

The primary variable is the nature of the problem. In general terms the formulation of a response to a transient rumour will inevitably take less time than the resolution of complicated negotiations. More specifically, each type tends to favour one group of policy-makers more than the others, who are subsequently dependent for the degree of their participation on the attitude of the group initially advantaged. For example, the Cabinet and their committees have a greater chance of involvement in policy-making where the alternatives are clearly defined than where ingenuity is required, in situations of confusion and low information. However, there is wide scope for variation in specific instances. While the invasion of Prague did throw the onus of activity onto the executive, it need not inevitably have led Halifax and Chamberlain to devise the form of response that they did, with its stress on immediacy and intricate diplomacy, and its effective exclusion of the Cabinet. It is not implausible that, perhaps through lack of a clear personal preference, they could have decided to re-adjust British policy in a more long-term and less dramatic form, by the gradual forging of a new stance through the medium of Cabinet discussion. Similarly, although a refocussing of general attitudes without any special urgency, might tend to involve the Cabinet, so as to ensure basic consensus and full knowledge of the specific implications of these attitudes,¹ it is equally possible that most ministers would not have

1 As was the case with the reply to Hitler's peace offer of 6 October 1939, three drafts of which were considered by the War Cabinet (at the time resembling the FPC in size), CAB 65/1: CMs 39-45(39), 6-12 October 1939.

strong or informed views and would be content to follow the initiatives of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary.

In other words, while the proportion of time expended, and the degree of Cabinet involvement both depend initially on the objective nature of the particular issue - its newness, amenability to discussion and degree of urgency¹ - they are also strongly affected by the ways in which the actors in the policy-making process take the opportunities for influence and involvement presented to them at the outset by the type of question under consideration. The length of a problem's continuing salience, and the level of Cabinet participation, is therefore ultimately determined by interaction between the type of issue, and the views of those ministers whose activity it initially favours.

As far as the Anglo-Soviet negotiations are concerned, this means that the large number of FPC discussions on the subject were the consequence of the Committee having capitalised on the opportunity of participation which the Soviet proposals for a formal and complicated alliance presented to them. Without the positive reaction which this inspired within the Committee, and the history of Cabinet concern over the USSR in late March, it is likely that the alliance would have been ruled out completely and that the negotiations would have been considerably cut short. The 14 meetings on Soviet relations, therefore, indicate genuine participation in policy-making by the FPC and are not simply a measure of an inevitably prolix discussion.

1 These indicators are not unlike those used by Charles Hermann to define crisis; C.Hermann: Crisis in Foreign Policy (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill, 1969), pp.21-36.

Other types of evidence support this observation. Figure 1 for instance, showing Ministers present at the FPC, shows a marked contrast between the months before and after the date of 19.4.39, when the Soviet problem first came to dominate discussion. For the meetings of the first four issue-divisions, the number of ministers attending was, in sequence; 8,9,8,6,9,9,8,8,8,8,8; - or an average of 8.1 per meeting. However, for those meetings concerned with the USSR, the figures were: 8,6,9,9,10,11,11,10,11,10,11,10,10,12; - or an average of 9.9 per meeting.¹ Both these sets have regular lines of figures, suggesting a definite shift in behaviour for basic reasons which operated consistently over time. Thus the statistics clearly indicate that for the period in which the Anglo-Soviet negotiations were the principal diet of the FPC, it was consistently attended by nearly two more ministers than had previously participated. Insofar as this increase can be attributed to specific new appointments to the Committee, rather than to temporary and occasional factors, it was due to the appearances of Morrison, Chatfield and Burgin, all of whom were responsible for aspects of planning for an imminent war. There are various factors which complicate these figures, such as the data of the appointments of Chatfield and Morrison, and the long absence abroad of Walter Runciman. Runciman's absence reduces the numerical increase in ministerial membership of the Committee, but only by 0.1 to 1.7. The appointment of Chatfield and Morrison accounts for a further 0.8,² but the remainder (i.e. 0.9) has to be explained by the arrival of Burgin on 10 May.

There is no firm evidence as to why Burgin was added to the

1 The average attendance for the other 5 interspersed meetings was 10.6.

2 For the basis of these and other calculations used in this section see Appendix I at the end of this thesis.

already large FPC, when his background in transport matters, and his already evident difference of emphasis from Chamberlain over the USSR,¹ did not make him an obvious candidate. It is a plausible explanation, to put it at the lowest, that the FPC was already recognised as an important forum of debate and that the issue of the Soviet negotiations could not be dealt with without extensive ministerial participation. Certainly the rate of general absenteeism (i.e. occasional non-attendance, as opposed to the overall ministerial attendance at the Committee, which has been the measure employed so far), dropped by nearly half once discussions of Soviet relations had begun, from 10.5% to 6.2%. One should not hang too much on small figures, but it is fairly clear that not only were more ministers members of the FPC for the discussions on the USSR, but also both new and existing members showed less inclination to miss the odd meeting, for whatever reason, than before. The Committee's business came to seem a higher priority. This in its turn seems best explained on the basis that ministers were more interested, concerned and actively involved in the debate over the Anglo-Soviet negotiations, than they had been with the equally vital issues of foreign policy that had come before the Committee during the previous six months. That on average four officials were present to service the Committee in this later period, compared with the three who attended up to 19 April 1939 is a further significant fact in favour of the hypothesis, since it indicates that the proceedings of the Committee were being taken with a greater seriousness and in more detail. The growing involvement of ministers in the highly complex negotiations meant a greater demand for the kind of specialist advice and information which officials like Sir William

¹ Burgin had shown himself concerned to keep the negotiations with the USSR going on 10 May in Cabinet. (The same day as he first attended the FPC). CAB 23/99 CM 27(39).

Malkin could provide, as well as for more liaison with the rest of the policy-making process.¹

Finally, the frequency with which meetings of the FPC were held once the Soviet issue became the major preoccupation, also suggests that the Cabinet Committee played a particularly important role in developing British policy on the issue. If we take the terminal dates as being 14 November 1938, and 3 September 1939, we find that the average time between meetings for the two periods, was as follows:

1. 1 October - 18 April: 11 meetings in 200 days, or one every
18.2 days.
2. 19 April - 3 September: 19 meetings in 137 days, or one every
7.2 days.

Thus there is a striking contrast between the regularity with which meetings were held in the two periods under scrutiny. For the first the Committee met once a fortnight - for the second, once a week. This is too sharp a change to be dismissed as the result of factors unconnected with the type of subject under discussion, like administrative convenience, or an increasing general desire among ministers to be in touch with foreign politics. Even the increasing importance of foreign policy in the second period is balanced by its inclusion of the summer vacation. Added to previous data about attendance, it strongly suggests that from April 1939 onwards, the FPC increased markedly the degree of its participation in policy-making, at least on the specific subject of

¹ Malkin was Legal Adviser in the Foreign Office. 'Officials' here also includes R.A. Butler (see footnote 1, p. 94 above) who provided more liaison with both the F.O. and the House of Commons. The exact figures of attendance were 2.7 for the period 14 November 1938- 11 April 1939, and 3.8 for the meetings of the Soviet negotiations.

the Soviet negotiations. It spent more time on the question than it had on others, ministers were sufficiently anxious about the outcome of the debate to attend with greater regularity, the need was felt to add formally another minister to the Committee, and lastly there were no long gaps between meetings which might have broken the continuity of the discussion or reduced the level of knowledge of ministers about the intricate daily developments of the negotiations. More importantly, and as was argued above for the months of April and May, the evidence of the quality of the discussion inside the Committee, confirms these statistical indications of the central role played by the Cabinet in formulating policy during the Soviet negotiations.

Throughout June and July, the structure of the problem at stake continued to facilitate ministerial contributions. The negotiations involved complicated choices between detailed proposals with their origins in external sources. After the first timid request to the Soviet Union for a unilateral declaration of help to Eastern Europe, British policy was always essentially reactive, in the sense that it consisted largely of a series of progressive concessions - beginning with the gradual acceptance of the initial Soviet proposal for a full triple alliance, and continuing with regular if reluctant decisions to acquiesce in extra demands made by the Soviet Union, as the latter either sensed British negotiating weakness, or came to abandon their own desire for an alliance, or both.¹ These external inputs came

1 This picture is confirmed by the contemporary impression of Lt.Gen. Henry Pownall in the War Office. On 17 July he wrote: "As soon as our people give way on one point the Russians produce a brand new obstacle which they say is essential or the deal's off. Some six times have they played this trick, and we give way to each in succession". Chief of Staff: The Diaries of Lieutenant-General Sir Henry Pownall, Vol.1. 1933-40. Edited by Brian Bond, (London, Leo Cooper, 1972), p.214.

to the Committee as already thought out and coherent ideas requiring no strictly original action.¹ This provided a body of common and concrete information which encouraged detailed discussion. For just as Committees are not ideal bodies for the forging of collective imagination, so it is a function more suited to their operations to argue over the logical and substantial differences between various sets of formal proposals, which are clear to all members and can be dealt with section by section. It is here, perhaps, that Cabinet decision-making in 1939 came closest to the 'rational' procedures of selecting by argument between organised and clearly separate alternatives, which writers on international relations tend to assume characterise the workings of government in foreign policy issues.²

The formal negotiations also maximised the participation of individual members of the Committee, since it was easier to take part by making some negative analysis of written suggestions, than by advocating a particular proposal without any special expertise on foreign policy. Ministers had not been excluded from the first stage of policy-formulation, (conception); neither then nor in the long-drawn out manoeuvres of June-July were they excessively inhibited by the usual pressures against criticising or dismissing ideas brought forward solely by their own Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. In this instance all members of the Committee, including the executive, were considering the Soviet initiatives,² on equal terms and at virtually the same time.

1 This is not to say, with Lord Eustace Percy that "no Cabinet, large or small, can ever originate policy" (cited in J. Mackintosh The British Cabinet (2nd Ed.) p.416), merely that Ministerial participation was made easier by the negative task required.

2 G.Allison: Essence of Decision, pp.10-38, demonstrates the ubiquity of such assumptions.

There was little scope for pre-emption of the response, or for advance weightings of the issue, by Halifax and Chamberlain. Once the FPC had been introduced to the Anglo-Soviet negotiations, they quickly became intricately involved in the issue. Even if the executive found this a matter for regret, there was little they could do to reverse the process, once set in motion.

To do Chamberlain and Halifax justice, however, it is quite likely that they were themselves sufficiently uncertain about the correct judgements to be made in those extremely complex and crucial negotiations, as to find relief in the full involvement of the FPC, if only to spread the responsibility more widely. The negotiations consisted of a continuous chain of so many equal and interlocking sub-decisions, which would only amount to a major stance of foreign policy by a process of accumulation, that they militated against Chamberlain and Halifax forming any obvious single attitude which might provide a dominant lead for the Committee and give clear pointers to the proper response for each individual proposal. A good example of this is Cadogan's remark to the FPC on 19 April, that Halifax was too busy as yet to investigate the new Soviet proposals in detail, 'still less to formulate a line of policy'.¹ If the Foreign Secretary could not fashion a clear attitude to the major initiative of 18 April, it was hardly likely that he would be able to do so for the more complicated demands yet to come. The fact that the executive had been initially forced into agreeing that negotiations should go ahead, together with the objective factor of a

¹ CAB 27/624 FP(36) 43rd Mtg. 19 April 1939.

real confusion about the political and strategical pros and cons of a detailed agreement with the Soviet Union, must have been further inhibitions against their forming a confident opinion, and must therefore have worked in favour of the issue going to the Cabinet, in the form here of the FPC, for the multiple decisions which arose. In the event, the FPC and Cabinet grappled endlessly with such questions as staff talks, or the definition of indirect aggression, pulled between a grudging desire for an alliance and distrust of the Soviet Union. Each small decision involved lengthy agonisings in which extensive Ministerial participation, and a lack of direction in overall policy, unfortunately went hand in hand.

At this point it may be useful to say something about the general characteristics of the FPC in 1939, for since it is commonly argued that the Committee was essentially the creature of the Prime Minister,¹ its apparent participation in policy-making might be thought to throw in even sharper relief the autocracy of Chamberlain's Premiership; by taking issues out of the forum of the genuine Cabinet into a smaller group, the Prime Minister could in theory easily manipulate them. The close look we have taken at the actual proceedings of the Committee during a two month span shows without doubt that on one issue at least the very reverse was the truth. An analysis of the composition of the Committee further indicates, prima facie, that it would have been very difficult to use it as a mere vehicle for Prime Ministerial government, and that arguments which suggest that Chamberlain altered the membership of the Committee at will to suit his particular needs for support, are at best inaccurate, and derive largely from the assumption that the Prime Minister's theoretical powers were automatically extended to the full in

1 For example Keith Middlemas: Diplomacy of Illusion, p.61.

practice.

The 'inner Cabinet' hypothesis, as the argument may be termed, certainly has little numerical basis. The Cabinet consisted of 23 ministers almost throughout the Munich-September 1939 period, during which time an average of 9.4 ministers attended the Foreign Policy Committee, or 40.9% of the Cabinet. Such a high figure hardly indicates that the business of the Committee was monopolised by the Prime Minister and a handful of sympathetic associates, leaving most of the Cabinet in ignorance and without access to the discussion of major foreign issues. Moreover the Committee's personnel included all the Cabinet's senior ministers, in terms of their political status and the degree of importance of their departments, as well as the great majority of those ministers likely to take a particular interest in foreign policy. The eleven regular attenders¹ were the Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Home Secretary, the Dominions Secretary, the Minister for the Co-Ordination of Defence, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the President of the Board of Trade, the Lord President of the Council, the Secretary for the Colonies, and the Minister of Supply; - of whom only the Home Secretary and the two non-departmental ministers could be said not to have an important responsibility relating to foreign policy. Of these three, Hoare was a former Foreign Secretary, Runciman had recently headed the major mission to Czechoslovakia during the September crisis, and Morrison had a special responsibility for

1 'Regular attenders' were those present at 50% or more of meetings.

Defence matters.¹ Thus the members of the FPC were unlikely to act as fodder for the Prime Minister's initiatives; rather, they were virtually all ministers with important departmental interests to protect in foreign policy outcomes,² some of them carrying sufficient weight as individual politicians (Hoare, Stanley, Simon, Runciman) to command a very serious hearing in the Committee, whether or not they agreed with the Prime Minister. Conversely, of those ministers who took little or no part in the FPC, only the Secretary of State for India and the three Service ministers had any more specialised concerns in the foreign policy issues of 1939 than those which all shared, of avoiding war or damage to British security. In fact, as the Service ministers were represented on the Committee by Chatfield, only Lord Zetland of the ministers intimately affected by its deliberations, can truly be said to have been excluded from access to the Committee. Furthermore, the 'non-attenders' - encompassing both those who never attended the Committee, and those who did, but infrequently, - included not a single minister who enjoyed the contemporary status of being or having been at some time, a holder of one of the three most prestigious offices in the Cabinet; that is, of Prime Minister, Foreign Secretary, or Chancellor of the Exchequer. This lack of any figure of stature contrasts with the total of four such personages among those who were members of the Committee.

1 Morrison was appointed to help Chatfield and answer for him in the Commons. He was also "available to assist with general Parliamentary and other business". Keesings Archives, 28 Jan 1939, 3421G.

2 That this was an important consideration is shown by a memorandum sent by Cabinet Secretary Sir Edward Bridges to Chamberlain on 4 July 1939: "As an after thought, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster should also be appointed to the Defence of India Committee. It is a sticky business, and most of the members have strong departmental interests to protect". CAB 21/481.

It only remains to deal briefly with the argument that the Prime Minister both could and did alter the balance of personnel in the Committee according to the outcome he required at the time. If one looks at the attendance records over the 30 meetings which took place during this period, (Figure 2), one is struck, in contrast, mainly by the regular patterns which they illustrate. Chamberlain and Inskip were ever-present; Halifax, Hoare, Simon and Stanley all missed no more than three; Chatfield¹ and Morrison each missed six, but five of these were due to the fact that they were not appointed until 29 January 1939; Runciman only attended 17, but was absent on a tour of the Dominions for at least eleven of those he missed.² Anderson, the three Service ministers, and Ernest Brown, were all called in only to attend one or two sessions in each case to provide strictly technical information. They were not called in to bolster Chamberlain at crucial stages of argument over policy;³ Burgin attended all the sixteen meetings held after his appointment on 10 May 1939; MacDonald however was absent for one third of the meetings. This was the entire total of ministers attending the Foreign Policy Committee from Munich until war - 16. It leaves MacDonald as the only irregular attender whose absences might be explained by Prime Ministerial encouragement to be present at some meetings more than others. Such reasoning, however, would not be able to explain the fact that MacDonald missed six consecutive meetings

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- 1 Chatfield had to be at the FPC, as Minister of Co-ordination of Defence. Inskip remained as Dominions Secretary with MacDonald as the latter had previously combined both Dominions and Colonial offices. Supplementary data from D. Butler and J. Freeman: British Political Facts 1900-68, (London, MacMillan, 1969). Inskip was moved because his position 'in the country' had 'gone back'. See Inskip Papers, Diary II, pp.4-5, 16 Jan 1939.
 - 2 Runciman Papers, R3/32/1-4: Reports from Privy Council Office, 3 April-2 May 1939.
 - 3 CAB 27/624-5; FP(36) 33rd, 36th, 51st and 60th Mtgs.

between 26 January and 19 April, returning to regular attendance precisely on the first discussion of the Soviet proposals, for which he did not disguise his full support. From Chamberlain's viewpoint, if he did wish to manipulate the Committee to ensure the success of his own preferences, MacDonald's return came at the worst possible moment. The clear general conclusion, therefore, is that Chamberlain either could not, or did not wish to, control the day-to-day balance of views and personnel in the Foreign Policy Committee.

There remains the possibility that Chamberlain organised the permanent membership of the Committee to ensure a built-in degree of sympathy for executive thinking. As Ministers without departmental interests in foreign policy, Hoare and Morrison are the only possible examples of this. So far as Hoare was concerned, if this was the motive, it was a severe misjudgement, since the Home Secretary in fact led the opposition to the Prime Minister over the Soviet issue to decisive effect. In any case, Hoare was a senior minister whose exclusion from this major committee after long-time membership would have been an obvious affront. Morrison therefore stands as the sole plausible example of executive nepotism; - and the available evidence only hints at this being the reason for his appointment. As Sir Horace Wilson wrote to the Secretary of the Cabinet on 3 February:

'...apart from any other reason, this is an essential move in connection₁ with his position in relation to defence'.

1 Sir Horace Wilson to Sir Edward Bridges, 3 Feb. 1939, CAB 21/481.

Thus even here, the departmental balance of the Committee was an important constraint on the Prime Minister's ability to load the balance of opinion. Although Chamberlain may well have been influenced in replacing Winterton with Morrison by the greater degree of sympathy shown by the latter to his own views, there were natural limits to the extent that he could replace all dissentient ministers in this way, while it would have been equally absurd to pack the FPC with associates who held office largely irrelevant to foreign affairs, such as Labour or Education. The political requirements of stability and confidence among organisations and personnel meant that the abstract shuffling of appointments, which in models of competitive power-maximisation would be the natural activity of an executive, was not part of the Prime Minister's normal style of policy-making. This was partly because the routines of balanced representation and continuity of attendance in the FPC were, among others, institutionalised in the form of the Cabinet Secretariat.¹ In 1938, for example, Sir Rupert Howorth and Sir Maurice Hankey had agreed that 'there seems no good reason' for adding the Lord Privy Seal to any more Cabinet committees, let alone to the FPC, which already had nine members, of which two were peers.² And in the event, neither Earl De La Warr, nor his successor, Sir John Anderson, appeared on the Committee. The appointment of ministers to these bodies seems to have been the joint product of organisational constraints, Ministerial prerogative, and the institutional norms and routines of the Cabinet office. Chamberlain's ability to manipulate permanent membership was therefore strictly limited.

1 See S.W. Wilson: The Cabinet Office to 1945, pp.13-14, 57-8, and Capt'n. S. Roskill: Hankey: Man of Secrets, Vol.III, 1931-63, p.373.

2 Sir Rupert Howorth to Sir Maurice Hankey, 30 May 1938; CAB 21/481.

All the above findings tend to indicate that the FPC was a genuine forum of Cabinet discussion. Indeed, it may have exhibited a slightly higher level of ministerial involvement than the Cabinet itself, as most of the ministers whose lack of experience and vested interest in such questions might have led them to defer to the authority, knowledge, and strong leadership of the executive, were not in fact members of the Committee. All the professionally interested ministers were thus brought together in a specialised environment, unfettered by the psychological constraints against dissent which may have been present in the full Cabinet through its size, and the pressure on time imposed by the amount and variety of business.¹ An example from the summer negotiations show that the executive recognised the fact. For when, on 6 July, Chamberlain and Halifax wished to amend the mere procedure of British proposals to the Soviet Union on the issue of 'indirect aggression', the Foreign Secretary felt it necessary to hold back the relevant telegram until he had obtained the views of all other members of the Committee, either in person or by individual letter. He wished to give his colleagues no cause for complaint about either method or policy.²

In this context the executive clearly did not feel as unfettered in the exercise of its discretion as some writers have suggested. Indeed, the sum of the qualitative evidence of actual discussions and policies, with the data about patterns of attendance and composition,

1 It is worth noting that this runs contrary to the tendencies noted by I. Janis in Victims of Group Think, pp.197-202.

2 Involvement in the Soviet negotiations seems to have educated Ministers to make contributions on other issues, Runciman wrote weightily to Chamberlain about both Tientsin and Italy, even threatening resignation on the former. Runciman Papers, R3/38/1-55, Runciman to Chamberlain, 19 June 1939; R2/42/1-27; Runciman to Halifax and Chamberlain, 29 June 1939.

leads us to conclude at the least, that the Foreign Policy Committee was not a means by which Chamberlain by-passed the Cabinet; rather it was a Cabinet for foreign affairs, subject to the same strengths and weaknesses as its parent body.¹

The case of the Anglo-Soviet negotiations has provided a good example of collective activity in the making of high-level decisions, characterised by constant interaction within the group of ministers concerned, and by a lack of leadership-domination. It has also shown that the contributions to policy-making of a Cabinet committee, may in certain circumstances be seen as the means by which the full Cabinet can maximise its own participation in a particular issue. For in the instance we have examined, the FPC was far more representative of the interests of Cabinet Ministers in general, with respect to international relations, than it was a channel for executive hegemony. Thus, on a major issue, in a period of crisis, and involving highly technical diplomacy, we found that the Cabinet was a primary forum of policy-making.

1 Formally of course the FPC was still subject to Cabinet control.

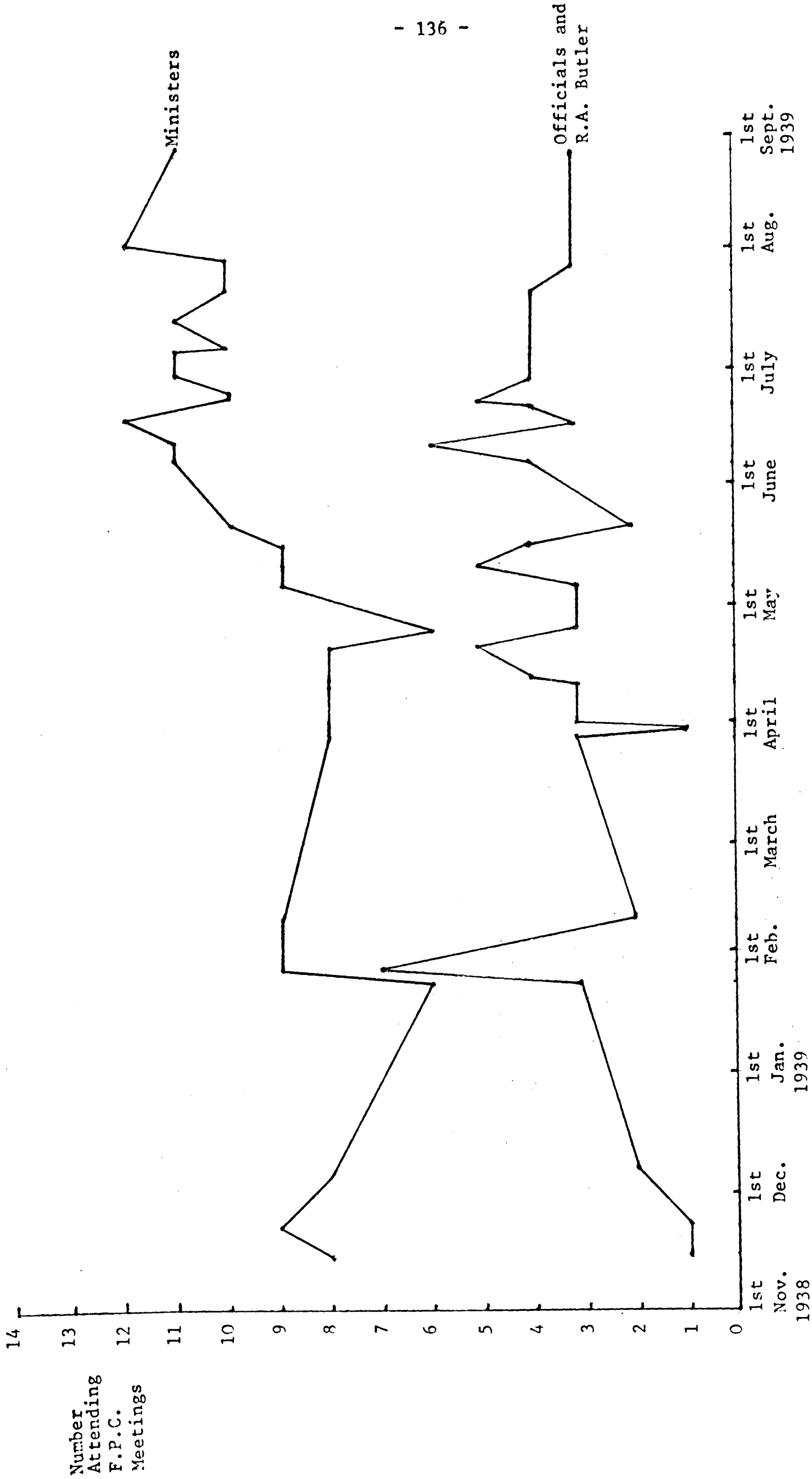


Figure 1: Level of Ministerial and Official Attendance at Meetings of the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet 14th November 1938 - 1st September 1939.

Chamberlain	x x	x	xx	x	xxx	xx	x	x	xxxx	xxx	xx	x	xx	x	x	x	x
Halifax	x x	x	xx	x	xxx	xx	o	x	xxxxx	xxx	xx	x	xx	x	x	x	x
Simon	x x	x	ox	x	xxx	xx	x	o	xxxxx	xxx	xx	x	xx	x	x	x	x
Hoare	x x	x	xo	x	xxx	xx	x	x	xoxxx	xxx	xx	x	xx	x	x	o	x
Inskip	x x	x	xx	x	xxx	xx	x	x	xxxxx	xxx	xx	x	xx	x	x	x	x
Chatfield	o o	o	oo	x	xxx	xx	x	x	xxxxx	xxx	xx	x	xo	x	x	x	x
Morrison	o o	o	oo	x	xxx	xx	x	o	xxxxx	xxx	xx	x	xx	x	x	x	x
Stanley	x x	x	xx	x	xxx	xx	x	o	xxxxx	xxx	xx	x	xx	x	x	x	x
Runciman	x x	x	oo	x	ooo	oo	o	o	oooo	xxx	xx	x	xx	x	x	x	x
MacDonald	x x	x	xx	o	ooo	oo	o	x	xxox	xxx	oo	x	xx	x	o	x	x
Stanhope	o o	o	ox	o	ooo	oo	o	o	oooo	oox	oo	o	oo	o	o	o	o
Kingsley Wood	o o	o	ox	o	ooo	oo	o	o	oooo	ooo	oo	o	oo	o	o	o	o
Hore-Belisha	o o	o	ox	o	ooo	oo	o	o	oooo	ooo	oo	o	oo	o	o	o	o
Burgin	o o	o	oo	o	ooo	oo	o	o	oxxxx	xxx	xx	x	xx	x	x	x	x
Brown	o o	o	oo	o	ooo	oo	o	o	oooo	ooo	oo	o	oo	o	o	o	x

Figure 2: Attendance of Individual Ministers at Meetings of the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet 14th November 1938 - 1st September 1939

x = present
o = absent

(iii) Entry into War, 1-3 September 1939

Another case in which the Cabinet enjoyed more than formal powers over a foreign policy decision was that of entry into the War itself. Yet on the face of it the two days following on from the German invasion of Poland, and leading up to the expiry of the British ultimatum to Hitler constitute a very different type of decision from those which preoccupied Ministers during the Soviet negotiations. Most obviously, the time-span of deliberation was very short at less than 48 hours (and will be treated here with appropriate brevity). In one sense the urgency was self-imposed. Hitler had sent no ultimatum to Chamberlain or Daladier. At bottom however, circumstances were dictating rapid action. The arrival at 7.28 a.m 1 September, of a Reuters report of Hitler's broadcast announcing war with Poland,¹ raised the question of whether the casus foederis of the March guarantee had finally arrived. His Majesty's Government were confronted with an unavoidable choice between war with Germany and the abandonment of their new policy of support for the vulnerable states of Eastern Europe. The middle-way of negotiations on the basis of a status quo ante was hardly realistic. Chamberlain called for German troop withdrawals, and the issue was complicated by Mussolini's offers of mediation,² but there was no chance that the dilemma would disappear of its own accord. In any case, and as the events of 2 September were to prove, a major

1 Nicholas Bethell: The War Hitler Won, (London, Futura, 1976, first published 1972), pp.1-97 provides a full account of events on the Polish front.

2 Halifax records the delays caused by Mussolini's call for a conference on 31 August. Hickleton Papers, A4.410.3.10. Diary of events in August 1939.

domestic political argument was bound to be provoked by any procrastination.¹ Thus events could not have been more pressing, when the Cabinet met at 11.30 a.m on 1 September.

If we look beneath the surface of the problem, however, it is apparent that the decision facing Ministers at this time was not of the same type of crisis as that confronting, say, Israeli politicians on the afternoon of 6 October 1973 as the unforeseen Egyptian attack across the Suez Canal gathered pace.² Charles Hermann's basic definition requires that decision-makers (i) be surprised (ii) feel their fundamental values to be threatened, and (iii) have only a short time in which to act, before they can be said to be immersed in a crisis.³ This is a limited, only partly satisfactory definition, but it does provide a yard-stick for distinguishing between the various forms of pressures usually lumped together in the umbrella description of 'crisis'.

In the case of the events of 1 September 1939, for instance, it cannot be said that British Ministers were deeply shaken or surprised by the news of the German invasion. That Hitler would next turn his attention to Poland had, by definition, been foreseen since the making of the March guarantee, while throughout the summer of 1939 there were regular scares about Danzig and the Polish Corridor.⁴ In the

1 Chamberlain was aware of this as early as April. Letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 29 April 1939; Chamberlain Papers NC 18/1/1092-1118.

2 Avi Schlaim 'Failures in National Intelligence Estimates: The Case of the Yom Kippur War', World Politics, Vol.XXVIII, No.3. (April 1976), pp.348-80.

3 See footnote 1, p.121.

4 Harvey, p.298, 19 June 1939.

short-term, the whole of August was dominated by the "battle of nerves" (in Cadogan's phrase)¹ as specific threats and demands began to flow from Berlin to Warsaw. Ministers were recalled from holiday for a meeting on 22 August. The Nazi-Soviet Pact was announced on the same day, and the general air of imminent conflict was such that on 27 August Chamberlain felt 'like a man driving a clumsy coach over a narrow crooked road along the face of a precipice'.² All essential measures of mobilisation were to be completed by 31 August.³ When Poland was actually attacked, therefore, the Cabinet were not thrown into disarray; resignation was more the keynote of their outlook. Even the Nazi-Soviet Pact, such a traumatic blow for intellectuals of the left, barely rippled the waters of Cabinet discussion. Perhaps because Ministers had on the whole played down the likelihood of any German-Soviet agreement,⁴ they felt disinclined to regard it as important in the event. The meeting of 22 August only turned to the Pact after a long report on the now irrelevant state of Anglo-Soviet negotiations. Halifax then welcomed the news on the grounds that British relations with Spain and Japan were now likely to improve.⁵

1 Dilks, p.195, 12 August.

2 Letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 27 August 1939 NC 18/1/1092-1118.

3 CAB 23/100; 41 and 43(39); 22 and 26 August; also COS 966 25 August, CAB 53/54.

4 Examples of scepticism can be found in CAB 23/99, 26/39) 3 May; 38(39) 19 July; PREM 1/409, 19 May 1939.

5 CAB 23/100, 41(39), 22 August 1939.

It would be foolish to pretend that the events of 1-3 September were not perceived as a major crisis in Britain, as in the world at large. But from the viewpoint of establishing whether or not decision-making was characterised by panic or fundamental disturbance, the term crisis should not be used without qualification, at least when referring to the Cabinet. We have already seen that the element of surprise was limited. Hermann's second defining characteristic of crisis, that it is a major threat to participants' values, also does not apply here tout court. Certainly Chamberlain's Government would not have gone to war for any but the most fundamental reasons. Their deepest beliefs about politics were engaged throughout the Danzig crisis. But - if we expand the definition to relate it more closely to the theme of this chapter - their central images of international relations, and expectations of the future, were not thrown over by the German attack on Poland. Whereas the coup of 15 March had forced, and in a military vein, the fall of Singapore was later to force¹ radical reappraisals of the direction of British policy in an atmosphere of high uncertainty, actual entry into the Second World War took place amidst feelings of confirmation about the attitudes towards Germany which had emerged over the previous six months. Well before August, Ministers had recognised that the structure of contemporary European politics was on the verge of disintegration, that war had become more likely than not.² Halifax felt in June that 'on the political side we were living in what was virtually

1 Norman Dixon: The Psychology of Military Incompetence, (London, Cape, 1976), pp.130-44.

2 Space does not permit a full analysis of these images, but there is a wealth of evidence to support the contention made here. Hoare, for example, wrote in May that the situation was slightly improved, but "one has always to keep in mind the risk that Hitler may change the picture at any moment". Hoare to Sir Philip Sassoon, 13 May 1939; Templewood Papers, X:4.

a state of concealed war'.¹ Equally, after 15 March although Chamberlain retained for some time hopes that Hitler was still fundamentally realistic enough to avoid a conflict² even the Prime Minister's illusions about Hitler's personal character were ebbing fast. In May, he could write: 'I can't yet see how the detente is to come about as long as the Jews obstinately go on refusing to shoot Hitler'.³ The consequence of these attitudes was that as the August crisis developed, feelings among British Ministers became if anything clearer and less uncertain. The pressure on Beck and his colleagues required no major intellectual or psychological revisions in London, except in the sense of an increased resolution to act on previous decisions. For our purposes a further corollary is that Hermann's third component of crisis decision-making, a short time in which to act, can also only be partially applied here. The unrolling of predictable and predicted events meant that the decisions made in Cabinet in the first few days of September were more those of implementation than formulation. The drama of those 48 hours should not obscure the fact that no new stance in British foreign policy was being forged.

As an instance of policy-making, therefore, the last stages of Britain's drift towards war with Germany contained elements of crisis in that an explicit choice was demanded on an issue of the highest international importance and in a period of great tension. On the

1 CAB 23/100, 33(39) 21 June 1939.

2 Chamberlain Papers; letters to his sisters, 23 April, 2 July 1939. NC/18/1/1092-1118.

3 Ibid; Letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 28 May 1939.

other hand this was not a time of unusual trauma or attitudinal flux for the Government. The alternatives before them were relatively clear, information was at less of a premium than in March, and psychologically Ministers were far better prepared than they had been a year previously, over Czechoslovakia.¹

It will be argued below that these characteristics of the issue were once again an important factor in determining the pattern of Cabinet decision-making, and that in this case they tended to facilitate broad-based Cabinet discussion at the expense of dominant leadership. However, before this argument can be made with any clarity, it is important to deal with one major complication; namely the issue of whether or not the Government as a whole, or certain members of it, were trying to escape from their obligations under the March guarantee, in order yet again to avoid the horrors of war. This interpretation used to be orthodox among those for whom 'appeasement' was synonymous with betrayal and cowardice; by extension, Chamberlain was said to have embarked on the war only because compelled to do so by Parliamentary revolt on the night of 2 September.² It is certainly of the greatest relevance to the role of the Cabinet at this time to decide (i) whether Chamberlain and Halifax attempted to renege on the Guarantee, only to be restrained by their colleagues and by Parliamentary pressures, (ii) whether the whole Cabinet was searching for a way out of their commitment to defend the independence of Poland. How, in the last

1 Keith Robbins: Munich (London, Cassell, 1968) and K. Middlemas: Diplomacy of Illusion, pp.59-66, 308-9.

2 Nigel Nicolson (Ed): Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1939-45 (London, Fontana/Collins 1970) p.26; A.J.P. Taylor: The Origins of the Second World War (London, Hamish Hamilton 1961) Ch. XI.

analysis, were the conflicting values of peace and resistance to German hegemony, ranked or reconciled? Was peace still a serious consideration after the invasion of Poland?

Many M.Ps clearly thought that Chamberlain at least, was looking for a second Munich, to judge from the uproar in the Commons after the Prime Minister's statement on 2 September. But in Cabinet on 1 September the Prime Minister had spoken as if war was already declared:

'The event against which we had fought so long and so earnestly had come upon us. But our consciences were clear, and there should be no possible question now where our duty lay'.¹

Halifax had then reported his remark to the Polish Ambassador, who had called for the implementation of the Guarantee, 'that provided the facts were correct, he did not suppose that we should differ from the Polish Ambassador's conclusion'. Moreover, when the private intermediary Birger Dahlerus suggested that he, (Dahlerus), and Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes should fly back to Berlin as a last attempt to avoid catastrophe; ...'After discussion, it was agreed that the reply to be sent by telephone to Mr. D... should be stiff', and should stress the fact that the only way war could be avoided was via a German withdrawal from Poland:

'No hope should be held out that we should act as mediators between Germany and Poland'.

The Cabinet approved the draft message to Hitler which ended: unless Germany immediately withdrew her troops, His Majesty's Government,

1 CAB 23/100. 47(39) 1.9.39. (my italics).

would, without hesitation, fulfil their obligations to Poland'.¹

In the Cabinet Minutes there are no signs of dissent or procrastination among Ministers. The main reasons for the delay in issuing an ultimatum after the invasion seem to have been the desire on civil defence grounds for time to complete evacuation and other last preparations against sudden air attack, and the pressure from the French Government, for whatever reasons, against precipitate action. Britain had no wish to be seen beginning the war in disagreement with her major ally. Only Halifax's cryptic comment points to any sign of a desire in a section of the Cabinet to abandon the Guarantee. In describing 'the general feeling' in the Commons on the evening of 2 September that 'the French were trying to run out of their engagement to Poland and were taking us with them', the Foreign Secretary added that:

'The whole thing to my mind showed democratic assemblies at their worst, and I could not acquit some members of the Cabinet₂ of having fed the flames of suspicion'.

This could mean either that some Ministers anxious for an immediate ultimatum, had been talking privately to the effect that the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary were considering a sell-out, or that some Ministers, themselves reluctant to send an ultimatum, had been talking in such a way as to excite the suspicion of MPs that the whole Cabinet shared this view.

1 Ibid; Confirmed in The Hickleton Papers, A4, 410.3.10, Diary of Events in August.

2 Hickleton Papers, A4.410.3.10. Diary of 2 September. Halifax may have been referring to France alone, but this cannot be assumed.

In the former case, Halifax's contemporary record suggests that he at least did not consider reneging; for the suspicion of a sell-out:

'there had never been the least ground. The sole reason for the French delay was General Gamelin's desire to¹ secure further time for completing mobilisation'.

Halifax was undoubtedly prepared to give Germany some more time in which to reply to the British warning of 1 September,² and even to make one more request for the withdrawal of troops from Poland.³ But if this was refused, or if a communication agreeing to withdraw had still not been received by at the latest 12 noon on the next day, 3 September, he and the Prime Minister proposed to issue an ultimatum.⁴ Moreover when, on the morning of the 2nd, the Italian Foreign Minister telephoned London to say that he might be able to get Germany to agree to an armistice and a conference, Halifax, speaking personally, told Count Ciano that he felt that the Cabinet would require the withdrawal of German troops from Poland before any negotiations could start.⁵ It should be noted that this was all said in the Cabinet which began at 4.15 p.m. before the scenes in the Commons which pressured the Government into advancing the time of delivery of the ultimatum to 9 a.m on 3 September. At the end of this meeting, the Prime Minister summarised the collective view:

'There should be no negotiation with Germany unless she was first prepared to give an undertaking to withdraw her troops from Poland and Danzig',

1 Ibid.

2 i.e. to withdraw troops from Poland entirely, if Britain was not to fulfil her obligation to Poland. See Cmd 6106(1939), Blue Book of British Documents Concerning Germano-Polish Relations and the Outbreak of Hostilities between Britain and Germany, p.168.

3 DBFP:III:7: Nos. 732 & 735, pp.521-3, Halifax to Sir Neville Henderson, 2 September 1939 8 p.m. and 8.20 p.m.

4 See CAB 23/100 48(39) 2.9.39 4.15 p.m. This was the original proposal made by the Prime Minister and Halifax, even before the Cabinet decided on that midnight as the time for the expiry of an ultimatum. It was itself to be subject to an armistice.

5 Ibid.

and:

'it was undesirable to allow Germany longer than until midnight¹ of 2/3 September to make up her mind on these points'.

The first of these statements had been repeated several times during the Cabinet by various Ministers and was reiterated in the Commons by the Prime Minister that evening. It remains to be explained why the second, setting an earlier time limit on Germany's reply than Halifax and the Prime Minister had originally envisaged, was made neither to Germany, nor to the House of Commons at 7.44 p.m. As Chamberlain admitted to his Cabinet later that night, this had been 'an important departure...from the line which the Cabinet had approved'.² In his diary Cadogan recorded the reasons:

'Trouble is the French. We can't simply wait longer for a German reply. But the French don't want to present ultimatum till noon tomorrow, with 48 hours notice...Cabinet in afternoon, who wanted ultimatum to expire at midnight tonight. But we couldn't budge the French. Awful evening, ringing up Bonnet and Daladier...Finally Daladier agreed a statement for Prime Minister to make at 7.30, - no time limit - merely saying³ we were consulting French as to procedure'.

The fact that Cadogan had a strong personal sense of Britain's obligation to fight for Poland indicates that French procrastination, and the reluctance of Chamberlain and Halifax to act regardless of the French, really was the cause of the failure to issue any immediate ultimatum,

1 Ibid; See also Dilks p.212, and R.J. Minney: The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha, (London, Collins 1960), p.226. The meaning of 'make up her mind' is slightly unclear. Of various sources only Cadogan and Hore-Belisha specify that this was when an ultimatum was to expire, rather than be delivered.

2 CAB 23/100. 49(39), 2 September 1939 11.30 p.m.

3 Dilks, p.212, 2 September.

rather than any intention of avoiding war. The Permanent Under-Secretary would have been quick to note any Ministerial tendency to slide back on that obligation. Even on 1 September, Halifax, and probably Chamberlain as well, had authorised Cadogan to give the following message by telephone to Dahlerus, (who would communicate it to Goering and Hitler):

'The only way in which a world war can be stopped is:

- (1) that hostilities be suspended and
- (2) German troops should be¹ immediately withdrawn from Polish territory'.

This evidence all suggests that Chamberlain and Halifax were not considering abandonment of the Polish Guarantee. Rather, caught between the pressures of diplomacy and accountability, they chose to delay implementing the Cabinet's decision. In the absence of certain news from France, the disadvantages of entering the war separately were enough to give the two men pause. They may have been encouraged to wait for agreement with France on the timing of the ultimatum by the fact that Germany still had to reply to the warning of 1 September. She had not yet directly rejected the request for the withdrawal of her forces from Poland.²

It is most likely, as it has been assumed above, that Halifax was referring to the accusation of back-sliding against the Prime Minister and himself, when he wrote of some Ministers 'having fed the flames of suspicion'. John Simon, after all, had taken Anderson, de la Warr,

1 DBFP:7: No.652 Minutes by Cadogan, 1 September 1939, p.480. The interpretation of the word 'immediately' was an obvious difficulty.

2 These conclusions are confirmed by the account in Harvey, pp.312-5.

Morrison, Colville, Burgin, Dorman-Smith, Elliot and Hore-Belisha to his room soon after the fracas in the House. After short discussion they proceeded to the Prime Minister, whom they told 'very forcibly' that an ultimatum must be sent to Germany immediately.¹ This fits in with Cadogan's record of being summoned urgently to dinner at No.10 where the 'Prime Minister told me about the House and trouble with his own colleagues'.²

However, the records also explain the second possible interpretation of Halifax's statement, that some Ministers other than the Prime Minister and himself, had been mooting the possibility of not acting on the Guarantee, thus arousing the hostility of many MPs in both parties. As previously, we can only rely on the evidence of attitudes as they were before the violent attack on delay in the House, which made it very difficult for any Minister to argue that an ultimatum should not be sent, because of the possibility in that event of the fall of the Government. In any case our information on the attitudes of the rest of the Cabinet after the 7.44 p.m statement, tallies with what we know about their views before it. The group led by Simon, in pressing the Prime Minister to send an ultimatum without further delay,³ was consistent with the view which its members had taken in that afternoon's Cabinet, at 4.15 p.m. There, Hore-Belisha recorded,

1 Minney op.cit. pp.226-7, and Harvey, p.315. The PM's statement 'was very badly worded and the obvious inference was vacillation and dirty work'. Crookshank Papers, Diary 2 September 1939. Captain Crookshank was a Junior Minister at the Treasury at the time.

2 Dilks, p.212.

3 See Harvey, p.315:

'I heard from De la Warr that there was almost a revolt in the Cabinet after the statement over the failure to put in a definite ultimatum. This was led by John Simon, Morrison, Elliot and De la Warr'.

a 'unanimous decision was taken that ultimatum should end at midnight'.¹ As we have seen,² the Cabinet Conclusions, while not mentioning the word 'unanimity', do confirm the decision that Germany should have no longer than until midnight to 'make up her mind'. The doctrine of collective responsibility, which a Cabinet Minister implicitly accepts by taking office,³ meant that all those present at the meeting agreed to this decision once taken. None resigned over the decision for war, as Burns and Morley had done in August 1914. Moreover if we examine the views of those Ministers whose attitudes would have been most influential over the eventual policy-outcome, in determining whether or not Britain would fight for Poland,⁴ we find that only for Sir John Anderson, the Lord Privy Seal, is there no evidence to show that he positively supported an immediate ultimatum; there is no data at all on Anderson's views before the debate in Parliament.⁵

1 Minney, p.226.

2 See p.147 above.

3 S.S. Wilson: The Cabinet Office to 1945, pp.1-2, 9-10, 59-63 provides useful information on the working of this doctrine between the wars.

4 Apart from Chamberlain and Halifax, whom we have already examined, the following Ministers come into this category, on the criteria of personality and office:

Anderson	(Lord Privy Seal)
Simon	(Chancellor of the Exchequer)
Hoare	(Home Secretary)
Kingsley Wood	(Secretary for Air)
Chatfield	(Minister for the Co-ordination of Defence)
Hore-Belisha	(Secretary of State for War)

5 i.e. there is none in the diaries of Cadogan, Halifax, Harvey, Hore-Belisha, Inskip or Wallace, and none in the Cabinet Minutes. Nor does Sir J. Wheeler-Bennett: John Anderson, (London, Macmillan 1962) provide any information on the point.

Of the others, Simon agreed with Halifax, some time during the afternoon, that Britain could not contemplate a conference with German troops still on Polish soil, and believed it "to be a plant to gain time and allow more ships out etc".¹ This statement indicates that Simon was not in favour of delay, particularly in the light of the fact that it was to be Simon's initiative which led to the Ministerial pressure on Chamberlain that evening to issue an immediate ultimatum. For the rest, the Cabinet Minutes for the meeting at 4.15 p.m on the 2nd, record their opinions. Sir Samuel Hoare thought:

'there would be tremendous risks in accepting any delay which might well have considerable reactions on public opinion'.

Kingsley Wood reported that:

'The Chief of the Air Staff strongly opposed a further delay for 48 hours'.

Chatfield added:

'that on military grounds he thought it was undesirable to allow Herr Hitler any longer than until midnight 2/3 September to make up his mind',

while Hore-Belisha said:

'that the advice given to him by the General Staff accorded with that given by the Chief of Air Staff' and... 'Public opinion₂ here was strongly against our yielding an inch'.

This phrase is included in Hore-Belisha's own account, where he also reports that he told the Cabinet that personally, he "was strongly opposed to further delay", which he thought might result in breaking the unity of the country".³

1 Harvey, p.314.

2 CAB 23/100, 48(39), 2 September, 4.15 p.m.

3 Minney, p.225.

These are the individual statements behind the Cabinet's decision. Of the other Ministers, only Lord Maugham¹ is recorded as having spoken, and he thought that Hitler would not make any concessions even if a conference were to be held. The other 14 members of the Cabinet² included men of the experience of Elliot, Inskip, Runciman and Zetland but none of them were influential in the sense that their support was vital to the Prime Minister for his survival, as was that of Simon, Halifax and Hoare. For reasons both of personality and of Ministerial position, they could not hope to carry out decision in favour of abandoning the Guarantee, against the opinions of the senior Ministers whom we have looked at. Employing a previous measure none of the 14 had ever held any of the three most important offices in British politics, those of Prime Minister, Chancellor of the Exchequer, or Foreign Secretary. Nor were any of them to do so in the future. As it happens, what we know about the general attitudes towards Germany in 1939 of men like Stanley, Elliot, De la Warr and MacDonald, suggests that many of the 14 would themselves have been opposed to any further 'appeasement' after 1 September.³

1 Lord Chancellor.

2 i.e: Brown, Burgin, Colville, De la Warr, Dorman-Smith, Elliot, Inskip, MacDonald, Morrison, Runciman, Stanhope, Stanley, Wallace and Zetland.
They held, respectively, the offices of:
Labour, Supply, Scotland, Education, Agriculture, Health, Dominions, Colonies, the Duchy of Lancaster, Lord President, Admiralty, the Board of Trade, Transport, and India.

3 Inskip characterised the Cabinet rebels of 2 September as 'the usual people, Oliver Stanley, Walter Elliot, Burgin (not so strong) and Ernest Brown'. Inskip Diary II, 3 September 1939.

To conclude this detailed look at the final British decision to go to war, we may say that none of the 20 other Cabinet Ministers who at 4.15 p.m on the 2nd, authorised Chamberlain and Halifax to settle the final terms of the 'communication' to Germany, and the statements to be made in Parliament (on the lines indicated in the discussion), either wanted or were able, to push Britain into abandoning her obligation under the Guarantee to help Poland resist the German attack.¹ But nor did the Prime Minister or Foreign Secretary intend to abrogate the obligation to an invaded Poland, although if Germany had continued to prefer the aggressive diplomacy of August to the military action of 1 September this is not to say that they might not have been willing to see Poland make some concessions in a negotiated agreement. The criterion on which British policy at this stage was assessed, was not so much the absolute territorial integrity of Poland, but rather, whether or not Germany was bent on European hegemony. If she was prepared to use force to win gains from Poland and thus to make that country's 'independence' meaningless, then in the eyes of British policy-makers it was likely that Hitler was indeed seeking hegemony. Thus the hesitation shown by Britain on 2 September was due to the refusal of France to agree to a midnight deadline.² The indecision arose over the timing, not the fact of the ultimatum.

1 CAB 23/100. 48(39) 2.9.39. 4.15 p.m. None of the 20 wanted to renege sufficiently to argue the case in Cabinet.

2 The other operative factor, the need to finish evacuation and other defence preparations, was by far the lesser of the two variables. No source has it as leading to delay after the 4.15 Cabinet, while Anderson, the Minister responsible for evacuation, was to be a member of the Simon group that evening. Wallace Papers, Diary Vol.I, 2 September 1939.

Of course Chamberlain may have suspected France of being on the verge of abandoning the Guarantee, and have been reluctant to go to war without her. If he had had his way in delaying an ultimatum further, and France had actually cancelled her commitment, would the Prime Minister have wanted Britain to fight alone or to relinquish the task altogether? This speculation cannot be resolved; there are plausible hypotheses for either possibility. However, all the evidence as to his (and Halifax's) actual attitudes, shows a sense of the inevitability of a war over Poland if Germany had not withdrawn her forces by noon on the 3rd. There is nothing to point to any doubt in their minds as to the necessity or rightness of declaring war once Poland had been attacked - admittedly insofar as the issue can be kept separate from that of whether war against Germany was possible or desirable without the support of France.¹

It is not difficult to see how this account is relevant to the problem of how the Cabinet as an institution operated. No-one in the Cabinet was about to 'rat'; Ministers were not at the mercy of executive whims, but nor did they chain an unwilling Chamberlain to his post. The 'mutiny' of ten on 2 September was largely the result of misunderstanding about Chamberlain's motives, and its main effect was only to accelerate the issuing of an ultimatum.²

1 It is arguable that Ministerial determination to declare war if Poland was attacked was such as to have carried the day even if France had pulled out (although the military implications would have been serious). Hoare noted on 28 August: 'No question of not sticking to it. No question of our breaking in The War of Nerves'. Templewood Papers, X:5, See also Wallace Diary, 31 August.

2 The accounts of both Wallace and Chamberlain confirm this. Wallace Papers, Diary, Vol. I. 2 September.

Nonetheless, the fact that such misunderstanding occurred, and that strong words were used to remind Chamberlain of Britain's commitments is itself evidence of the real part played by the Cabinet in the September crisis. The Prime Minister was obviously hurt by his colleagues' determination to make him accountable:

'To crown it all a certain number of my colleagues in the Government who always behave badly when there is any trouble about, took this opportunity to declare that they were being flouted and neglected and tried to get up a sort of mutiny. Even Edward Halifax found their behaviour unbearable and¹ declared that I have the temper of an archangel'.

More important than this spectacular demonstration, however, was the participation in decisions throughout the two day period of the Cabinet as a whole. The Cabinet met three times, views were expressed freely, and unanimity displayed on the central issues. When there arose suspicion that the Prime Minister might be going beyond his brief on the evening of 2 September, the rest of the Cabinet were both able and willing to mobilise within a few hours a protest that led to another formal Cabinet at 11.00 p.m and a final decision to issue the ultimatum at 9 a.m the next day.

That the Cabinet was able to keep in the forefront of affairs was partly due to the vital need to preserve a consensus on entering a major war. It was important for the preservation of wider domestic support,³ as well as for the image Britain presented to Germany and

1 Ibid; Chamberlain to Ida Chamberlain; 10 Sept. 1939, NC18/1/1092-1118.

2 CAB 23/100: 49(39) 2 September 1939 11.30 p.m.

3 Chamberlain said that "He wanted at once to retrieve the impression he had made in the House", Minney, op.cit. p.227.

the neutral states, that Ministers should be unanimous in their support of the ultimatum, and that their collective relinquishing of office before the formation of a War Cabinet, should not have been complicated by prior resignations. But this is not the whole explanation. Chamberlain had been willing to risk subsequent disagreements with colleagues in both late September 1938, and in March 1939. Moreover in the equivalent crisis of August 1914, consensus had been an important, but not fundamental consideration. At the last, Herbert Asquith and Sir Edward Grey preferred a divided Cabinet to the abandonment of their own policy of support for France.¹

The factor to which we have to return as a major if not exclusive determinant of the Cabinet's role in the decision to declare war on Germany, is the character of the problem as it arose at the time. Non-specialist Ministers were able to form and to articulate views not only because of the obvious unparalleled importance of the occasion (in September 1938 and March 1939 there had been far less mental preparedness for an imminent war), but also because of the way in which the very existence of the Polish Guarantee acted to structure policy-choices. Its breach of the time-honoured rule of 'no advance commitments' paradoxically served to involve Ministers in the final decisions for war, by clarifying the issues before-hand. Although the Guarantee failed as an act of deterrence, it worked incidentally as an act of policy-planning, ensuring that the British Government entered the war relatively smoothly, with less chance of

1 See Keith Wilson: 'The British Cabinet's Decision for War, 2 August 1914' British Journal of International Studies I(1975) No.2, pp.148-159; and Zara Steiner: Britain and the Origins of the First World War (London, Macmillan, 1977) pp.215-41.

decisions being made in the erratic, ad hoc way that had characterised some past crises of foreign policy.¹ A case in point is the letter sent by Chamberlain to Hitler on 22 August. Euan Wallace wrote:

'its excellence was due in no small measure to the collective mind of the Cabinet, and the document actually telegraphed to Berlin that evening was substantially better both in form and substance than the draft submitted₂ to us half-way through our meeting'.

Administrative and psychological (if not military) preparations had been made for a German move to absorb Poland, so that the event when it came consolidated rather than disturbed the newly revised perspectives on European affairs now held by members of the National Government. It was revealing that Churchill had been willing to join the Government since 31 March 1939, and the gap between his views and those of most Ministers narrowed with every week of the summer.³ By 1 September members of the Cabinet were sensitized to the likelihood of continuing "outrages" from Hitler, and they were ready to deal with the specific issue of Poland when it arose. By contrast, their equivalents in the Liberal government of 1914 had not fully prepared for the problems that were raised by 'The guns of August'. A

1 For examples see, for Chanak, A.J.P. Taylor: English History 1914-45 (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1965), pp.190-1; and Christopher Thorne: The Limits of Foreign Policy: The West, The League and The Far Eastern Crisis of 1931-3 (London, Macmillan, 1973) pp.391-403, 412-4.

2 Wallace Diary, Vol.I, 22 August 1939; the document referred to is the PM's letter to Hitler; DBFP III:7: Nos. 142, 145; Halifax to Henderson, 22 August 1939 8.40 p.m and 9.50 p.m.

3 Martin Gilbert: Winston S. Churchill Vol.V 1922-39, pp.1052-1115.

confrontation of some kind with Wilhelmine Germany had been in sight for some time, but the inability of the anti-war faction in Asquith's Cabinet to carry the day, was partly due to their incomplete understanding of the implications of the Anglo-French military conversations of the previous decade. The extent of Britain's commitment to France was a very strong card in Grey's hand as he sought to obtain approval for his policy over considerable discontent in Cabinet.¹ The differences between the clarity and form of the issues involved in 1914 and 1939 are part of the explanation for the contrasting powers of the Cabinet evident in the two cases. Peculiar circumstances will always qualify even a generalisation of this limited status. One broad conclusion which is emerging, however, is that a model of foreign policy-making in the British Cabinet that pictures the Prime Minister and his colleagues as adversaries, competing for influence over decisions, is simplistic in the extreme.

(iv) To Continue Alone? May-July 1940.

The period of May-June 1940, the months of the fall of France, was a time of the highest stress and instability for all those who lived through it. By the same token it raised once more the most basic and prominent questions with which decision-makers are ever likely to be confronted - those of war or armistice. It would seem that, as in the previous September, the problem facing British ministers could not have been more conducive to uninhibited debate. The crude facts of physical danger and potential resistance were apparent to all; there existed only a narrow and defined range of available strategies; there could be no question of taking any imaginative initiative such as that of the guarantees of 1939 to transform the political environment. With Hitler in a position of military invulnerability, and with no immediate prospect of attracting new allies by diplomacy, all proposals raised inside the British Government would inevitably be subsumed under the crude but clear alternatives of fighting on until the situation changed, or of coming to terms of some kind with Hitler. Since the War Cabinet met at least once daily,¹ it might be thought that in mid-1940 suitable conditions existed for full Cabinet participation in the making of these major political decisions.

Despite these factors, the data presents a different picture. It will be argued that the period in which France left the war demonstrates how an energetic Prime Minister (in wartime necessarily absorbed with military and foreign policy) could lead the opinion of his colleagues into channels of which only he and perhaps a small

1 Between 3 September 1939-22 June 1941 (659 days), the War Cabinet met 496 times. Between 1 May-31 July 1940 (92 days) it met 108 times. CAB 65/1,2,5,6,7,8,9,17,18.

circle had a very clear advance idea. In practice this happened in two ways: firstly by systematically excluding the genuine consideration of some options, and secondly by successfully transforming an existing policy to meet dramatic new circumstances and pressures. The ability of the Prime Minister to play such a role was made possible by the profound impact of external events on existing attitudes, in such a way as to precipitate a highly fluid situation, where uncertainty and shock were the predominant mood. Churchill was thus presented with opportunities which enabled him to direct the nature of the debate into the areas which he judged important. That he formed very definite personal ideas on how to deal with the new problems, was partly the result of necessity, partly of predisposition, and partly of character;¹ it also meant that the Prime Minister took advantage of the opportunity inherent in the crisis to exert executive leadership.

Earlier in this chapter, while discussing the routine functions of the executive in implementing policy, we touched on Churchill's direct approaches to Roosevelt, outside the scope of Cabinet business.² The content of these declarations between 15-20 May, gave clear indications that the Prime Minister intended to make it very difficult for his colleagues within the Government to renege on their commitment to the war. Indeed he distributed the telegrams to members of the War Cabinet, which was not always routine procedure.³

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- 1 Anthony Storr argues that Churchill found in the dangers of 1940 a release with elation from the 'black dog' of depression. Other temperaments, like Sir Samuel Hoare's, seem to have been completely disorientated. A Storr: 'The Man' in A.J.P. Taylor et. al. Churchill: Four Faces and The Man (Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1973), pp.205-46; on Hoare, Dilks, pp.286-8; and FO 800/323, Hoare to Halifax, 1 June 1940.
 - 2 Supra, pp.40-2. The telegrams were usually sent via the U.S. Ambassador in London, by-passing the Foreign Office, PREM 4/27:3.
 - 3 Winston S. Churchill: The Second World War: Their Finest Hour p.21; CAB 65/7, WML30 (40), 19 May 1940.

Even at this early stage, Churchill was becoming aware that the bases of British war policy were on the verge of dissolution, and that the Government might imminently be faced with a totally changed set of circumstances, demanding the rapid reformulation of expectations long-established but now rendered obsolete by the destruction of the western front. For although Allied military opinion had long anticipated a German attack in the west, even possibly as the first stroke of war,¹ it quickly became clear after the invasion of 10 May that a new scenario had to be considered; that of a rapid French defeat. On 13 May Guderian's armoured forces crossed the Meuse and broke through the French defences where they least had been expected to do so. By the evening of the next day Churchill was reading a message from Paul Reynaud to the War Cabinet which warned that the breach in the defences had allowed the Germans to drive for Paris, and thought that the only hope of preventing them was by massive attacks on the supporting German bomber force. The outlook had evidently deteriorated very quickly.²

Even so, neither Churchill nor the Cabinet yet regarded the situation as sufficiently grave to require the dispatch of home-based fighter squadrons. After Paul Reynaud's statement to Churchill on 15 May that France had effectively been defeated, the Prime Minister gave the distinct impression to his colleagues that the outlook was not

1 Certainly since the scares about an attack on the Low Countries in early 1939; CAB 23/97, CM 3 & 6 (39) 1 & 8 February 1939; N. Gibbs: Grand Strategy, Vol.I, pp.657-663.

2 CAB 65/7 WM(40) 122, 14 May, 7.00 p.m. The following account of the military events of May-June 1940 is based primarily on J.R.M. Butler: Grand Strategy, Vol.II., Official History of the Second World War (London, HMSO 1957) pp.195-246; Brian Bond (Ed.): Chief of Staff, pp.306-369; Peter Calvocoressi and Guy Wint: Total War: Causes and Courses of the Second World War (London, Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1972) pp.118-131; and General André Beaufré: 1940: The Fall of France, translated by Desmond Flower (London, Cassell, 1967)

disastrous. In those days of hectic military activity, the Cabinet relied on Churchill for its sources of information; here he told them that Reynaud's message had been 'alarmist', and that in personal telephone conversations with Generals Georges and Gamelin, it had been clear to him that they remained calm, and believed that the German advance in the south had been halted. Supported by Air Marshals Newall and Dowding, Churchill directly opposed the dispatch of further fighters to help the French, and the Cabinet took a decision to this effect.¹

But it took less than 24 hours to reverse their decision. Information from the front of renewed German penetration, indicated that, in Ironside's words: 'the situation was critical...All now depended on whether the French will fight with vigour in the counter-attack which General Gamelin proposed to launch'. Halifax said that Reynaud feared the German attainment of Paris that night.² In the evening Churchill arrived in Paris, and heard for himself about the vulnerability of the French military situation; losses of artillery and fighter aircraft had been severe, and the German tank corps was in a position either to move on to Paris, or to advance to the coast so as to split the Allied forces. He passed on this information to the Cabinet, which met without him at 11 p.m so as to authorise the second reinforcement that day of fighters to France, a volte-face in policy.³

1 CAB 65/7, WM 123(40) 15 May 1940: and Confidential Annex, CAB 65/13, WM(40) 123:2.

2 CAB 65/7: WM 124(40), 16 May 1940 11.30 a.m; and Confidential Annex, CAB 65/13 WM (40) 124:1.

3 Ibid; WM 125(40), 16 May 1940, 11 p.m. The Cabinet only sent half the number of squadrons to French bases that Churchill had asked for, since Britain would have been left without any fighter defences herself.

Thus by 17 May it was clear that France was in an extremely serious military situation. If her defeat and exit from the war was not yet seen as certain in London, ministers could not fail to realise that this was now a distinct possibility. Within a week of the German move against the West, the balance of strength had been transformed, British policy-makers were increasingly and rapidly faced with a new series of conditions to be accepted, understood and processed into attitudes or policies. However, the full impact of the changed situation did not take effect immediately, despite French defeat having been made militarily probable by the German advance on Amiens and Arras.

This was partly because, without the benefit of hindsight, few of the participants could clearly see the pattern of the battle, and its inexorable conclusion. It was also because Churchill's interpretation of developments continued in an optimistic vein, in the belief that the trend of conflict could still be reversed, given will, effort and the correct strategy. On 18 May, he praised to the Cabinet the efforts of the RAF and of recent French resistance, saying that 'On the whole the military situation in France is better'.¹ During the next few days, further Allied reverses, culminating in the German arrival at the Channel coast on the 20th, made the likelihood of defeat more clear. Yet those responsible for British policy were still cushioned from the direct implications of the changes. Not until late on the 25 May did the Service Ministers and Chiefs of Staff

1 CAB 65/7, WM 127(40), 18 May 1940, 11.30 a.m. By contrast, the BEF the day before had been under such pressure that at one stage it was feared that German divisions were moving in on Calais. Brian Bond (Ed.): Chief of Staff, pp.313-20.

take the decision that Gort should make haste to evacuate as much of the BEF as he could salvage from France.¹ Right through the previous four days Churchill had hoped that the trapped forces would be able to fight their way southwards to meet a new French army advancing to the north. On the 21st the Prime Minister told the War Cabinet that 'The situation is more favourable than certain of the more obvious symptoms would indicate...We must now be ready to fight hard under open war-fare conditions'.² The next day he described the plan in more detail for the Cabinet after seeing Weygand, and forecast a crucial battle for 23 May, despite doubts from Ironside and a gloomy report from Gort's staff.³ On the 23rd itself, frustrated by the lack of any sign of a reversal of the campaign, Churchill cabled Reynaud demanding the immediate implementation of Weygand's pincer plan, which could 'turn defeat into victory'.⁴ It was thus partly due to Churchill's refusal to accept that the battle was lost and the BEF should cut its losses, that the excision of France from the contest did not become more plain at an earlier stage.

1 CAB 65/13 Confidential Annex, WM 139(40), 26 May; Butler: Grand Strategy, Vol.II, p.191. Gort had in fact already begun to retreat, on his own decision.

2 CAB 65/7, WM 132(40), 21 May 1940, 11.30 a.m.

3 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex WM 134(40):1, 22 May, 10.30 a.m. As early as the 19th Pownall was thinking of arrangements for a possible withdrawal from France and on the 20th was writing of the 'folly' of Churchill's orders. Bond, op.cit. pp.322-3.

4 R. Parkinson: Peace for our Time, pp.360-1. In the meantime there was a serious breakdown in communications between both the Cabinet and the front, and the British and French military commanders. General Weygand was under the impression that Churchill was encouraging a general British retreat on the 23rd. J. Weygand: The Role of General Weygand: Conversations with His Son, translated J.H.F. McEwen (London, Eyre and Spottiswoode 1948),

Another major factor, however, was the failure of the information and co-ordination process between London and the battlefield. Ministers did not realise the extent of the German advance or the weaknesses of the Allied forces and positions. Liaison with the French army was bad. There was always an important time-lag between events on the continent and decisions in Whitehall. Towards the end, on 24 May, Churchill and General Ironside had believed that Lord Gort was still trying to strike to the south, when in fact he had begun to retreat to the ports. The information was finally conveyed to them by the French.¹ But all this lack of data was compounded by the Cabinet's reliance on Churchill for what up-to-date knowledge there was, and for an overview of the general trend of the conflict. As far as we can see from the continuing decisions to approve the counter-attack to the south, the Cabinet was no more convinced than Churchill of the irrevocability of French defeat until 26 May, when the BEF was already preparing for embarkation. In any case being even more out of touch they had little choice but to accept the Prime Minister's version of events. Particularly since although Ministers not in the War Cabinet attended the latter's meetings at this time, they only did so on an occasional basis, and by grace of the Prime Minister. Those in the War Cabinet by right (Halifax, Chamberlain, Attlee and Greenwood) were still recovering from the change in Government, although not all for the same reason.

The foregoing unoriginal description of military happenings in May 1940 is designed both to make clear how the world of British policy-makers at the time was suddenly overturned, and to show how that

1 See above; also J.R. Colville: Man of Valour: The Life of Field Marshall the Viscount Gort (London, Collins, 1972), pp.185-226, and Bond, op.cit. p.347. Political and military decision-making were right out of phase; Gort did not even know that Belgium was about

catastrophe generated the greater impact by being partially disguised until its final dénouement. It may also serve as a secondary (because to do with military rather than foreign policy) example of the way in which the Prime Minister could, by strength of leadership, influence strongly the conclusions of his Cabinet. But primarily it is important to realise the fluidity of the events into which the Cabinet found themselves plunged, with little mental preparation. Ministers were faced with the immediate need to reassess the factors on which they had pinned their hopes for survival and ultimate victory. Previous images of the way the war would develop, with Britain and France jointly draining off the German military effort, and isolating the German homeland by blockade,¹ were inevitably dissolving under the pressure and speed of events. They had to absorb the fact that to all intents and purposes Britain would now have to fulfil her war aims entirely alone, being deprived not only of French manpower and matériel, but also of the strategical advantages of a western front and a long stretch of European coastline from which to administer the vital blockade.² As a result of this increasingly obvious circumstance, there arose the problems of deciding whether in practice Britain should (or would be able to) continue the war in the new environment, and, in the event of an affirmative answer to this first question, of determining the ways in which it could be done. It was a time which required a fundamental but expeditious change in focus.

1 These images were remarkably undeveloped, but the Cabinet had broadly believed in victory through defensive strength. See Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1120-1139, Letter to Ida Chamberlain, 8 October 1939.

2 Invasion of the U.K. itself now became a realistic possibility, as the Chiefs of Staff pointed out on 22 May. COS 376(40) in CAB 80/11.

This task presented little difficulty for Churchill, despite his belated recognition of the collapse of France. His attitude to the war was clearly defined, strongly held, and consistent. Simply, it added up to a determination to prolong the fight in all foreseeable circumstances, and to a preference for complete defeat over the stigma of a compromise peace, which would mean accepting that victory was impossible without avoiding what he believed would be subjugation. Thus for the Prime Minister, defeat in France constituted only a severe set-back, and by no means an irresistible pressure to rethink Britain's position. He believed that Britain should fight to the death, however near death might be.¹

For some of his colleagues however, the issue was less clear. They had held no brief for a compromise solution to the war while the Allies remained in a position from which the achievement of their objectives remained possible, given sufficient patience, even if the exact methods of this success could not yet be predicted. Since defeat seemed remote, there was good reason to hope that the means of victory would eventually be engineered. Because they were willing for Britain to undergo the toils and suffering of war as such, there was no reason for ministers to consider the possibility of a settlement which satisfied their aims less than completely, so long as the danger of defeat did not figure in their thinking. But in May 1940 that danger appeared with a vengeance.

1 In his first broadcast as Prime Minister on 19 May Churchill romanticised: 'It is better for us to perish in battle than to look at the outrage of our nation and our altar'. But this was belief as much as rhetoric. 'Memoir by Sir John Martin' in Action This Day: Working with Churchill, Edited by Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, (London, Macmillan, 1968) pp.153-6.

In this inchoate environment the Prime Minister set a clear lead on the attitude he expected the government to adopt. Although Churchill was determined not to believe the worst of any situation until it was inevitable, he did not blind himself to the possibility that the worst would in fact occur. As early as 17 May he had initiated a special ministerial sub-committee under Chamberlain to consider the consequences for Britain of the fall of France.¹ But as the new Lord President of the Council told the Cabinet, this brief did not involve a discussion of whether Britain would be able to continue the war, or of whether she should revise her whole expectations of the conflict:

'He had been concerned in the main with a situation in which we might find ourselves obliged to continue our resistance single-handed in this country until the United States of America could be induced to come to our help'.²

Thus Chamberlain went on, because of the above premise, merely to describe the extensions of government powers over internal activities which the sub-committee had recommended as a necessary means of continuing the resistance. And this although a day later Chamberlain was to write in his diary that he considered the Americans to be Britain's 'only hope' and that even they 'can do little to help us now'.³ By 22 May the Lord President had come to regard the crisis as 'the gravest moment in our history', and anticipated 'an attack on this country very shortly'.⁴ Yet, emasculated by his recent fall from

1 W.S. Churchill: The Second World War: Their Finest Hour, p.48.

2 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 128(40):1. The Committee which accepted this brief consisted of Chamberlain, Halifax, Anderson, Attlee and Hankey. (My italics).

3 Feiling: The Life of Neville Chamberlain, p.444, diary of 19 May.

4 CAB 65/7, WM 133(40), 22 May 1940. The full findings of Chamberlain's Committee on emergency powers are contained in CAB 66/6, WP (40) 162, 20 May.

leadership and possibly by a fear of reviving the accusation of 'appeasement', Chamberlain took no initiative towards raising the issue of what Britain should do in her new position, in any wider context than that of providing efficient domestic powers to meet the emergency of a German attack. Nor, as we shall see, was this because he was as resolutely determined as Churchill to continue the war even when defeat might appear certain.

The Prime Minister took a further initiative on 26 May, when he asked the Chiefs of Staff directly to describe what situation would arise if France were forced into an armistice after Belgium had capitulated but also after the BEF had reached the coast (and were in the process of escaping). The COS were given formal terms of reference, of which it is worth quoting the rest in full: (what situation would arise)

'in the event of terms being offered to Britain which would place her entirely at the mercy of Germany through disarmament, cession of naval bases in the Orkneys etc.; what are the prospects of our continuing the war alone against Germany and probably Italy. Can the Navy and the Air Force hold out reasonable hopes of preventing serious invasion, and could the forces gathered in this Island cope with raids from the air involving detachments not greater than 10,000 men; it being observed that a prolongation of British resistance might be very dangerous for Germany engaged¹ in holding down the greater part of Europe'.

As will be observed, the purely military question on which the COS were uniquely qualified to pronounce, occupies only part of these terms of

1 W.S. Churchill: Their Finest Hour, pp.78-9: CAB 65/7, WM 139(40) 26 May, 9.00 a.m, and Confidential Annex, CAB 65/13, WM 139(40):1, COS 394(40) in CAB 80/11. (My italics).

reference, that is the two italicised sentences. The rest of the document consists of value-judgements which intrude on the neutrality of the question, and seek to pre-judge the issue. It is clear what answer Churchill wants to his question, about the prospects of holding out. His mention of the terms which Britain might be offered is couched in the language of a Carthaginian peace; Germany is seen as incapable of offering terms other than those which would put Britain "entirely" at her mercy. The examples chosen strike at the most sensitive points of British conceptions of her national interests - the capacity for self-defence, and the sea-power on which her commercial and Imperial safety was based. This political pre-judgement is followed at the end of the terms of reference by an equally direct attempt to load the question, this time on the military side. The Prime Minister was so eager to anticipate a conclusion from the Chiefs of Staff to the effect that Britain would be able to carry on, that he tried to begin their task for them by stating one of the main arguments in favour of the capacity to continue the fight; he did not balance this out by an example from the other side of the question.

It would be impossible to show whether the form in which Churchill cast the question, in some way pre-determined the Chiefs of Staff's eventual conclusion (proved correct by a hair's breadth as the year wore on); which was that the outcome would depend on the ability of the British aircraft industry to withstand bombing and provide the RAF with constant superiority in the air, and that the COS believed in this ability.¹ Conversely, it is impossible to show

¹ The actual phrasing of the COS' conclusion was cautious. Churchill, ibid; CAB 66/7, WP 169(40) 26 May 1940, and see p. 209 below.

that it did not help to condition their findings. In any event, that is not the only relevant issue. Just as important is the effect of Churchill's lead on the direction and tone of the discussion within Cabinet in general. (The Chiefs of Staff's answer was not delivered until the next day, two Cabinets later).¹

As we have seen so far, Churchill was the source of the only two initiatives in the government for discussing the effect of the possible fall of France on Britain's position. Moreover he formulated the questions which sprang from these moves in such a way as, in the first case, to delimit the scope of the issue under consideration, and in the second, to indicate strongly the form of answer that he expected and desired. The rest of the Cabinets for May 1940 show Churchill continuing to give a clear lead on the attitude he wanted from the Cabinet, and finally achieving the agreement of his Colleagues after a period of some considerable doubt and uncertainty.

Soon after Churchill had posed his question to the COS on 26 May, and in the same meeting, Halifax indicated that for him at least, recent events had deeply disturbed the notions about war aims which had been evident in the discussions of the previous October. He stated

1 CAB 65/7, 141(40), 27 May 1940, 11.30 a.m; and Confidential Annex, CAB 65/13, 141(40):9.

that:

'we had to face the fact that it was not so much now a question of imposing a complete defeat upon Germany but of safeguarding the independence of¹ our own Empire and if possible that of France'.

It should not need spelling out that this implied that the Foreign Secretary was coming to think that a compromise settlement might be preferable to a German invasion of the United Kingdom and possible territorial gains in the Mediterranean. Particularly since he went on to recount his conversation of the previous evening with the Italian Ambassador, in which he had told Bastianini, after the latter 'had clearly made soundings as to the prospect of our agreeing to a conference', that:

'peace and security in Europe were equally our main object, and we should naturally be prepared to consider any proposals which might lead to this, provided our liberty and independence were assured'.

Bastianini was coming for a further interview that morning, 'and he might have fresh proposals to put forward'.² The trend of Halifax's thought was confirmed nearer the end of the meeting. He observed that if France collapsed, the Germans would be able to switch their productive effort en masse towards the construction of aeroplanes. Since Halifax and the Chief of the Air Staff had just agreed that Britain's ability

1 CAB 65/13, WM 139(40):1, Confidential Annex, 26 May 9.00 a.m. By contrast, in the previous October, Halifax was coming more and more to the view that his chief war aim was the elimination of Herr Hitler'. CAB 65/1, WM 40(39), 7 October 1939.

2 CAB 65/13, WM 139(40):1; and Dilks, pp.289-90. This approach was made despite Mussolini's discouraging reply to a message from Churchill on 16 May. Sir Llewellyn Woodward: British Foreign Policy in the Second World War, Vol. I, (London, HMSO, 1970), pp 229-37.

to survive, as argued in the first COS draft on the question, would depend on preventing the Luftwaffe from achieving sufficient air superiority as to mount an invasion, the pessimistic inference of this remark was that the outlook for survival might be poor.¹

None of Halifax's fellow-ministers attacked either his pessimism or the particular implications of his remarks. On the other hand, they did not express positive support. They were in a state of genuine indecision, open to formative influences in either direction, from both the course of events and the nature of leadership exerted in Cabinet. Clement Attlee, the Lord Privy Seal, merely made two piecemeal observations to the effect that Italy might be nervous about the prospect of a German hegemony in Europe, and that the best way of keeping France in the war would be to convince her of the fact that 'destruction' would ultimately follow capitulation. He thought the Cabinet should await the COS's report. Chamberlain, similarly, had no positive views. He confined himself to some low-key remarks on the best way to keep Italy from attacking France, suggesting that France might be able to buy Mussolini off with concessions. Finally he added that undertakings by the French not to make available their productive capacity to Germany would be useless, since the Germans would impose terms designed to prevent such an arrangement. Arthur

1 The first COS draft is COS (40) 390, WP 168(40) in CAB 66/7, 25 May 1940. The Prime Minister himself had been receiving relatively optimistic predictions on the question of air power from his personal adviser, Prof. F.A. Lindemann, who had written on 26 April: 'The combined Metropolitan air strength of England and France is at present about 2/3 of that of Germany, and on the 1st July it will be nearly 3/4'. The fall of France does not seem to have led either Lindemann or Churchill to highlight the new relativities of air power until August 1940. Cherwell Papers, OFF 1:1, Jan-May, and May-September 1940, Minutes to PM; PREM 4/94:4, Lindemann to Churchill, 10 August 1940.

Greenwood, the remaining member of the War Cabinet, seems to have made no comment.¹

Churchill agreed that there could be no reliance on France not to obstruct Hitler once she was out of the war. However, he showed no sign of backing down from the view he had expressed in the messages to Roosevelt of a week earlier. On the contrary, he stressed that Halifax's criteria of 'peace and security' were insufficient. Both aims 'might be achieved under a German domination of Europe'. For the Prime Minister it was a question of a different interpretation of national interest. 'We must ensure our complete liberty and independence'. Whereas Halifax had been willing to define these terms on the one hand widely enough to admit the possibility of recognising an immovable German dominance of Europe, and on the other within sufficient limits as to avoid any danger of a complete loss of security, Churchill would accept nothing less than 'complete' independence, or positive liberty. He would envisage no solution which demoted Britain from her apparent pre-war status of a great power, subject to the will of no other single power.

'He was opposed to any negotiations which might lead to a derogation of our rights and power'.

This was a conception which none of his colleagues in the War Cabinet seemed to share with such implacable enthusiasm.²

1 At the second meeting that day it was decided that Sir Archibald Sinclair, the Secretary for Air and Leader of the Liberal Party, should be present when the question of Italian mediation was next discussed. CAB 65/13, WM 140(40): Confidential Annex.

2 Labour Ministers Attlee and Greenwood were certainly anti-fascist. This did not commit them, however, to a full-hearted support of the British Empire's world role. See J.F. Naylor: Labour's International Policy, pp.215-217; Attlee's pamphlets 'Your constituencies in war-time', and 'Labour's peace aims', Winter 1939-40, Attlee Papers (Oxford), Box 8.

The Prime Minister did not contribute a great deal to this meeting in quantitative terms: what he did say however, was couched in positive language; viz: '...we could never accept'...'our complete liberty and independence'. Whereas Halifax now felt the pressure of conflicting criteria, (survival versus 'liberty'), and other ministers felt sufficiently unsure of their views as to want to await the outcomes of further developments and information, Churchill had an uncomplicated and internally consistent picture of the future. Having entered the war for right reasons, his ideas ran, Britain should continue the fight until her aims had been fully realised. Military setbacks were inevitable in some form or other. So long as Britain remained actually undefeated, she possessed the potential capacity to achieve victory, since time would inevitably work against Germany.¹ These opinions could not help but stand out in a small Cabinet where others neither adhered as fiercely to ideas they had formulated in a previous and now remote situation, nor could conceive of any compelling alternatives. Churchill was the only member, and one in an institutionally powerful position at that, with an exceptionally sharp definition of how Britain should act.

It would be possible to trace the whole development of this formulation of policy by describing the events of each individual Cabinet, in sequence. This would not only be repetitive and space-consuming, but it would not bring out clearly the basic structure of the debate, or how its outcome was affected by the way in which the argument was conducted, and the limits within which its propositions

1 In this Churchill the historian saw British experience repeating itself. See his speech on the surrender of Belgium; Hansard, 5th Series, Vol. 360, 28 May 1940. (My italics in text).

were cast. Such phenomena can be better demonstrated by a direct analysis of the principal issues discussed throughout what is already a very short-time span - from 26 May to 19 July (the date of Hitler's 'Reichstag' peace offer, whose rejection marked the end of a phase of uncertainty in Cabinet policy-making).

As will be clear already from the events of the 9 a.m Cabinet on 26 May, the main question involved the way in which the government might or might not adapt its attitude to the war as a result of the projected loss of her ally. To a large extent however this issue was entangled with the particular point from which it sprang, that of a possible bribe to Mussolini to keep Italy out of the war. Strictly speaking, the attempt to influence Italian policy was principally the concern of France, - for two reasons. The security of the French homeland would be immediately threatened by an Italian declaration of war, and the doubt as to Mussolini's intentions only lasted as long as there was a prospect of France herself escaping defeat. Nevertheless Britain was also very concerned with Italy, as she had been throughout the 1930s, and the British government was continually consulted during the French deliberations over whether to make an approach.¹ But in the discussion within the British Cabinet, the issue was quickly blurred into that of a more general settlement. After the initial French suggestion of a démarche and the first, fairly open-minded reactions from the Cabinet as to its

1 Sir Llewellyn Woodward: British Foreign Policy in the Second World War, Vol.I, pp.229-245.

utility,¹ both Churchill and Halifax showed signs of a willingness to discuss the question of negotiations in terms which went beyond Mussolini to Hitler - although for diametrically opposite reasons.

The Prime Minister himself felt under no illusion about the buying off of Italy being separate from the Anglo-German dispute. He wanted to alleviate France's difficulties, but:

'At the same time we must take care not to be forced into a weak position in which we went to Signor Mussolini and invited him to go² to Herr Hitler and ask him to treat us nicely'.

He was afraid that France would 'drag us into a settlement which involved intolerable terms'. This was because, as he remarked slightly later, of the suggested approach to Mussolini:

'it implied that if we were prepared to give Germany back her colonies and to make certain concessions in the Mediterranean, it was possible to get out of our present difficulties'.

Churchill saw this as unacceptable:

'He thought that no such option was open to us. For example, the terms offered would certainly prevent us from completing our rearmament'.

Halifax was equally prompt in raising broader considerations than those of Franco-Italian relations. Vis-à-vis any offer to Mussolini, he said:

'that he attached perhaps rather more importance than the Prime Minister to the desirability of allowing France to try out the possibilities of European equilibrium'.

1 On 26 May, Reynaud suggested going beyond the existing general feelers to Mussolini, hoping to keep Italy out of the war, to explore the possibility of Italian mediation in an overall settlement; CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 140(40), 26 May, 2 p.m; CAB 66/7, WP(40) 170.

2 Ibid; Churchill had initially seen Reynaud without Halifax, and had not encouraged him to develop the proposal.

As we have seen, the Foreign Secretary had already told Bastianini the previous day that he was free to tell Rome:

'that His Majesty's Government did not exclude the possibility of some discussion of the wider problem₁ of Europe in the event of the opportunity arising'.

This elision of the Italian problem into that of the wider war is not an academic mirage. Halifax himself noted it in his papers, with regard to the continued discussion on the 27 May:

'At the 4.30 Cabinet we had a long and rather confused discussion about, nominally, the approach to Italy, but also largely about general policy in₂the event of things going really badly in France'.

The Foreign Secretary grasped at the broadening of the debate because of his growing feeling that hostilities were no longer the unquestionably right course. The probing of Italy was an opportunity to do this. Indeed, he was positively anxious to avoid particular issues, and to concentrate on a general focus, in which difficulties might more easily be accommodated. He thought that any approach should avoid 'geographical precision' when touching on the problem of terms.³

But this very difficulty about the requirement of detail which Halifax felt when developing his argument, is an indication of his basic disadvantage in this situation relative to the Prime Minister. That is, the disadvantage of a minister feeling his way to a new argument and general position, in a Cabinet where the majority of his colleagues were undecided, but where he was opposed by the one individual on whom custom and the nature of the institution conferred

1 Ibid; Record of Conversation between Halifax and the Italian Ambassador, (attached also as telegram to Sir Percy Loraine, 25 May, No.413); Halifax's memory had faded by 1942, when he denied having wished to broaden the approach to Mussolini. Halifax Papers, A4.410.4.17; Halifax to Sargent, 12 October 1942.

2 The Earl of Birkenhead: Halifax: The Life of Lord Halifax, (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1965), p.458.

3 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 142(40), 27 May 1940, 4.30 p.m.

the role of leadership, and who in this case had an especially positive personality and idea of policy.

It is true that as Foreign Secretary Halifax was still in a position of privileged 'executive' responsibility over external relations, as we have argued before in this chapter. Moreover he represented continuity and experience at a time when a new Prime Minister might have been expected to defer somewhat to his most senior colleagues in the interests of preserving harmony within the Government. But circumstances had changed radically with the fall of the old administration. The War Cabinet, itself less than half the size of the peace-time body, had shrunk further (to 5 members) to the point where a 'foreign policy executive' of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary was impracticable - particularly since two of the other three members were now drawn from the Labour party.¹ Furthermore, Churchill's personality was well-suited to the taking on of major responsibilities from the moment of kissing hands. Encouraged over the previous twelve months by admiring friends, Churchill undoubtedly felt that history and the British people required great leadership from him. He was constitutionally ill-suited to working in harness with anyone, let alone Halifax, newly discredited by his past association with Chamberlain, and a man prone to vacillation and crises of conscience even in less catastrophic times.

Halifax's problem was heightened by the fact that because the external environment of British foreign policy in mid-1940 presented unparalleled dangers and uncertainties, Cabinet discussion placed a premium on recommendations which were well-known, clear and strongly

1 Both without departmental responsibilities; Attlee as Lord Privy Seal, Greenwood as Minister without Portfolio.

argued. The views of Lord Halifax at this stage were new, vague and ambivalent. His belief that France should be able 'to try out' 'European equilibrium' was hardly likely to convince the Cabinet that there existed a definite alternative to the line argued by Churchill which was worthy of serious consideration. Equally his eagerness to discuss the need to keep Italy out of the war in conjunction with the issue of whether to cut Britain's losses in the conflict with Germany (encouraged by both Churchill and French policy), could only increase the unsureness of his colleagues as to the right course on both questions.

Yet this ineffectiveness was more a function of the basic dilemma facing the Government than of personal failings in Halifax. It was soon clear that since the Italian question intrinsically involved that of 'general policy', confusion between the two was difficult to avoid. The comments of other ministers made the point. The Minister without Portfolio believed that concessions to Mussolini would mean:

'we should soon get to the point at which demands were being made which¹ affected the security of the British Empire'.

This would obviously impinge on British abilities to fight Hitler; particularly as:

'He doubted...whether it was within Signor Mussolini's power to take a line independent of Herr Hitler'.

At a later stage, Greenwood spelt out the nature of the 'demands' Italy might make:

'Signor Mussolini would be out to get Malta, Gibraltar and Suez. He felt sure that the negotiations would break down; but Herr Hitler would get to know of them, and it might have a bad effect of our prestige'.

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 140(40) 26 May 1940, 2.00 p.m.

In Cabinet on the day following the Secretary for Air, (and leader of the Liberal Party), took this point up in agreement:

'...the suggestion that we were willing to barter away pieces of British territory would have a deplorable effect and would make it difficult for us to₁ continue the desperate struggle which faced us'.

Attlee supported this argument; he thought the approach would be:

'very damaging to us. In effect, the approach suggested would inevitably lead to our asking Signor Mussolini₂ to intercede to obtain peace-terms for us'.

It is therefore clear that the objections to pursuing an approach to Italy, rebounded by their very nature onto the issue of peace with Germany, and helped to associate the latter in the minds of ministers with damage to British prestige and security, as well as to confuse the issue in general. It was felt that an approach in Rome would pre-judge the problem of what attitude to take to Germany, firstly by 'inevitably' leading Mussolini into interceding with Hitler, (although it is not clear why this should have mattered in itself, given that the Cabinet certainly would have felt that it was free to take up or reject any terms offered by Hitler),³ and secondly, by irretrievably damaging Britain's bargaining position in the war, before the Government had even formulated its final attitude to the effects of the defeat of France. It would have apparently constituted

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 142(40), 27 May 1940, 4.30 p.m. These crucial discussions about peace were confined to meetings attended only by full members of the War Cabinet, plus Sinclair. Cabinet meetings were otherwise attended by a number of extra ministers.

2 Ibid: the same day Attlee assured Dalton: 'There is no shake among politicians here...we shall fight it out, and are confident that with the resources behind us, we shall win'. Dalton Papers; 17, Dalton to Attlee, 27 May 1940; Diaries, 22, Entry of 27 May.

3 Especially as German peace feelers had been made at regular intervals even after Hitler's offer of October 1939. Documented in a Foreign Office minute (C4216/610/G) in PREM 4/100-8.

in itself a set-back of near-military proportions. Undeniably, therefore, since the two problems were very easily and thoroughly blurred in the Cabinet's discussions, Halifax's arguments for a serious consideration of a compromise peace were weakened at the same rate as the proposal about Italy fell into disrepute, by process of close association and confusion.

The Prime Minister's position and viewpoint was also strengthened by the pressures against challenging the leadership and splitting the Government, in a war-time crisis of such severity and fluidity. After the long and divided Cabinet of the afternoon of 27 May, Halifax was near to resignation. The Foreign Secretary's record reads:

'I thought Winston talked the most frightful rot, also Greenwood, and after bearing it for some time I said exactly what I thought of them, adding that if that was really their view, and if it came to the point, our ways must separate. Winston, surprised and mellowed, and, when I repeated the same thing in the garden, was full of apologies and affection. But it does drive me to despair when he works himself up into a passion of emotion, when he ought to make his brain think and reason'.¹

Cadogan's account confirms that Halifax felt: 'I can't work with Winston any longer', and that Churchill had been 'v. affectionate' afterwards. Cadogan adds that he advised Halifax not to give way to the annoyance 'to which we were all subject' over Churchill's 'rhodomontades', and to consult Chamberlain before acting:

'He said that of course he would and that,² as I knew, he wasn't one to take hasty decisions'.

1 Earl of Birkenhead: Halifax, p.458.

2 Dilks, pp.290-91. Churchill does not mention this dispute; Their Finest Hour, pp.108-111.

As is evident 'it' never did come 'to the point', even though Churchill's 'sentimental' views were to represent the actual course of British policy far more closely than Halifax's 'reasoned' opinion. It seems likely that Halifax reluctantly gave voice to feelings which he was partly repressing, and that Churchill gave him an easy exit from his threats of resignation, by a personal conciliation which did not concede the substance of the dispute (as we shall see). Despite the strength of his views, the Foreign Secretary found it an impossible strain to precipitate a major confrontation with his Prime Minister at such a hazardous time, let alone to take the issue to a more public arena. Purged by his outburst, Halifax allowed himself to be talked out of any 'hasty decision'.¹

The surprise, danger and urgency of the new problems, meant that decision-making was taking place in true conditions of crisis. The consequent hesitancy felt by most ministers, especially those serving in office for the first time, invited dominating, executive leadership. And Churchill was not a Prime Minister to pass up circumstances which particularly seemed to require creative action on his part. He was personally willing to broaden the question of the approach to Mussolini because of a genuine fear that Britain might be insidiously trapped into the compromise peace to which he was so strongly opposed. By 28 May he was certain that 'the French purpose was to see Signor

1 Dilks, p.291. See also Jonathan Knight: 'Churchill and the approach to Mussolini and Hitler in May 1940: a reply to David Carlton'. British Journal of International Studies, Vol.3, No.1 (April 1977), pp.92-6.

Mussolini acting as an intermediary between ourselves and Herr Hitler. He was determined not to get into this position.¹ Churchill went on to describe the reasons for which he opposed Reynaud's apparent attempt to get Britain to the conference table and end the war:

'If we once got to the table we should then find that the terms offered us touched our independence and integrity. When, at this point, we got up to leave the conference-table, we should find that all the forces of resolution which were₂ now at our disposal would have vanished.

The Prime Minister summed up his views of negotiations with the Axis by the political cliché of 'the slippery slope' onto which Britain would be enticed. The metaphor illustrates well the technique by which Churchill continually presented the problem in extreme terms: one move towards communication with Hitler, the phrase implied, would begin an inexorable draining away of the remaining strength of Britain's position. There could be no middle way. Because of his own strong views, Churchill's natural tendency was to use his position as chairman to polarise the argument between his own advocacy of a fight-on-with-no-compromise attitude, and what he cast as the only alternative, that of negotiations involving the surrender of British interests and security. Favouring one extreme, he preferred to argue against the other, rather than against an attitude of moderate compromise, since he could then more easily cast Halifax's arguments as an attempt at complete surrender, and more firmly identify his own attitude with that of the status quo position, which was at least known and associated with patriotic sentiments of heroic defence. The opposite case, in its straw man form, amounted not only to virtual defeat, but to the notably worse fate for the decision-makers of this era of dishonourable defeat.

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 145(40), 28 May 1940, 4.00 p.m. At this time the War Cabinet was meeting twice a day.

2 Ibid: The echo of Munich must have been painfully evident to Chamberlain, sitting at the same table.

For when it had finally been acknowledged that France was likely to suffer military defeat, Churchill had told Reynaud that:

'We would rather₁ go down fighting than be enslaved to Germany'.

This was not just to encourage French morale; twenty-four hours later Churchill informed his Cabinet that:

'Even if we were beaten, we should be no worse off than we should be if we were now to abandon the struggle...If the worst came to the worst, it would not be a bad thing for this country to go down fighting for the other countries₂ which had been overcome by the Nazi tyranny'.

As a mere Service Minister, under Chamberlain, Churchill had not been able to set a strict moral example in this way. Then, his views only constituted one input among several, as to the criteria which ought to be adopted for the making of any given policy.³ But now, as Prime Minister, he was able to use his stature and right to lead the discussion, to get a special hearing and to put the onus for disagreement on his colleagues. In this same monologue, he asserted that the only way to reflate Britain's punctured prestige in the world, was by remaining unbeaten, thus assuming that the need to boost prestige was a first priority. It was this natural appropriation, on Churchill's part, of a high moral authority, which so much put his fellow Cabinet members at a disadvantage when they were in the process of reconsidering their attitudes, and possibly of feeling their way towards a new position, with all the attendant justification which that would require.

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 140(40), 26 May 1940, 2.00 p.m.

2 Ibid; WM 142(40), 27 May, 4.30 p.m. This statement clearly exasperated Halifax: 'he could not recognise any resemblance between the action he proposed, and the suggestion that we were sueing for terms which would lead us to disaster'.

3 Churchill had tried to set a lead when 1st Lord, but his role had confined the impact of his personality. The Prime Minister found his barrage of letters annoying. Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1124, letter to Ida Chamberlain, 8 October 1939.

A prime example of this is Churchill's reaction on 28 May to the suggestion that the British Empire should directly appeal to the USA for the latter's entry into the war. The Prime Minister thought that this would be 'altogether premature':

'If we made a bold stand against Germany, that would command their admiration and respect; but a grovelling appeal, if made now, would have the worst possible effect'.¹

Here Churchill both polarised the debate by casting the options in extreme form, and again adopted for his views the terminology of moral approval; for the opposing alternative, his tone was little short of demagogic. The importance of this does not lie in any argument that the use of such language is itself enough to give a minister a determining role in policy formulation; clearly most others expressed strong feelings of approbation or denunciation at various times. Nor is it argued that a Prime Minister has only to handle a discussion in this way in order to dominate his Cabinet. That would imply that low-key Premiers like Stanley Baldwin or Clement Attlee were never able to exert strong leadership over their peers. The point is rather that where the pace of events was so fast, where the data-base of previous policy-assumptions was in the midst of disintegration, there occurred, before the re-emergence of a definite set of attitudes in Cabinet, a crucial hiatus in which the Prime Minister was especially well-placed to take an influential initiative should he wish to do so. And where a system is structured so as to give certain special opportunities to particular actors, it is not usual for those openings to be ignored. The strong moral line and polarisation of argument

¹ CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 145(40), 28 May 1940, 4.00 p.m. (My italics).

which characterised Churchill's behaviour on this occasion, were the ways in which this Prime Minister took the opportunity. In so doing, he fulfilled a necessary function from the point of view of the Cabinet as collective organisation. Without an agreed and clear perspective during the disintegration of the western front, it vitally required an initiative from somewhere to clarify the issues. Because the environment was one of crisis, there was also an intrinsic need for rapid resolution of the issues into a single, settled policy, whatever its form. Churchill's immediate provision of a clear-cut opinion and his consistently strong inputs on its behalf, were the relevant response to this need. The actual arguments employed were in this one sense, broadly irrelevant to the final decision.

However, the Prime Minister's lead did not only take the form of righteous exhortation. He also annexed the arguments of practicality to his views. Halifax had made no pretence that a re-adjustment of war-policy would carry any moral weight; his advocacy rested on tangible reasons of necessity. But here too he was outflanked by Churchill. Halifax based his argument by definition on the prediction that Britain could secure acceptable peace terms from Hitler.¹

1 On 25 May Halifax seems to have drafted a letter to Roosevelt (never sent) asking the USA to use its influence on Hitler to ensure that any terms 'that were intended to destroy the independence of Great Britain or France' were not insisted on, but recognising that Hitler had the right to offer terms favourable to himself and unfavourable to the defeated. This was a significantly different perspective from that of Churchill. Halifax Papers, A4.410:4:1, Draft (by Halifax) of a message from the Prime Minister to the President, 25 May 1940.

Churchill argued from statements which were also essentially speculative, but which he presented as indisputable objective facts, by basing them on the current scenario, where Britain was still undefeated and had suffered no disastrous military losses. In this he was aided by the fact that the Foreign Secretary's prediction conflicted with the undividedly hostile image of Hitler and the Nazis which was common to all British policy-makers by this time. To gain acceptance, it would have had to have achieved the reformation of an established stereotype. Such an achievement was obviously not impossible, since general perspectives must and do change over time if policy is not to fall disastrously out of time with the continually evolving external environment. But in this context, most factors worked against any minister other than the Premier being able to shift the general focus of policy. Moreover, in this specific instance, the Prime Minister was not competing to gain acceptance for a new set of attitudes, but was rather seeking only to reinforce and perpetuate the existing criteria for war-policy.

The 'facts' and practical arguments which Churchill presented in support of this line added up to an optimistic picture of apparently disastrous events, by a selective interpretation of the value of allies. As we saw earlier, the Prime Minister was eager to represent any small sign of resistance to the German invasion as evidence of the continued ability of France to stay in the war. Yet when it ultimately became clear that this was not in fact the case, he quickly turned the implications of French defeat also to Britain's advantage. On 26 May, when it was realised that counter-attack was impossible, Churchill

remarked that:

'From one point of view, he would rather France was out of the war before she was broken up, and retained the position of a strong neutral¹ whose factories could not be used against us'.

Cadogan noted this switch of view in his diary that night, with some scepticism. Five days later however, he had come round to the same opinion.² It was a natural rationalisation to make. But Churchill had come to it first among those present at Cabinet, and because of the natural attention accorded to his reactions, he probably played a decisive part in setting the tone of the collective governmental feeling about Britain's new isolation, by affecting the delicate and momentary balance between pessimistic and optimistic perceptions.³

In similar vein, Churchill moved towards a position of regarding recent developments as positively beneficial in terms of their effects on American policy towards the war. British policy-makers had been sanguine from the beginning about the back-up resources which the USA could provide for the Allied war effort,⁴ but now there emerged a significant propensity to regard an American entry into the war at some stage as likely and even inevitable. Right back on 15 May the Prime Minister had said that 'American sympathy had recently

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 140(40), 26 May 1940. Churchill was not alone in this view. Hankey Papers, 4/32, Hankey to Hoare, 19 July 1940.

2 Dilks, pp.290 and 293.

3 In part this is reminiscent of the irresistible optimism of General Douglas MacArthur before the Inchon landings in Korea. Joseph De Rivera: The Psychological Dimension of Foreign Policy, pp.175-181.

4 See CAB 23/100, CM 36(39), 5 July 1939, 5.30 p.m; CAB 65/5, WMs 15 and 21(40)16 and 23 January 1940. Also CAB 27/662, DM(39)21, 1 September 1939.

been veering very much in our favour.'¹ The Cabinet naturally looked to Churchill, with his transatlantic connections, for its interpretation of Foreign Office data on American intentions - especially now that Hoare had left the Cabinet, taking his close personal relations with Lothian with him.² Even the Foreign Secretary recognised the special advantages which Churchill possessed through his correspondence with Roosevelt. Halifax said, with regard to Britain's need for American 'planes:

'...that in his opinion the only chance of obtaining the equipment we required was through a direct approach from₃ the Prime Minister to President Roosevelt'.

We have already noted how Churchill stressed the need to win America's 'administration and respect'; on that occasion the War Cabinet had agreed with him that there should be no appeal to the USA for fear of confirming any fears as to the British weakness.⁴ As time went on Churchill could argue that positive American intervention was near at hand. On 9 June he brought up in Cabinet a complaint from General Smuts that the Dominions Office had urged the propagation of the idea that it was neither Britain's wish nor interest to involve the USA in 'totalitarian warfare'; Smuts believed that:

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 123(40):2, 15 May 1940.

2 The Marquess of Lothian was Ambassador in Washington between 22 August 1939-12 December 1940. Hoare had considerable private correspondence with him. Templewood Papers, XI:1,3,5.

3 CAB 65/7, WM 131(40), 20 May 1940.

4 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 145(40):1, 28 May 1940 4.00 p.m. and CAB 65/7, WM 145(40).

'as events were now moving any day anything might happen to precipitate the United States into the war. Why should we arrest this process of conversion by the logic of events?'

The Prime Minister said that he entirely agreed with the view expressed by General Smuts. He had therefore already ordered the sending of a telegram to the Dominions to correct the impression given in the previous circular.¹ Thus Churchill got his way on two diametrically opposed decisions twelve days apart. After a further three days, the question of the war itself was almost subordinated to the acquisition of American aid. Churchill stated:

'A declaration that we were firmly resolved to continue the war in all circumstances would prove the best invitation to the United₂ States of America to lend us their support'.

The circular argument here, that Britain should continue the war so as to encourage America to help her continue the war, seemed to pass unnoticed.

Thus, when Roosevelt sent a message of encouragement to Reynaud on 13 June, the Prime Minister was ready to interpret it as a virtual declaration of war - that is, as far as the President could go without Congress. He thought that Roosevelt would hardly urge France to fight on if he did not intend to join her. He expected America's entry 'in the near future'.³ Churchill's friend Lord Beaverbrook agreed:

'It was now inevitable that the₄ United States of America would declare war'.

1 CAB 65/7, WM 159(40), 9 June 1940.

2 CAB 65/7, WM 163(40), 12 June 1940, 5.00 p.m. At nearly the same time Lothian was saying circumspectly that the US could not do more for Britain without entering the war, a prospect bedevilled by 'the natural instinct of every democracy to avoid war if it possibly can'. Lothian Papers, Vol.399, Lothian to Victor Cazelet, 1 July 1940.

3 If Roosevelt were successful in the November election. CAB 65/7, WM 165(40), 13 June 1940, 10.15 p.m.

4 Ibid; Beaverbrook did not become a full member of the War Cabinet until 2 August 1940, and was attending here as Minister of Aircraft Production because of the last crisis over France. He was also on good terms with Roosevelt. A.J.P. Taylor: Beaverbrook (London, Hamish Hamilton 1972), Penguin Ed., 1974, pp.514-516.

There seem to have been some in the Cabinet who were less convinced than Churchill of this likelihood, but if so their doubts were inconsequential in the absence of hard information, other than Churchill's firm statements about America's imminent entry into the war. Although it was pointed out in discussion both that Roosevelt 'had not stated in terms that the United States would declare war', and that the implications of the message might not be as clear to the French as to the 'Anglo-Saxon mind', Churchill relentlessly stressed the significance of the declaration. Hitler might 'turn on' Britain:

'...very quickly, perhaps within a fortnight; but before that the United States of America would be in the war on our side'.

Ultimately the War Cabinet tended to agree, although they still 'generally felt' that it needed pointing out to France that the President's message:

'contained two points which were tantamount to a declaration of war - first, a promise of all material aid, which implied active assistance, and second, a call to go on fighting even if the Government was driven right out of France'.¹

It will be noted, with hindsight, that these hopes and inferences were wildly unrealistic, and indeed that they were soon replaced by a more sober assessment. In May-June, 1940, however, they were both a typical product of the sense of crisis, and one of the means by which the strain was alleviated. Churchill inspired and inflated the feeling that Britain might soon have a new ally, by his positive introductions of the possibility during discussions on war-policy, and by the way he presented Roosevelt's evident sympathy for the Allied cause as proof

1 CAB 65/7, WM 165(40). It was out of this Cabinet that the notion of Anglo-French union arose, in Churchill's telegram to Reynaud. Churchill: Their Finest Hour, pp.162-7.

of an almost immediate American declaration of war - despite his simultaneous acknowledgement of the restraints imposed by Congress on US foreign policy, and the general feeling that this interpretation would not be obvious to the French.¹

Halifax was thus confronted by a Prime Minister who fully utilised the opportunities inherently open to him in this particular development of the war first to determine the direction of Cabinet thinking, and then to consolidate tentative preferences into general policies. It was not surprising that he failed to gain Cabinet support for his differing views. The course of the initial major confrontation between the two men, (from 26-8 May), illustrates the way in which Churchill was able to identify his views with the maintenance of the status quo, and to place the onus of proof upon Halifax. The disagreement centred on the likely nature of any German terms. Halifax raised the subject during discussion of the approach to Mussolini:

'He was not quite convinced that the Prime Minister's diagnosis was correct and that it was in Herr Hitler's interest to insist on outrageous terms.² After all, he knew his own internal weaknesses'.

The Prime Minister did not respond immediately to this challenging of one of his fundamental assumptions. However, later in the proceedings, as we have already noted, he stressed that any terms offered would certainly involve unacceptable conditions, such as a limitation on British rearmament. Halifax agreed that this condition would be unacceptable - but Hitler might not seek to impose it. The next day he pressed the point again, but by then had been put on to the defensive. Inevitably in such a dispute, the Foreign Secretary

1 CAB 65/7, loc. cit. See also P.M.H. Bell: A Certain Eventuality: Britain and the Fall of France (Farnborough, Saxon House, 1974), pp.64-67.

2 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 140(40), 26 May, 2.00 p.m.

was forced to answer objections from the Prime Minister, and not vice-versa. For Churchill refused to take seriously the possibility of Hitler offering reasonable terms or of Britain negotiating them. Halifax had to deny that he proposed suing for terms which would lead to disaster and constantly to reiterate that realistic terms were not an impossible contingency, solely to keep the idea in the forefront of the debate.¹ Although even Churchill at this time was able to conceive of British war aims less ambitious than those of October 1939 - because of the desperate military situation - he did so in a purely hypothetical context. He would not allow the issue an important place in policy-formulation:

'THE PRIME MINISTER said that he thought the issue which the War Cabinet was called upon to settle was difficult enough without getting involved in the discussion of an issue which was quite unreal and was most unlikely to arise. If Herr Hitler was prepared to make peace on the terms of the restoration of German colonies and the overlordship of Central Europe, that was one thing. But it was quite₂unlikely that he would make any such offer'.

After another 24 hours and three Cabinet meetings, Halifax was still arguing that the present might be the best opportunity of getting good terms, and that he had been again misrepresented as pursuing 'ultimate capitulation' (so successful had Churchill been in polarising the issue). But by this time he was reduced to a mere restatement of the desirability of 'trying out the possibilities of mediation'; the fact that he was requesting a major change in policy

1 Halifax's central points through the arguments of the five relevant meetings were, in summary: (1) that terms which Germany might offer need not be unacceptable, as such, to Britain. (2) in the event of terms being offered which did not promise to destroy British independence, the risk of fighting on might become too great given the strength of Germany's new position. Confirmed by the account in Sir Llewellyn Woodward: British Foreign Policy in the Second World War, Vol.I, pp.197-204.

2 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 142(40), 27 May 1940, 4.30 p.m.

was inhibiting even the development of his case.¹ Churchill could contrast the physical fact of Britain's survival, however temporary it might be, with the speculation of the Foreign Secretary's point. The Prime Minister thought:

'...that the chances of decent terms being offered to us at the present time were a thousand to one';

and

'it was impossible to imagine that Hitler would² be so foolish as to let us continue our rearmament'.

By continuing to assert flatly that any German terms would enslave Britain, and that negotiation in itself would be harmful, Churchill was drawing attention to the inherent difficulties of Halifax's standpoint, that it contravened the generally held image among ministers of a dynamically aggressive Nazi regime, and at the same time raised the spectre of previous and apparently mistaken negotiations with Hitler. In short, his was a very strong case. Moreover since he had been accepted on all sides as the new Prime Minister only two weeks before, Churchill was in a very strong position to demand the rejection of Halifax's viewpoint - especially as he alone among major political figures had escaped the retrospective 'shame' of both Munich, and the failure to support rearmament.³

No less on the argument that Britain should not ignore a chance to avoid the costs of a German attack, was Halifax fighting a losing battle. Even when it seemed that the BEF might be lost, Churchill

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 145(40), 28 May 1940, 4.00 p.m.

2 Ibid; less coolly, Churchill also thought that 'the nations which went down fighting rose again, but those which surrendered tamely were finished'.

3 But a number of Labour politicians (including Attlee) had preferred Halifax to Churchill in the succession crisis of early May. Dalton Papers, Diary Vol.22, 9 May 1940, and Paul Addison: The Road to 1945, pp.99-102.

compared Britain's intact strength with the disintegrating powers of France (rather than with France's position before the German attack, which would have been a truer comparison). He believed that Britain's situation could only improve, and because of rather than despite, an attempt at invasion. In opposing what he saw as French attempts to entangle Britain in negotiations, Churchill argued that:

'...the position would be entirely different when Germany had made an unsuccessful attempt to invade this country'.

Thus the only incentives were to continue in the war:

'We should get no worse terms if we went on fighting, even if we were beaten, than were open to us now. If, however, we continued the war and Germany attacked us, no doubt we should suffer some damage, but they also would suffer severe¹ losses. Their oil supplies might be reduced'.

It is clear that Churchill's argument here is based as much on assertion as that of Halifax - an invasion attempt will be unsuccessful, Hitler's terms will be crippling, (yet no more so after a total defeat of Britain), Germany will suffer 'severe losses' but Britain only 'some damage'. Nevertheless, it was here that all the innate advantages of the Prime Minister counted in his favour. Because of the premium on a positive and formulated policy at this time, and because of the opportunity Churchill had to determine the terms of reference of the discussion, his assertions were likely to be more influential in Cabinet than the assertions of any colleague. Particularly as the Prime Minister was not unwilling to capitalise on the privileges which his institutional status conferred on him. For example, stimulated by

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 140(40), 26 May 1940, 2.00 p.m.; WM 145(40), 28 May 4.00 p.m. (my italics).

reports that the Australian High Commissioner was spreading counsels of 'defeatism', Churchill both admonished his ministers, and wielded the idea of public support as a further means of exhortation:

'THE PRIME MINISTER thought that it would be as well that he should issue a general injunction to Ministers to use confident language. He was convinced that the bulk of the people of the country would₁ refuse to accept the possibility of defeat'.

The War Cabinet 'completely agreed' with Churchill. But once again they were following in the Prime Minister's wake, not sharing in the initiative.

Moreover Churchill was able to mobilize Ministers outside the War Cabinet as another way of weighting the balance of argument within it. In between the two halves of the meeting which began at 4 p.m on 28 May, and was adjourned for three-quarters of an hour in its midst, he saw the group of other Ministers and gave them the most recent information:

'They had not expressed alarm at the position in France, but had expressed the greatest satisfaction when he had told them that there was no chance of our giving up the struggle. He did not remember having ever before heard a gathering of persons occupying high places in political₂ life express themselves so emphatically'.

Thus the Prime Minister not only pre-judged the outcome of the Cabinet's deliberations, but also communicated to the Cabinet the views of other ministers in the form of a uniquely homogeneous and emphatic endorsement of his own position. While the views of this group were generally in favour of fighting on, it is reasonable to

1 CAB 65/7, Confidential Annex, WM 141(40), 27 May 1940, 11.30 a.m. For the issue of interpretations of public opinion, see Ch.4. below.

2 CAB 65/7, Confidential Annex, WM 145(40), 28 May, 4-6.15 p.m. and 7 p.m. onwards. Six non-War Cabinet ministers had been present at the morning meeting (WM 144(40), 11.30 a.m), but their long agenda had not included this issue.

wonder how far Churchill over-estimated their enthusiasm, and also whether he would have reported their views so readily had they taken another form. Dalton's private account confirms the meeting's agreement with the Prime Minister, but also gives the impression that its response was much more passive. Churchill had said that if Britain were to face defeat, let her face it not through surrender, but 'only when each one of us lies choking in his own blood upon the ground'. In response:

'There was a murmur of approval round the table, in which I think, Amery, Lord Lloyd and I were loudest. Not much more was said. No-one expressed even the faintest flicker of dissent. Herbert Morrison asked about evacuation of the Government,¹ and hoped that it would not be hurried'.

Churchill thus seems to have exaggerated somewhat in his account to the War Cabinet, who relied upon him for an interpretation of the collective feelings about the war in the wider Cabinet. This is perhaps an indication of the force with which the Prime Minister was arguing for a continuation of the war. His colleagues, whether they disagreed or were simply less certain in their judgements, were under extreme pressure to follow Churchill's lead, since he would not admit even the possibility of doubt. Anything less than unqualified belligerence was in danger of being cast as treason. At that delicate point in the formation of a consensus within the War Cabinet, the Prime Minister's armoury of weapons in discussion may have been of some significance.

1 Dalton Papers, Vol.22, Diary, 28 May 1940. The vociferous trio were all newcomers to the Government, and all 'anti-appeasers'.

At this point we should turn to the opinions of the other three members of the War Cabinet, and of those who were occasionally present. The two main protagonists monopolised the dispute, but not the discussion. However, the meetings of the Cabinet at this time reveal Attlee, Chamberlain, Greenwood and the few other major contributors as moderate, hesitant, and influenced by the arguments of Churchill and Halifax. Although they all held individual views on the situation, these were nothing like so consistent or strongly affirmed as those of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary.¹

At the height of the crisis, for example, on the morning of 27 May, Chamberlain told the Cabinet that he had replied to Mr. Bruce's pessimism about British prospects by pointing out 'that it was too soon to give any definite opinion in the matter'. The lack of conviction in his language can hardly have reassured Bruce (the Australian High Commissioner):

'Our dangers were clear, but Germany would have her difficulties also, and even fighting, single-handed we might well outlast her'.

Chamberlain implicitly recognised that not 'outlasting' Germany was at least a serious possibility, to be weighed in advance when determining policy - an admission Churchill would never have conceded. The Lord President went on to illustrate further this ambivalence about the war. In terms of sheer survival, he was determined and sanguine about fighting on; but he was not so certain about the ultimate wisdom

1 Unfortunately there are few private papers in existence relevant to these discussions.

2 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 141(40):1, 27 May 1940, 11.30 a.m. (my italics).

of continuing to exclude a compromise peace from the range of possible futures. Chamberlain suggested, and the Cabinet agreed, that he should see the Dominion High Commissioners again, to inform them that:

'...even if France went out of the war, there was no prospect of our giving in. We had good reason to believe that we could withstand attack by Germany, and were resolved to fight on.'

(This statement would apply of course to the immediate situation arising out of the hypothetical collapse of France. It would not mean that if at any time terms were offered, they would not be considered on their merits).

This statement represents an important *via media* between the two extremes of (i) fighting until the war ended in total victory or total defeat, and (ii) being willing to contemplate immediate negotiations for peace so as to avoid the risks of bombing and attempted invasion. The other Ministers seem to have endorsed it. While the 1st Lord and the Dominions Secretary spoke against Bruce's 'defeatism' about Britain's chance of survival in isolation, the Cabinet approved Chamberlain's remarks in their entirety, including the new qualification on Britain's ability to achieve victory and keep out of negotiations with Hitler. Ministers were against 'capitulation' before the first stone had even been cast, but equally they were not for an irrevocable, open-ended prosecution of the war.²

The lengthy discussion on 28 May makes this clearer. Again the Cabinet Minutes give the impression that it was Chamberlain of the

1 Ibid; the three service ministers, plus Anderson, Caldecote (formerly Inskip) and Duff Cooper were also present at this meeting.

2 Even Eden recalls having seen 'nothing to quarrel about' in Maisky's contemporary judgement that 'though he believed we could withstand all Hitler's attacks, he did not see how we could win the war'. The Earl of Avon: The Eden Memoirs: The Reckoning, p.121.

uncommitted ministers who contributed the most. Firstly he stressed that:

'...mediation at this stage, in the presence of a great disaster, and at a time when many people might think that we had no more resources left, could only have the most unfortunate results. We in this country felt that we had resources left to us of which we could make good use'.

Yet there was no doubt that Chamberlain was here arguing for the continuation of the war on the criterion of achieving a better ultimate compromise peace, rather than on that of pursuing total victory. He agreed with Churchill that resistance to invasion would improve Britain's position, but where the latter believed that any terms offered thereafter could not be worse than at the present, and essentially hoped that time would bring Britain allies who would restore her capacity to defeat Hitler, the Lord President thought that Britain's ability to resist would secure for her an acceptable settlement which should be considered seriously the moment it appeared on the horizon. The following statements express this view fully:

'There could be no question of our making concessions to Italy while the war continued. The concessions which it was contemplated we might have to make, e.g., in regard to Malta and Gibraltar, would have to be part of a general settlement with Germany'...

'A' 'It was clear to the world that we were in a tight corner, and he did not see what we should lose if we said openly that, while we would fight to the end to preserve our independence, we were ready to consider decent terms if such were offered to us'.

'A' 'THE LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL Said that it was our duty to look at the situation realistically. He felt bound to say that he was in agreement with the Foreign Secretary in taking the view that if we thought it was possible that we could now get terms which, although grievous, would not threaten our independence, we should be right to consider such terms'.

'If, as we believed, we could hold out, we should be able to obtain terms which would₁ not affect our independence'.

These arguments have the appearance of consistency. But even aside from the fact that they were a loose amalgam of the two different standpoints of survival at all costs and victory at all costs, it will have been observed that their attitude to the prospect of immediate negotiations was distinctly ambiguous. At various points Chamberlain emphasised that mediation would harm Britain's bargaining position and morale, and that better terms would be available once the contest had been joined. At others he suggested, (as at 'A' above), that the possibility of an imminent settlement should not be ruled out.

Dalton colourfully expressed his impression after the ministerial meeting, that the War Cabinet might not be completely or actively behind Churchill:

'It is quite clear that whereas the Old Umbrella - neither he nor other members of the War Cabinet were at this meeting - wanted to run very early,₂ Winston's bias is all the other way'.

And indeed, Attlee, Greenwood and Sir Archibald Sinclair seem to have shared Chamberlain's rather diffuse and tentative attitude. None of the three figure prominently in the Cabinet Minutes, and unless for some inscrutable reason Sir Edward Bridges decided to pare down their

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 145(40), 28 May 4.00 p.m. For 'A' see text below. The statements are in sequence, but were made at different stages of the discussion.

2 Dalton Papers, Diary Vol.22, 28 May 1940; 'The Old Umbrella' is presumably Chamberlain.

contribution to the debate, it is reasonable to infer that they did not feel sufficiently certain or positive in their views to speak forcefully and at length. (It is interesting that the three concerned were both relative newcomers to Government, and representatives of the former Opposition). Generally speaking, we may say that they were definitely opposed to peace negotiations merely on the grounds that France was certain to be defeated - and in any case sceptical about their likelihood. Attlee tended to take his lead from others. He felt that Hitler would be in a worse position if he had been frustrated in his plan for victory by the end of the year, and that approaches to Mussolini should be avoided because they would lead to an immediate intercession between Britain and Germany. His views were expressed in the most clipped way, but it is clear that he was opposed to such a move in part because of the great damage it might do to the morale of the British people, and their consequent ability to survive a German onslaught.¹

Greenwood also subscribed to these two points. He believed that any course of action open to the Cabinet would be highly dangerous, but still came down just about in favour of continuing the war, for the present:

'The line of resistance was certainly a gamble, but he did not feel that this was a time for ultimate capitulation'.

In a prior meeting Greenwood had been willing to see Halifax's 'line of approach' (about Mussolini and general 'European equilibrium') tried. Now he remained aware of the fragility of Britain's position but wanted

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 140(40), 26 May; WM 142(40), 27 May; WM 145(40), 28 May; J. Weygand: The Role of General Weygand, p.91, described Attlee showing 'approval' of Churchill's optimism at the Supreme War Council of 31 May; and see footnote 2 above, p.179.

no 'weakening' in the immediate crisis.¹

The only other participant in high-level policy-formulation within the Cabinet at this time, (as opposed to the intermittent attenders), was Sinclair, in his function of representing the minority party in the National Government. The Liberal leader was equally opposed to any concessions while the outcome of a German attack on Britain still remained to be determined; in any case, he thought that:

'...there was no possible chance of acceptable terms being open to us at the present moment'.

Sinclair's clear pronouncement nonetheless carried the implication that at some future stage, 'acceptable terms' might conceivably be available to Britain. The two Labour Ministers also accepted the implication, endorsing Chamberlain's remarks to that effect. The Minutes explicitly and repeatedly record that: 'There was complete agreement with the views which had been expressed by...The Lord President of the Council'; that:(after Chamberlain's statement that making peace soon would involve a 'considerable gamble', but equally Britain should be ready to consider 'decent terms'), 'The War Cabinet agreed that this was a true statement of the case'; and that: 'In further discussion, general agreement was expressed with the views put

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 145(40) 28 May, and WM 140(40), 26 May.

forward by the Lord President'.¹ Thus Attlee and Greenwood shared the low-profile stance articulated by Chamberlain. They were willing to state positively their opposition to joining France in an imminent armistice, but they also bestowed approval on Chamberlain's further comments about the need to consider any reasonable terms - as did Sinclair. Essentially they were reluctant to voice such sentiments positively, their expressions of opinion being generally tentative and piecemeal. Their muted agreement with Chamberlain's compromise position was based both on a recognition that peace might be an eventual hard necessity, and on the history of their own previous commitment to make no more 'dishonourable' agreements, and to vanquish Nazism completely.²

Thus after intensive debate in the last week of May, a pattern of attitudes had emerged in the War Cabinet; Halifax and Churchill in basic conflict, with the other senior ministers pulled both ways and tending towards compromise as much through a desire for consensus as through any conviction about the precise policies to be followed in future.

Of course the progress of the war, France's collapse, and many other factors outside Britain's control, were the major determinants of the history of this period. Put in a wider perspective, arguments within the War Cabinet of the kind we have plotted may seem of only passing significance. The assumption behind any analysis of decision-making, however, is that external forces continually interact with

1 Ibid; Sinclair thought that 'some exhortation on the lines suggested by the Prime Minister' should be added to the reply to Reynaud (turning down a direct appeal to Mussolini). A contemporary observer also noted the War Cabinet's half-way position: 'text of telegram (which) seems to envisage possibility of Musso mediating at a later date. It looks as if Halifax may have evolved some scheme for mediation by Italy on an offer of terms to Hitler. Incredible though it sounds, I cannot put it past him". Harvey Diary, 29 May 1940.

2 The two Labour leaders were in any case not yet experienced or personally equipped enough to take a lead in Cabinet. P.Addison: The Road to 1945, pp.112-113; Hankey to Chamberlain, 9 May 1940, quoted in S.Roskill: Hankey: Man of Secrets, Vol.III, p.463.

domestic variables to produce choices whose character and outcomes are far from being pre-determined. There will always be a variety of ways in which a country may react to a given international development, according to the state of her own politics and government at the time. In the case under review here, hindsight has tended to distort our understanding by making the path that Britain did follow in 1940 seem obvious and inevitable. The Cabinet records make it clear that policy-makers did not, of course, see it in that way. Fear, uncertainty and speculation abounded in a 'world turned upside down'. The meaning for Britain of the terrifying events in France was obscure, except in their demonstration that nothing could be taken for granted about the war. Recommendations about policy were bound to be even more subjective than usual. In these circumstances, then, choices were especially crucial and problematical, and the decisions which did emerge are worthy of the closest attention.

As it was, the very unpredictability of events contributed to the strengthening of Churchill's arguments, precisely because the latter resembled articles of faith more than a detached measuring of pros and cons. Behavioural research suggests that when decision-makers perceive external threats to be severe, they tend to fall back on conviction far more than logic, thereby resolving some of the anxiety that might otherwise paralyse decision.¹ In May 1940 Churchill enjoyed not only the powers of Prime Ministerial office, but also a capacity for conviction unrivalled among his colleagues.

1 For example O. Holsti: 'Cognitive Dynamics and Images of the Enemy' and R. North: 'Perception and Action in the 1914 Crisis', both in J.C. Farrell and A.S. Smith (Eds.): Image and Reality in World Politics (New York, Columbia University Press, 1968).

Moreover, the absence of certain pressures worked in the Prime Minister's favour. It had been important, for example, that there had been no German peace offers made during the crucial last weeks of French independence, and especially in the week before Dunkirk, when the course of the campaign had become clear, including the prospect for Britain of the loss of her entire army, and the Cabinet had been in the midst of its anxious discussions about a possible end to hostilities.¹ There was a strong inhibition in the British Government against beginning contacts with Germany about peace. Such a positive step would have been an overwhelming responsibility at such a time of tension between basic aims and values on the one hand, and apparent lack of capabilities on the other. It would have meant a risky pre-judgement of Hitler's interest in a moderate peace. It would also involve massive humiliation at home and abroad. Finally, the way in which such a step might be taken, had particular complications. The raising by the French of a possible bribe to Italy, inevitably introduced for Britain the added unpleasantness of likely concessions in the Mediterranean to a country not yet at war, as part of the price for achieving a general settlement with Germany. The Mediterranean furthermore, was an area of long-term strategic importance to the British Empire.²

Given that these factors militated against a positive move by the Cabinet for an armistice, a démarche by the Germans themselves,

1 The last time on which a possible peace move had come before the Cabinet had been in March 1940, on the occasion of American Under-Secretary of State Sumner Welles's visit to Germany and Italy. CAB 65/6, WMs 67 & 69 (40), 13 & 15 March 1940.

2 Documented in Lawrence Pratt: East of Malta, West of Suez: Britain's Mediterranean Crisis, 1936-9, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1975).

on the relatively moderate lines of the July feeler in Berne,¹ would at least have brought an important new element into play during the formulation of British policy. It would have relieved the Government of the responsibility for initiating the distasteful contacts with Nazism, and it would have removed the difficulties of having Mussolini as middle-man. At the same time a serious proposal would have forced on the War Cabinet detailed consideration of a scenario based on peace, at the very point when they were most in a state of flux over attitudes to that question, and when a specific decision in either direction was being avoided. In the light of this, the timing of Hitler's eventual peace offensive in July was a tactical error comparable with the failure to press home both the attack on the BEF before Dunkirk, and the blitz of British fighter bases during the Battle of Britain. Probably Hitler saw the developing options no more clearly than did his victims.

Too much should not be made of this point. There is no strong case for believing that a German peace proposal at say the start of June, would have led to a compromise settlement of the war. The relevance of the lack of such a proposal is more limited- to illustrating the truism that policy formulation within the Cabinet does not exist in a vacuum; that even where internal considerations of power or personality favour one point of view, outside factors or the lack of them may still constitute an important factor in the

1 This involved not attacking Britain, so as to achieve 'a working arrangement' with the British Empire. See FO memo. C4216/610/G, pp.8-9, in PREM 4/100-8.

flow of decision-making.¹

The opinions of the Chiefs of Staff were more predictable than the actions of Hitler, but they too constituted a form of external pressure on the sorts of conclusions which the Cabinet might come to. Had the COS, when they presented their reply to Churchill's slanted brief of 26 May, argued that Britain's finely balanced resources were regrettably insufficient to survive an attempt at invasion, more ministers than Halifax might have been nervous of putting the matter to the test. While it is true that Churchill only asked for the opinion because he was fairly sure of the answer,² even he could not have kept the Chief's of Staff's views from the Cabinet had they been adverse. As it was the COS came down on the side of Britain's ability to survive, while making clear the element of subjectivity in this finely balanced judgement. After outlining the difficulties facing Britain, with only her own bombing fleet as a counter-vailing force, they ended on a note of faith and hope rather than proof:

'To sum up, our conclusion is that prima facie Germany has most of the cards; but the real test is whether the morale of our fighting personnel and civilian population will counter-balance the numerical and material advantages₃ which Germany enjoys. We believe it will'.

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- 1 The importance of 'feedback' and the form it takes is discussed in theoretical terms by Karl Deutsch: The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control, (New York, The Free Press, 1963), Ch.11.
 - 2 He thought that the brief 'left freedom to the Chiefs of Staff to express their view, whatever it might be'. On the other hand 'I knew beforehand that they were absolutely determined; but it is wise to have written records of such decisions'. Their Finest Hour, p.78.
 - 3 CAB 66/7, WP 169(40), 26 May 1940 (also COS (40) 397, in CAB 80/11). A curious note at the end of this document says that the COS 'have not had a chance to see this Report in its final form and reserve to themselves the right to suggest such modifications as they may wish to put forward'. Even more strange, the Confidential Annexes to the COS Minutes from 2 May 1940 to 19 April 1941, have been missing from the Public Records since at least 1949.

This conclusion was nevertheless a definite opinion from those professionally competent to express one, and it must have been a real stimulus to ministers to continue the war, in the short-term at least, even if not implying a very encouraging outlook for victory.

Dunkirk provided a more positive boost to Churchill's outlook of uncompromising resistance. The rescue of the greater part of the BEF from enemy hands was a great objective contribution to Britain's home-defence capacity and even, in the far-distant future, to the reconstruction of a force for Continental invasion.¹ Yet there were also psychological benefits. It was not difficult for the Prime Minister to use the success of the evacuation as a means of reinforcing his strenuous arguments of the previous week, and of proving Britain's basic resilience (in the particular form of her air-power) in the face of the forthcoming adversity. Paradoxically defeat meant that the talk of 'resolve' now had greater plausibility. On 11 June Churchill reported that he would impress on Reynaud that if France could delay a German success:

'we should hold out, even if the whole resources² of the enemy were turned on the United Kingdom'.

A day later the War Cabinet decided that a study should be made, on the assumption of French collapse, of the economic harm that Britain could do to Germany, and of the aid that Britain would require from the USA both to survive and to defeat Germany.³ Horizons were widening once more; the question of an imminent peace was no longer an issue.

1 But Dunkirk was still 'as great a military disaster as history can show', a major blow to the chances of victory. Brian Bond (Ed.): Chief of Staff, p.360, Pownall Diary, June 1940.

2 CAB 65/7, WM 161(40), 11 June 1940, 12.30 p.m.

3 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 162(40):9, 12 June 1940; in response to COS Report WP(40)201.

Perhaps the most important way in which Dunkirk reinforced Churchill's arguments, however, was in the negative respect of the prevention of a disaster. Had the BEF in fact been lost, Britain's military position would have seemed irredeemable. That it came so near to disaster was a measure of her intense vulnerability. The COS had reported that the primary conditions for repelling an invasion were air superiority, and the morale of the work-people who manufactured aircraft. If the army had been captured, it would both have demonstrated that the RAF could not dominate the air over the Channel, and have been a major blow to civilian morale, with the loss of a key symbol of defence, and one that was largely made up of the friends and relatives of industrial workers.¹ As it was, the assumptions of the new policy were fortunately reinforced.

Yet even without the turn of events, Churchill had effectively managed to impose his strategy upon the Cabinet. For the very nature of the compromise which we have described was weighted against the conclusion of a negotiated peace. The War Cabinet had come to an informal decision to continue the war, wait on events, and delay the consideration of peace terms to a later stage, when the blunting of an invasion would have restored the semblance of a bargaining position. In practice this solution meant that British policy was likely to follow one or other of the two scenarios set by Churchill- glorious defeat or the open-ended continuation of the war. For if an

1 What evidence there is as to the actual impact of Dunkirk on popular morale, suggests that an initial wave of cheerfulness soon gave way to apprehension (but not defeatism). Mass Observation Files 175, 179, 181, 183, 196, June 1940.

invasion were to be repelled, then the Prime Minister would be able to capitalise on the relative improvement in British futures to encourage the belief that if survival was possible, then victory could be also. The prospect of imminent defeat would no longer exist to provide an incentive for accepting negotiations. Alternatively, if an attack on Britain began to prove successful, it is implausible that a satisfactory compromise peace could have been achieved at such a late stage, with even less leverage than in June. Once an air bombardment and an invasion had been launched and was bearing fruit, Hitler was unlikely to accept an armistice on anything less than the most favourable terms. At worst, the momentum of the military campaign would carry him on to achieve complete victory by conquest.

In the event, the way the war unfolded during the next three months conformed with the first of Churchill's preferences. The War Cabinet moved naturally away from their original opinion that successful resistance would lead to a better position from which to obtain independence-without-victory, even though the latter had seemed the best possible outcome after the loss of France. The Battle of Britain and the abandonment of Operation Sealion enabled Churchill to recruit ministers to his belief (and their own, prior to May 1940), that Britain must and could continue to strive for complete victory.¹

Thus neither Halifax nor the moderate centre of the War Cabinet ultimately had a decisive influence on the attitude of the British Government to the war after the attack of France. The Foreign Secretary

1 See, for the renewed consensus on ultimate victory, CAB 65/14, Confidential Annex, WM 222(40):4 (telegram to Dominions), WM 222(40):9 (reply to King of Sweden's peace feeler), 8 August 1940; CAB 65/15, Confidential Annex, WM 244(40):1 (prospects for a strategic air offensive in 1941), 6 September 1940.

failed to convince his colleagues of the need to work for peace before an invasion; Chamberlain, with Greenwood and Attlee in train, appeared to have kept open the option of an 'honourable issue' at some point in the future, but by siding with Churchill against Halifax on the immediate issue, they had in fact rejected the idea of peace negotiations at the very point when they might have been most seductive.¹

During June Churchill actively consolidated his implicit success in preventing the consideration of a compromise peace. As it became finally clear that France was lost, the Prime Minister began to cast any discussion of the future more in the optimistic terms of prospective victory. The recent past had been catastrophically unsuccessful; accordingly Churchill stressed that a 'new phase' was commencing, and one that he viewed with confidence:

'we should maintain the blockade, and win through, though at the cost of ruin and starvation throughout Europe'.

He added that such resolution would attract the support of the USA.² In other words Churchill was no longer paying even lip-service to the idea that a hard-fought compromise might be the best realistic goal. He resurrected the idea of military victory on the basis that Britain's retreat behind the safety of her coasts would of itself assure eventual victory through the working of time and a blockade against Germany. He reported to the Cabinet his words to Reynaud of 13 June, without a trace of disingenuousness:

1 An interpretation also to be found in Patrick Cosgrave: Churchill At War. Vol.1: Alone 1939-40. (London, Collins, 1974), p.221.

2 CAB 65/7, WM 163(40), 12 June 1940, 5.00 p.m.

(Britain) 'believed that Hitler could not win the war without overcoming us. Our war aim still remained the total defeat of Hitler, and we felt¹ that we could still bring this about'.

This despite the clear scepticism among his own colleagues about total victory, expressed in War Cabinet only two weeks before, and despite the circumspect Chiefs of Staff paper of 25 May, which had said that success was only likely on the twin assumptions of (i) 'full economic and financial support' from the USA, and (ii) the accuracy of the Ministry of Economic Warfare forecasts as to German economic weaknesses.²

In this highly unstable environment, where most other predictions and options were highly tentative, Churchill fully exploited his institutional privilege of collecting the voices within the War Cabinet, his penchant for certainties becoming even more pronounced. Statements to colleagues came to resemble orders more than suggestions. On 16 June, in the midst of a quite specific discussion about the French armistice, Churchill announced that:

'in no circumstances whatsoever would the British Government participate in any negotiations for armistice or peace'.

and:

'At the present juncture all thoughts of coming to terms with the enemy must be dismissed as far as Britain was concerned. We were fighting for our lives and it was vital that we should³ allow no chink to appear in our armour'.

1 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 165(40):1, 13 June 1940, 10.15 p.m.

2 CAB 66/7, WP 168(40) (COS 390(40)), 25 May 1940. See also WP 201(40), along the same lines, discussed at the Cabinet of 12 June, CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 162(40):9.

3 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 168(40):1, 16 June, 10.15 a.m.

Under this kind of pressure the Prime Minister's colleagues, who had only ever been concerned to qualify his arguments by postulating a later consideration of the peace issue, were unlikely to voice any disagreement. Yet by supporting Churchill's dismissal of an armistice before the invasion attempt, they were also drawn into a tacit approval of the whole burden of the Prime Minister's remarks, including the implication that a compromise peace would be possible 'in no circumstances whatever'. Once Churchill had elided the two issues, of unmitigated resistance to attack, and of unyielding commitment to final victory, it was impossible for other ministers to disentangle them without appearing both premature and faint-hearted. Certainly Halifax had come round to follow Churchill's lead. Two weeks after his advocacy of peace to the War Cabinet, he remarked that France ought to realise that:

'if they made an armistice, they would embark on a slippery slope which would lead to the loss of their fleet and eventually of their liberty'.¹

Three days later he expressed the belief that if Hitler forced onerous terms on France, then the United States would enter the war.² Without Churchill's leadership and exhortation it is unlikely that the Foreign Secretary would so easily have abandoned his belief in the feasibility of peace. Nothing in the meantime had happened in the war to undermine his previous argument that reasonable terms might be available.

For himself Churchill was increasingly concerned to shift the

1 CAB 65/7, WM 165(40), 13 June 1940, 10.15 p.m.

2 CAB 65/13, Confidential Annex, WM 168(40):1, 16 June 1940, 10.15 a.m. By November Halifax had left thoughts of peace well behind him. He wrote to the Archbishop of York, of 'perfectly groundless hopes' that a Christmas truce 'might speedily be developed into something more permanent. This might well be dangerous'. Letter of 27 November 1940, FO 371(40) 24362.

Government's attention away from the difficult present:

'It might well be to our advantage that the Germans should have to hold down all these intelligent and freedom-loving people; the task of this holding down all Europe should prove beyond even the strength of a Gestapo,¹ provided England could retain her liberty'.

While it was probable that his colleagues held hopes along these lines, the Prime Minister relentlessly expressed such views with complete confidence. Each turn of events was presented through the same filter of inflexible optimism and determination, despite the fact that a prediction six months previously of the current difficulties would have made even Churchill pause for thought. The peace terms offered to France, for example, were cast as 'murderous' and depriving that country of 'all liberty'.² Apparently unaffected by his frenetic involvement in detail of all kinds, Churchill also took care to monopolise interpretations of the general outlook. The Cabinet was rarely allowed to forget the spirit in which it and the populace at large ought to be approaching the future. The Prime Minister was strongly opposed to the evacuation of children to North America:

'A large movement of this kind encouraged a defeatist spirit, which was entirely contrary to the true facts of the position, and should be sternly discouraged'.

As a consequence of these remarks the Cabinet gave its approval to a stern Prime Ministerial warning to higher officials 'to maintain a spirit of alert and confident energy' since 'there are no grounds for supposing that more German troops can be landed in this country...than can be destroyed or captured by the strong forces at present under

1 CAB 65/7, WM 177(40), 23 June 1940. Six months previously even Churchill would have looked on the prospect as a disaster.

2 CAB 65/7, WM 176(40), 22 June 1940, 9.30 p.m.

arms'. The RAF was said to be at the zenith of its strength, and the German Navy at its nadir. Subordinates who were deliberately exerting a 'disturbing or depressing influence' should be removed or reported.¹ In such ways did Churchill display the powerful Prime Ministerial leadership for which he has so often been praised.

In the light of the way opinions on the future of the war had been dominated by Churchill, and their subtleties submerged by the cumulative effects of his 'never surrender' reprovals, such German initiatives as there were for a settlement came far too late to have any impact within the Cabinet. Whereas an offer in late May or early June might have further disturbed the uncertain feelings of Churchill's colleagues, by the end of June peace feelers encountered a Government once again operating on a basic consensus. As a result the Prime Minister was able to set in motion a negative response with little collective deliberation.

The Papal suggestions for an agreement of 28-30 June did not even get as far as the War Cabinet, despite the fact that 'Silly old Halifax evidently hankering after them'.² Churchill did not allow the Foreign Secretary to begin talking seriously again about peace. He minuted:

'I hope it will be made clear to the Nuncio that we do not desire to make any inquiries as to terms of peace with Hitler, and that all our agents are₃ strictly forbidden to entertain any such suggestions'.

1 CAB 65/8, WMs 189 & 192 (40), 1 July 11.30 a.m., and 3 July 1940, 11.30 a.m.

2. Dilks, p.309.

3. Churchill: Their Finest Hour, p.152. In August Churchill sent a similar minute to Halifax to ensure 'a firm reply' to the King of Sweden. The Government, he said, 'would all rather perish in the common ruin than fail or falter in their duty'. There is no record of Halifax's reaction. PREM 4/100-3, Churchill's minute of 3 August 1940.

The Prime Minister here interpreted the Cabinet's general feelings about a settlement, never expressed in a formal decision, with a certain licence. As with the Prytz Affair, this was a good example of the Prime Minister's capacity to remove all doubt as to the implications of a general attitude formed in Cabinet, by acting decisively on his image of that attitude when a specific occasion arose.¹ By acting in this way a Prime Minister could create a fait accompli in the particular instance, and possibly lead his colleagues into a view of their own policy which may not have been fully formed until that point.

On 10 July, the War Cabinet did get the chance to consider a possible German peace move, when the Foreign Secretary reported a conversation in Berne between the British Minister and the Acting President of the Red Cross, (Dr. Burckhardt), who had communicated that Hitler was once again urging 'a working arrangement' with the British Empire, and a 'white peace like Sadowa'.² By this stage Churchill had given sufficient clear expositions of British policy to leave even Halifax in no doubt of the response which should be made. He suggested, and the Cabinet agreed, that no reply should be made to the feeler. (Although it should be noted that there was at least enough interest to rule out 'a flat negative', in the thought that silence might lead Germany into confirming the sounding).³ There was no deliberation of any length on the issue, and the predominant impression is that of a pre-formed attitude applied automatically as the occasion arose.

1 See note 1, p.231 below on the Prytz Affair.

2 CAB 65/8, WM 199(40), 10 July 1940.

3 For some of the background to German diplomacy at this time, see James Graham-Murray: The Sword and the Umbrella (London, Times Press and Anthony Gibbs & Phillips 1964), Ch.8, and Documents on German Foreign Policy Series D. Vol. X, pp. 49-50, 187-9, 245-8, 287.

The War Cabinet's reaction to the major peace initiative of this period, Hitler's speech of 19 July,¹ confirms this picture. Ministers did not consider the speech until 22 July, by which time Churchill had acted quickly to ensure that the parallel attempt to contact the British Ambassador in Washington about peace, was given no encouragement. He had sent the following telegram:

'I do not know whether Lord Halifax is in town today, but Lord Lothian should be told on no account to make² any reply to the German Chargé d'Affaire's message'.

When ministers did meet, there was no serious consideration of Hitler's 'appeal to reason', but rather a discussion of whether it would best be formally rejected in Parliament, or simply ignored. In the event, Halifax made a radio broadcast on the same night which dismissed the peace offer by announcing that 'we shall not stop fighting until freedom is secure'.³

By the end of July the Prime Minister's consistently forceful advocacy had united the Cabinet behind him after a short but important period of uncertainty and division. Churchill had succeeded in maintaining the bases of British war aims, despite a massive upheaval in the operational environment. The confusion into which British policy was plunged in May 1940, had allowed full scope to the clear definitions of goals that in this instance the Prime Minister alone possessed. Churchill was no Machiavelli; quite the reverse. But circumstances and personality had conspired to produce a concentrated period of Prime Ministerial government.⁴

1 Documents on German Foreign Policy, Vol.X, pp.249-50, 318-9, The Times, Saturday 20 July 1940.

2 CAB 65/8, WM 209(40), 22 July 1940; Churchill: Their Finest Hour, p.229.

3 A transcript of the broadcast can be found in The Times, Tuesday, 23 July 1940.

4 Denis Kavanagh: Crisis, Charisma and British Political Leadership: Winston Churchill as the Outsider (London, Sage Professional Paper in Contemporary Political Sociology, Vol.1. No.06-001, 1974), puts this finding in the wider context of British politics and society.

Conclusions:

In 1939-40 policy-making at the highest political level was too complicated to exhibit any simple pattern. Bi-polar models which ascribe ultimate power in the system to Prime Minister or Cabinet do not come near to being adequate explanations. Even from the limited number of cases dissected here, it has been apparent that within the government circle there were a variety of ways in which policies were produced, that there was no single source of power, and that stable coalitions were not formed.

Although the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary enjoyed considerable executive scope in routine, if piecemeal, matters, and at times could also undeniably exercise a dominant influence over the making of major policy, in other equally crucial issues they could not display the same ability. Despite the technical diplomacy of Anglo-Soviet relations, it was the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet where the primary political deliberations took place, and where Halifax and Chamberlain were compelled to accept a policy they had initially found abhorrent. During the pressures of an urgent crisis in August-September 1939, it was the Cabinet which acted as a basic constraint on the freedom of choice of the executive. British commitments to fight for Poland were institutionalised in meetings of the Cabinet in that the Prime Minister was constantly forced to describe and explain the policy he was conducting. Even had the executive wished to renege on the British obligation to Poland, they would not have been able to do so because of the Cabinet's clear and agreed conception of what policy should be. The revolt of some ministers on 2 September, when they feared a reversal of policy, indicates their willingness in such a situation to pressurise the Prime Minister. Chamberlain's rapid response in dispatching the ultimatum is evidence of their capacity to do so.

The specific portrait of the Prime Minister running British foreign policy in 1939 through an inner group, or a compliant committee, is even more inappropriate to actual events than the general thesis of Prime Ministerial dominance in Cabinet. The notorious 'big four' of Chamberlain, Halifax, Simon and Hoare, is revealed on scrutiny to be an unjustified generalisation from one element of policy-making during the Munich crisis.¹ In 1939 Hoare was in fact the most prominent opponent of Chamberlain's attitudes during the central issues of the Polish guarantee and of relations with the Soviet Union. It was he who urged from the outset a close association with the USSR, which goes directly against the usual belief that the 'four' were particularly held together by their sharing of basic values and prejudices. Simon more often held the same opinions as Chamberlain, but did not stand out as a staunch ally. Throughout the foreign policy discussions we have looked at, he was especially reserved and made fewer positive contributions than other supporters of the Prime Minister like Morrison. In fact when the final crisis of peace-time developed, Simon was among the leaders of the group of ministers who insisted that Chamberlain procrastinate no longer in making clear Britain's intention to fight. Like Hoare's in April, this was not the action of a close confederate who shared in the making of policy before it came to Cabinet, and closed ranks to ensure its endorsement.²

1 For the conventional generalisation, see Andrew Boyle: Poor, Dear Brendan (London, Hutchinson 1974), p.225. For the meetings of the inner group in September 1938, CAB 27/646, and K. Middlemas: Diplomacy of Illusion, p.65 and passim.

2 Simon was in any case a National Liberal, not a Conservative like Chamberlain and Halifax. Nor, to judge by the virulence of his protest over Anglo-French union in 1940, was he a sycophant of Chamberlain's. Simon to Chamberlain, 17 June 1940; copy in the Hankey Papers, 4/32. (cf. Middlemas, loc. cit.)

The whole notion that major policy was systematically removed from the Cabinet and pre-determined by an inner elite, is best surrendered. The group of four played no significant part in the events we have looked at, and the Foreign Policy Committee was less a device for mobilizing support for Chamberlain than a means of increasing the access of interested ministers to certain types of vital issues. A similar example, from the Churchill period, is that of the War Aims and Reconstruction Committees which were set up in 1940-1. These were far from being dominated by the Prime Minister or a small group of his intimates, despite the need for decisive leadership in war time. Instead they stimulated a large amount of detailed literature and thinking about such subjects as European economic co-operation, which developed a considerable intellectual momentum and may have had important long-term influences on the later attitudes of the British Government about the post-war world. All this was largely independent of initiatives or control from Churchill, who was pressingly concerned with more short-term, (but no more important) questions. The Prime Minister actively disliked any distraction from day to day affairs, and played down the status of the committees in their life-time.¹ Ideas could not be shackled, however, and the Reconstruction Committee in particular provided early vehicles for the (largely Labourite) thinking about the future which was to produce the welfare state and favour the establishment of the United Nations system.²

1 Churchill to Bridges, 4 January 1941; CAB 21/1583.

2 The principal records of the Committee on War Aims and the Committee on Reconstruction are to be found in CAB 87/1 & 90, CAB 117/1,2,77-8-9, CAB 21/1581-2-3-4.

If there was any real separation between the Cabinet and a small group of its own ministers, then it consisted only in a distinction between the Cabinet and its regular foreign policy executive of Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary. The inevitable co-operation between the two men in the daily administration of foreign relations encouraged them to think together, and often alike, about problems of major policy in advance of consultation with the Cabinet. There were only occasional time-lags, as the opinions of one changed slightly faster than those of the other, whether Chamberlain and Churchill was Prime Minister. After Halifax had been eased out of office, Churchill and Eden operated effectively in partnership.¹

This harmonious co-operation meant that the executive was well able to capitalise on the opportunities which arose for them to take dominant initiatives. In foreign policy this was no more a period of 'Cabinet government' than one of executive elitism. The formation of the Polish guarantee was to a large extent determined by the positive activity of the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary in fashioning a new policy out of the general uncertainty. As a living institution, the Cabinet on this occasion was little more than an audience for executive activity. Equally, in mid-1940 the implicit decision to continue the war was not due to unity between the Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary - in fact the reverse - but it was still profoundly affected by the dynamic lead which the Prime Minister gave to a Cabinet who otherwise might have come to no clear policy-stance at all, and could have been liable to erratic changes of opinion. And although Halifax

1 Avi Schlaim, Peter Jones and Keith Sainsbury: British Foreign Secretaries Since 1945 (Newton Abbot, David & Charles 1977), p.84.

and Churchill were in dispute, between them they still stipulated all the terms of reference for such positive formulation of policy as there was at the time.

One clear conclusion which we may reach as a result of recognizing the variety of forms of central policy-making, is that decisional procedures emerge in different forms according to the type of issue under consideration. Only thus may we explain the differing degrees of participation from one policy to another, and the fact that the fluctuations in decision-making were not governed by circumstances of war or peace. Although we have not had the space to demonstrate this, there are examples to show that variations in the sources of influence occurred in both phases; even in a War Cabinet, ministers fully participated in the making of the reply to Hitler's peace offer of 6 October.¹ Conversely even in peace-time Chamberlain and Halifax could originate the new commitment of the Polish guarantee.

Thus the degree to which an issue was intrinsically suited to collective deliberation was the crucial variable in determining the varying styles of policy-making. But what specific characteristics of a problem were most significant? Clearly the importance of an issue, whether perceived or substantive, was not the determining factor. While some questions of routine administration were considered insufficiently important for the executive to trouble the Cabinet with, by and large all decisions which might be thought to have structural effects on national interests at some stage went through the Cabinet, giving ministers at least some access for participation. And at this level, they were not monopolised by any particular group. All the four cases we have looked at were highly significant for British interests, yet

¹ See note 1, p. 120.

they stimulated very different types of management.

A more plausible hypothesis is that the urgency with which a solution was required directly affected the number of ministers who could be efficiently involved in its production. Prima facie, the need for an immediate response in March 1939 led to executive policy-making - and in the case of the response to the October peace offer the lack of particular urgency seemed to lead to wide ministerial involvement. Unfortunately, this theory again does not fit enough relevant examples. In September 1939 the urgency could not have been greater, but the Cabinet as a whole acted to supervise the implementation of its general will. In April 1939, as the Litvinov proposals demanded a quicker pace in British considerations of the Soviet issue, so more ministers became actively engaged. In May 1940, a pressing need for some definite decision might actively have worked against executive dominance, since Churchill's attempt to maintain existing British war-policy was favoured by the lack of any specific bone of contention.

Urgency, therefore, was not a pre-requisite of dominant executive action. More important were the nature of the options raised by any issue, and their effects upon existing images and comprehensions of the policy-environment. There seems to have been, for example, an inverse relation between the ability of the executive to create policy and the initial clarity of the relevant alternatives. If, when a problem first became salient, the paths of choice were relatively limited and/or clearly defined, then the ability of most ministers to understand, become interested, and participate in argument over the issue was significantly increased. Organized discussion was made easier where the problem could be broken down into separate and finite components and dealt with comprehensively. Into this category fall the Anglo-Soviet

negotiations and the crisis over the German invasion of Poland. In each case ministers had from the very beginning a clear idea of the subject of discussion, and a choice of distinct strategies. Their understanding fostered confidence in their collective ability to make a decision.¹

The argument would also be sustained by examining the consideration of the 6 October peace offer. Here the general task was straightforward - to reply to the various points in Hitler's speech - and the conclusions which could be reached were limited by the very motives for which Britain had gone to war, to the task of imposing order on the Government's thinking about war aims. The specifying of these attitudes took place in a fairly wide circle of policy-making because by this time most ministers possessed developed general opinions about Germany and the war, and were capable of positive contributions.

When options were cloudy and open-ended on the other hand, policy-making tended to devolve onto a narrow circle capable of the co-ordinated and imaginative effort required to produce new programmes, or simply to define the issues in a climate of confusion. The making of the Polish guarantee, when British policy might have taken a number of different and unpredictable turns, is the best example of what has been termed in this chapter 'creative leadership'. When a problem demanded real originality, it was beyond the function of a collectivity to synthesise varying opinions with sufficient speed to anticipate the executive, who tended automatically to throw up solutions in response to new needs.

1 Perceived clarity can cut both ways, leading to the formation of stereotypes, as with Sir Robert Vansittart's view of Germany. Robert Jervis: Perception and Misperception in International Politics, pp. 172-181.

In March 1939 the executive introduced and developed three separate plans for a new British policy within ten days of the emergence of the issue. There was no mechanism by which the Cabinet could equal this, with only four meetings in the same time in which to work out agreed actions.

Churchill's dominating leadership in the crisis of May 1940 flourished on the same inhibitions against a group, however small, forging an agreed strategy when there are no clear proposals laid out from which to choose. Although in essence the problem was simplified to that of war or peace, there were crucial difficulties in perceiving the means by which either strategy might practicably be followed. It was extremely difficult to distinguish a feasible line of action in the gloom of the fall of France. Thus Churchill's strong attempts to make clear a desirable policy, fell on the fallow ground of colleagues whose varying opinions increased the natural hesitancy of each individual in advocating a particular course.

The clarity of the options facing ministers in any given problem, was itself strongly influenced by perhaps the key circumstance in determining the breadth of participation in policy-making - the extent to which a problem disturbed the settled images of foreign policy held by ministers. In this chapter the two main examples of decision-making which effectively narrowed to a very small area both involved occasions where external events severely ruptured the web of assumptions on which policy had previously had been based. These traumatic actions had suddenly broken the continuity of expectations about, respectively, the way in which German expansion would develop, and the military balance of the war. Both had created a hiatus of doubt and dispersed

consensus. In each the executive fulfilled the function of replacing policies which had suddenly become irrelevant, by imaginative and decisive initiatives.

Decisions which involved wider ministerial participation confirm this correlation between the effect of an issue on existing stereotypes and the style of its policy-making. The specification of war aims in October 1939 required the formation of general attitudes, but not, as we have indicated, the reformation of attitudes in a framework of open-ended choice. Hitler's speech introduced no new elements into the frame of assessment; a 'peace offensive' had been anticipated since the outbreak of war.¹ The continuity meant that ministers possessed sufficient information and confidence to be able to participate in the discussion of a response from the beginning.

We have seen in more detail how this same analysis applies to the case of Anglo-Soviet relations. Between 1-3 September 1939 also, it was undoubtedly fundamental for the Cabinet's ultimate control over the decision for war, that they held an existing set of attitudes to apply to the Polish crisis when it arose. These were embodied in the formal guarantee that the bilateral Treaty signed on 25 August. There was here no question of crisis descending on unprepared ministers, 'like a hawk into a dovecote' as Ted Hughes put it once. In this crucial lack of confusion the situation was similar to the study of war aims in late 1940. On the latter occasion, although many important particular aspects

1 One of the many examples is the circular telegram to the Dominions of 12 September 1939. CAB 21/565.

of the problem were developed anew, the boundaries had already been set in ministers' minds - by a combination of their own attitudes previous to May 1940, Churchill's strong lead in the crisis of that month, and the subsequent successful resistance to invasion. The issue of compromise peace was no longer open to debate, while the problem of 'the future world' was general enough for views to be aired without inhibition. That there was not the slightest urgency in their task also facilitated the Committee's task.

It is not suggested that the executive style of policy-making only characterises periods of the greatest political trauma when agreed preconceptions are suddenly shattered. It is more realistic to suggest that a broad base of policy-making seems to be encouraged when there is a high continuity between the specific question asked of ministers, and their existing set of more general images. This is especially so when the available options are distinct and pre-formulated, requiring choice rather than creativity. Conversely, when there is any need for basic originality, the circle of participation seems to narrow considerably. This may happen at a fairly modest level; although the examples we have developed have been concerned with great events, it seems likely that the executive will also dominate policy-making in relatively undramatic circumstances, (such as Hitler's announcement on 28 April 1939 that he no longer accepted the Anglo-German Naval Agreements),¹ so long as they are unexpected and require

1 Halifax and Chamberlain played down the significance of Hitler's breach of the Treaty. CAB 23/99, CM 26(39) 3 May 1939.

the positive construction of a new attitude or position. Creativity therefore seems to be the distinguishing characteristic of executive predominance. But the overall nature of the policy process varies according to the inputs involved.

Another central characteristic of Cabinet behaviour in this period seems to have been consensus. It is striking that in none of the cases we have looked at has a decision been taken over a dissident minority. On all occasions action was delayed until it was established that almost the whole Cabinet subscribed to the relevant proposal. In certain circumstances general agreement was reached more by default, as with the rapid execution of the Polish guarantee. In others there was no direct conflict, and discussion served the purpose of articulating common ground, as with the consideration of war aims at the end of both 1939 and 1940. Here full agreement was important but not surprising. But where disagreement was evident, there were definite attempts to build a consensus and to reconcile divisions, before action was initiated. The Cabinet had its own preventive diplomacy. The doubts of Hoare and Stanley about the exclusions of the USSR from policy in March 1939, were not ignored but rather accommodated in the compromise of a later approach - at least to the extent of securing their consent to the guarantee. Two months later, although the executive's opposition was over-borne in the decision to accept a triple alliance, it was only done by recruiting first Halifax and then Chamberlain to an actual belief in the rightness of the policy. Even the Prime Minister came to accept the principle of alliance on the substantive grounds of the international damage which the breakdown of negotiations would cause. The unity of the government was always a foremost consideration, as the rarity of threats of resignations suggests.

Similarly, in mid-1940 Churchill was very anxious not only to prevent Halifax's initial inclination towards peace from becoming policy, but also to bring round the Foreign Secretary to his own point of view. The Prime Minister wanted no dissent, even if it were in a minority, as his mix of conciliatory and firm remarks to Halifax on 27 May suggests. His later demands for 'confident language' from his colleagues, and during the Prytz episode his prompt warning to Halifax that there should be no repetition of R.A. Butler's 'luke-warmness', were strong pressures on ministers to adhere to a single line of policy.¹ Indeed ministers themselves were hardly anxious to provoke divisions. Halifax opposed Churchill with great reluctance, and could not bring himself to demand the formal decision over the peace issue which might have involved complete confrontation. By the time of the July peace offer, the Government was re-united. In such cases 'collective responsibility' operated more by engineering full agreement before a decision was reached, than by securing the subsequent loyalty and silence of unsuccessful dissentient minorities. In the long run it is true there was scope for a Prime Minister to move Ministers with whom he was not in sympathy. Halifax was undoubtedly moved out of the way by Churchill when appointed against his will Ambassador to the United States in December 1940.² But such actions could only take

1 Churchill's warning referred to a report that R.A. Butler, with Halifax's connivance, had told the Swedish Minister in London (Bjorn Prytz) that 'common sense and not bravado' would govern British policy towards the war and any possible peace. The Prime Minister's criticism arose partly from his having told the Commons that the Government would 'fight on to the death' and that he had taken 'personal responsibility for the resolve of all'. Both ministers protested their innocence. Churchill to Halifax, 26 June 1940, et.seq. FO 800/322, H/XXXII/38-9; FO 371(40) 24859; The Times, correspondence of 9-16 September 1965.

2 FO 800/323, Halifax to Hoare, 21 December 1940.

place once the initial squall had long since subsided.¹ That consensus was a pre-requisite for decision points to the irrelevance of a model which postulates competitive power-seeking as a first priority within the Cabinet. Conscious exchanges of threats and sanctions were rare even during serious disputes, and a central concern was the dampening down of conflict. Styles of policy-making varied with the type of issue, but ultimately, whatever the particular decisional unit, the outcomes always had to be capable of attracting the overall agreement of the Cabinet, even if on occasions that merely meant avoiding disagreement. Thus when we are trying to account for the content of a decision, or the general outlook expressed in a series of decisions, we need to analyse the nature of the consensus to which it conformed. The very fact of the varying sources of power in Cabinet government means that the pattern of British policy must be explained by the aggregate preferences of all ministers and not by those of any single individual or sub-group. Therefore the extent and sources of Cabinet consensus should provide highly suggestive answers to the key problem of why certain issues were raised and not others, and why within these issues particular decisions were eventually taken. In this sense the ideology of those who took part in decision-making, reveals at least as much about the origins of policy as does the distribution of power inside the machinery of government.

1 In any case, this happened very rarely and for a variety of reasons. Hore-Belisha's removal from the War Office in January 1940 was the culmination of a year's discontent, and on the part of his staff more than the Prime Minister. Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1137, letter to Ida Chamberlain, 7 January 1940.

Chapter III: AN ATTENTIVE PUBLIC: THE PRESS AND FOREIGN POLICY

If the Cabinet is the focal point of government and administration in Britain, the press dominates the world of political commentary. Parliament holds constitutional powers, and special interest-groups command more expertise, but it is the mass media which breathe most life into the democratic processes of debate, criticism and accountability. Before the Second World War this was no less true because radio and television were still in their infancy. The first decade of truly universal suffrage coincided with a period of great economic instability, produced a populace more politicised than before, and a concomitant demand for news. The press enjoyed a circulation boom, and a greater variety of journals flourished than before or since.¹ With the House of Commons somnolent with its large imbalance between the parties, the newspapers provided an ersatz opposition.

On these grounds any study of foreign policy making in the 1930's would be foolish to neglect the press. Furthermore, the problems of assigning influence or dominance which we have considered at the highest level of decision-making apply equally to relations between politicians and domestic society. It is difficult to make sense of the complicated cycles of debate, decision, and criticism, without lapsing into truism. Clearly the press exerted some influence even over strong governments. But the scope of this influence is

1 Francis Williams: Dangerous Estate (London, Longmans, 1957), pp. 204-5.

unclear. Were newspapers no more than irritants, or respected partners in a dialogue about future policies? Analysis needs to go beyond the usual practice of juxtaposing official action with editorial comment, to resolve such issues as the extent to which press criticism was less effective on foreign than domestic policies; the difference made by war time controls; and the truth of claims made about the importance of the press in the operation of democracy. In an attempt to go some way along this road this chapter examines first the various inputs of the press to the process of foreign policy-making, second the nature of government responses, and third the implications of this behaviour for an assessment of overall press influence.

As a preface to the main discussion it is important to outline briefly the legal rules which provided the framework for press-government relations. Behavioural norms and routines may ultimately tell us more about political reality, but laws change more slowly and in modern Britain they have significantly restricted expressions of opinion.

In peace-time there were few legal constraints on press activity in number, but in effect they amounted to a major inhibition of editorial freedom. The major area of licence for the British press consisted in the fact that a newspaper could publish anything it pleased without being subject to prior control. Such legal stipulations as there were only operated by imposing retrospective penalties for breaches of the law, in accordance with long traditions of British society and politics. If a newspaper considered an issue of sufficient importance it was thus free to challenge the government

openly, either taking the consequences in the courts and/or hoping to stimulate sufficient support in the ensuing public debate to deter an official prosecution.¹

Naturally, however, the content of the rules which an editor could choose to break, and the severity of the penalties he risked was the crucial determinant of whether or not he would do so in practice. Although the laws of contempt of court, civil libel, and obscene publications, which all fenced in press liberties, did so with very little effect on foreign policy matters, the remaining category of law touching on the press did indeed severely limit the effectiveness of journalists who were concerned with world politics. The statutes upholding Official Secrets and protecting the state against sedition are at once the source and the bulwark of the culture of confidentiality in which modern British government functions. Since 1889, and in particular the Acts of 1911 and 1920, any unauthorised disclosure of government information had been linked with espionage as a serious crime under British law.² By their catch-all phrasing these Acts restricted relationships between pressmen and officials, and also effectively prevented the serious public discussion of many important issues. Since much basic information was simply out of

1 Political and Economic Planning: Report on the British Press (London, PEP 1938), p.127.

2 The relevant legislation is recounted in Colin Seymour - Ure: The Press, Politics and Public (London, Methuen 1968), pp.126-174; also Tony Bunyan: The Political Police in Britain (London, Julian Friedmann 1976), pp.5-20.

reach of journalists,¹ their capacity to influence policy was correspondingly restricted. This was particularly the case in the area of foreign policy, because in 1939 the 'enemy' from whom official secrets had to be kept, still largely referred to hostile interests outside the borders of British society.

The other main aspect of the formal relations between press and government, although not one which enjoyed any legal expression, was the 'D Notice' system, whereby newspapers were systematically warned about the subjects whose discussion in print would bring down a prosecution under the Official Secrets Act. To the extent that these notices were respected by the press, whether through fear or simply a desire to co-operate, there existed a degree of advance censorship on certain issues, albeit one born out of consultation with the press representatives on the standing 'Admiralty, War Office and Press Committee'. That they were taken seriously is indicated by the fact that from their institution in 1912 there seems to have been little public debate about the Notices, and only the most occasional disregard of them.² Such press co-operation was due in part to the fact that D Notices were confined in peace-time to a relatively narrow area of military secrets.

1 Just how difficult it was to obtain material is shown by the Sandys affair. In 1938 Duncan Sandys MP was threatened with prosecution for using information gained in service as a Territorial Army officer to ask critical questions in the House about the state of Britain's air defences. After a Parliamentary row the Official Secrets Act was amended to limit interrogation on the sources of confidential information to espionage cases. Jonathan Aitken: Officially Secret (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1971), pp.63-5.

2 Cmnd 1681 (April 1962): Security Procedures in the Public Service paras. 122-53; Cmnd 3309 (June 1967): Report of the Committee of Privy Councillors to Inquire into 'D' Notice Matters; Thomas M. Franck & Edward Weisband (Eds): Secrecy and Foreign Policy (New York, Oxford University Press, 1974), pp.224-5.

The powers of the Government to control newspapers were made potentially very much greater during the first year of the Second World War. The new Ministry of Information immediately released, with the backing of newly issued Defence Regulations, an extended list of D Notices which indicated that the Official Secrets Act would be more widely interpreted and more vigorously implemented, in the future. Successful prosecutions for publishing material helpful to an enemy could now lead to the shutting down of a newspaper as well as to the imprisonment of its staff. The Notices consisted of 12 general stipulations, outlining the machinery for censorship of material liable 'to prejudice the efficient prosecution of the war' or endanger 'national security'. There were also a further 85 Notices which fell into 11 functional divisions such as 'Air raids', 'Finance' or 'The King, Parliament and Government'. In the case of foreign policy there was particular concern that nothing should be published which might prejudice Britain's relations with Neutral powers, for instance by speculating as to the aid they were or might be about to give to the Allied cause. The D Notices spelling this out were so broadly cast as to encourage Editors to seek prior approval for almost anything which they wrote on foreign policy.¹

Extra powers, extending the area of prohibited publication to matter systematically calculated to foment opposition to the war or to the resistance of an invasion, were taken under Defence Regulations 2(c) and 2(d) in May (and June) 1940. This enabled the Government to

1 Francis Williams: Press, Parliament and People (London, Heinemann 1946) pp.15-25; the drafting of the D Notices, which took place in consultation with the newspaper industry, is recorded in INF 1/181.

deal with subversive campaigns of opinion where previously their powers had been restricted to the control of specific, factual, secrets. Under Regulation 2(c) editors thought to be inciting opposition to the war, were to be first warned, and then prosecuted. The penalty was a £500 fine and/or 7 years in prison. In passing this measure, however, Parliament stipulated that no action should be taken without the prior consent of the Attorney-General.¹ Yet within three weeks the Home Secretary was telling the Cabinet that another new regulation was necessary to deal with subversive newspapers without the delays and uncertainties of a prosecution, at a time when the country might imminently be invaded and the Government might wish, as an act of military necessity, to prevent the publication of material sympathetic to the enemy, such as Action or the Daily Worker might print. Under 2(d), the Secretary of State could stop the printing, publication, and distribution of a paper simply by an executive act of Government. If accountable to anyone, this edict would only be examined after the fact, by the quiescent House of Commons.² In practice, when action was taken against the Daily Worker and the Daily Mirror/Sunday Pictorial, it was the use of this regulation which was threatened; the juridical procedures of 2(c) were discreetly shelved.³

1 Order in Council, 9 May 1940, in J. Burke (Ed.): Loose-Leaf War Legislation (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1940), pp.629-632.

2 The point of departure was the need to stop papers 'fomenting opposition to the successful prosecution of the war'. CAB 65/7, WM 144(40), 28 May 1940. (The War Cabinet did wish to be kept informed on the use of these wide powers). Order in Council, 29 May 1940, J. Burke (Ed.), op.cit. pp.685-87.

3 There was virtually no appeal from the Minister's decision under this regulation, as the Attorney-General had to explain to his colleagues when the Mirror case cropped up. CAB 65/9, WM 267(40), 7 October 1940. Also WP(40)482; WP(41)7, in CAB 66/14.

The Emergency Powers legislation also increased the Government's effective controls over the press in less dramatic ways. For example war-time ministries could drastically limit the supply of inside information which they normally made available through the briefing system without the onus being upon them to defend such actions. This, together with the very weight of the Ministry of Information's bureaucracy inevitably inhibited newspapers from subjecting policy to consistent and critical analysis.¹ There were also various positive ways in which Ministers could make life difficult for a paper while still falling short of full confrontation. Defence Regulation 80(a), for instance, enabled the Government to ascertain from Banks and Holding Companies the identities of the shareholders of the Sunday Pictorial and Daily Mirror, when those two papers were persistently attacking the Cabinet's conduct of the war.² Lastly, individual pressmen were as likely to be conscripted as any other citizen. For the Government it was an ideal way of dealing with recalcitrant critics. Two days after the major debate in the House of Commons during March 1942, in which the Cabinet openly warned the Daily Mirror to be silent or be shut down, the paper's leading columnist, Cassandra, resignedly joined the Army without waiting for the official call-up which had been arranged for three months later. At the same time another press critic, Frank Owen of the Evening Standard, was suddenly de-reserved

1 The shortage of newsprint was also a major factor. By 1942 papers were less than one third of their size of 1938, despite rising circulation. What space was available was eaten into by reports of official statements. See the remarks by Frank Owen, CAB 117/208, put out on the BBC North American Service 28 July 1941; and J.E. Gerald: The British Press under Government Economic Controls (University of Minnesota Press, 1956), pp.228-9.

2 CAB 65/9, WM 268(40)9 October 1940. PREM 4/66-2; Herbert Morrison-Churchill, 11 October.

in his late thirties and brought into the Forces.¹ Such blows were by no means unusual. Routine call-ups meant that by 1943 over one-third of Britain's 9,000 journalists were in uniform, which must have reduced the level of influence the press could exert on government through criticism and the pursuit of information.² The stimulation of public debate was understandably not a priority task from the official point of view.

(i) Functions of the Press:

We shall see later how the legal powers held by decision-makers by no means enabled them to control the press as they might have wished, even in war-time. For the present it is important to outline the functions which newspapers had come to perform on a regular basis inside the decision-making process, and which determined the fundamental character of press-Government relations. These relations took the form of a complicated web of inter-dependence that can in general terms be ascribed to the inevitable importance of communications media in a densely populated industrial society with liberal traditions. The principal aim of what follows is to analyse the specific attributes that gave the press a structural position of involvement in policy-making. These attributes consisted in both the difficulties which the press could cause the Government, and the positive contributions which they made to certain aspects of policy-formulation.³

1 Angus Calder: The People's War 2nd Ed. (London, Panther 1971), pp.332-3. Some of the reasons for Government sensitivity can be discerned in Cassandra's The English at War (London, Secker & Warburg, 1941).

2 Calder, op.cit. p.582.

3 The scheme adopted is coincidentally not unlike that used by Colin Seymour - Ure's 'The Times and the appeasement of Hitler', in his book The Political Impact of Mass Media (London, Constable 1974), pp.67-98.

It is best to begin with the more positive functions, for with these press participation was at its most intimate. The most straightforward contribution made by newspapers was their provision of information. To begin with, there was the simple question of speed and flexibility. It was not unusual for news to reach the Foreign Office from newspapers before it was received through diplomatic channels. In February 1939, for example, Halifax wrote to his Ambassador in Rome enquiring about a report in the Daily Telegraph of belligerent remarks made in the specialist journal Relazioni Internazionali over territorial disputes between Italy and France. Although Lord Perth had already dispatched a summary of the article, it had not arrived in London by the time that the Telegraph's report came to the Foreign Secretary's notice.¹ For more distant countries than Italy it was even more likely that newspaper cables (from both agencies and special correspondents) would reach London ahead of the administratively-processed and security-laden official telegrams, as an incident in August 1938 reveals. Halifax instructed Ambassador Craigie in Tokyo to ask the Japanese Government whether a statement reported in that day's Manchester Guardian as having been made by a Japanese spokesman 24 hours before, did in fact represent official policy. Halifax clearly assumed that it did, since he showed considerable concern about the content of the statement and outlined a detailed response on the basis of the paper's report.²

1 DBFP III:4, p.317, Halifax-Perth, 15 February 1939. Perth's dispatch was sent on the 14th; The Telegraph's article was printed on the 13th and the original Italian piece had appeared on the 11th.

2 DBFP III:8, pp.45-6, Halifax-Craigie, 26 August 1938. The next day Craigie was still only dispatching a reply to the Foreign Secretary's message of 24 August. There seems to have been a regular 3-day lag between dispatch and reply, with a full circle of nearly a week. The problem was less that of technology than administration.

The urgent reactions to the articles about Japan and Italy show how it was felt that either incident could easily have damaged British interests without prompt remedial action. In practice, protecting British interests in 1939 meant in the first instance ensuring that disputes did not escalate unnecessarily into major conflicts. For this purpose speed of information was crucial. In the Japanese case Halifax's immediate instructions meant that the United States Ambassador in Tokyo, about to make a 'stiff protest' over Japan's threats to shoot down non-combatant aircraft in Chinese air-space, was able to present the united Anglo-American front which was so glaringly absent in the later affairs over Tientsin and the Burma Road. With the Italian case, the Foreign Office did already have secret information on Mussolini's troop build-ups against France, but could hardly divulge the fact without exposing the activities of its intelligence services. The Daily Telegraph's early report thus provided an essential peg on which to hang an important protest.¹

A further example may serve to demonstrate that the press was at least on equal terms with the Government information service in circumstances of unpredictable change abroad. When the German occupation of Bohemia took place in March 1939, from which such ominous implications for British foreign policy flowed, the British Minister in Prague found that very little could be added to the Times' early reports. Sir Basil Newton admitted that he had no better sources than the paper and that they were both reduced to guesswork for much of the data about arrests and concentration camps. He tended to disagree

1 Dilks p.148, 11 Feb. Further routine examples of the press providing information can be found in DEFP III:8, p.437, Halifax to Mallet, 4 February 1939, and Vol.9, Halifax-Craigie 17 June 1939, p.193.

with the Times' estimates but could give no evidence for any contrary view.¹ Newton clearly felt it a first priority to comment on the paper's views, knowing that they would be a major formative influence on the images of Czechoslovakia developing in Whitehall. As for Hitler's next moves, Chamberlain himself told a private meeting of Labour Party and Trades Union officials quite frankly on 23 March that 'he knew no more than had appeared in the press' about what would happen.² He was telling the truth. Harvey notes how Henderson had just come back from Berlin saying that 'Hitler was now quite unpredictable...He did not know what Hitler might do now as a result of P.M's speech and Duff Cooper's remarks'.³

Once private conversations with foreign leaders were ruled out, the Government had no real advantage over the press. This could be as much the result of the slowness of the Foreign Office as that of the efficiency of the press. In the Cabinet Meeting of 22 August 1939 Ministers discussed the news of the Nazi-Soviet Pact on the basis of the morning's press reports, despite the fact that the United States had passed on a warning about the imminence of the Pact on the 17th. The message did not reach even the Foreign Secretary until the 22nd itself, so that the whole Cabinet had to rely on what they read over the breakfast-table. It may be the case that this delay was (exceptionally) caused by the presence of a Soviet spy in the Office, but its length was

1 DBFP:III:4, Newton-Halifax, 31 March 1939, pp.560-2.

2 PREM I/322, Report of Meeting with TUC and Labour Party on Collective Security, 23 March 1939. That this was not just a smokescreen is indicated by the frankness and truthfulness of the rest of Chamberlain's remarks.

3 Harvey Diary, 19 March 1939, p.264.

by no means untypical, as we have seen.¹ Moreover as the crisis developed during August, Cadogan found the Foreign Office so ill-prepared to process the influx of telegrams that he had to take on extra staff.²

Thus press news was important in policy-making mainly when events were moving fluidly, when uncertainty predominated. Even in 1968, well into the era of the 'global village', it was Colin Seymour-Ure's opinion that 'For speed, the Press has at least as fast channels of communication as the Foreign Office, and often faster, specially from remote places like Peking'.³ If that was true for a time when newspapers were beginning to dispense with their own diplomatic correspondents and when Foreign Services already enjoyed the use of jet travel and extensive telex/telephone facilities, how much more was it true in 1939, in a decade that has been called 'the age of the foreign correspondent', and when the Government found difficulty in supplying an aircraft with the range to take a vital military mission to Moscow?⁴ Yet the Foreign Office had to continue its own full service. They would have been foolish to rely on items about Nice, Corsica, and flying rights over China being certain inclusions in even the quality press.⁵ Duplication was inevitable, and when it occurred official reports were often superfluous.

1 Dilks, p.199.

2 S. Aster: 1939, pp.316-7, and note.

3 Colin Seymour-Ure: The Press, Politics and Public, p.262.

4 Franklin Reid Gannon: The British Press and Germany 1936-9 (Oxford, The Clarendon Press 1971), p.3. Gannon's is an excellent source-book on press opinions but does not go into questions of decision-making. On the military mission, CAB 27/625, FP(36)60th Mtg, 1 August 1939.

5 These matters were not trivial, and were dealt with in detail in such dispatches as DBFP III:3, Earl of Perth-Halifax, 14 December 1938, pp.474-7; Vol.8, p.42, Sir. A. Clark Kerr-Halifax 26 August 1938. This contrasts with B.C. Cohen's observations of US diplomats after the war, who apparently left the reporting of day-to-day news mostly to the press. The Press and Foreign Policy (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963), p.209.

By the same token the press was no more than an important supplementary source of information. Many of the moves of 'secret diplomacy' inevitably took place outside the scope of journalists' resources, while it was not unknown for the newspapers to provide accurate information only to see it disregarded in decision-making circles. Although it is clear that British newspapers were publishing details of the persecution of German Jews almost from its beginning,¹ the issue is very rarely to be found in the discussions of contemporary office-holders. Outside comment could not always raise an issue to a high level of political salience if those responsible for policy had good reasons for ignoring it. In this case the 'good reasons' were the great moral dilemmas and practical difficulties which would arise from considering the Jewish problem in conjunction with that of European peace. A more fundamental difficulty was the fact that press interpretations often differed amongst themselves. Consequently those with access to official documents shared a professional scepticism about the accuracy of much press analysis, which was by its very nature often purely speculative. Decision-makers could also be just wilfully prejudiced and blinkered.

Yet on matters whose importance could not be ignored, the very uneven quality of press information made it important. Accurate data was sufficiently frequent, and the existence of an independent source of investigation sufficiently valuable to ensure that the newspapers were taken seriously into account. Although Lindemann affected superior amusement about the Daily Mirror's exaggeration of British air

1 Andrew Sharf: The British Press and Jews Under Nazi Rule, (London, Oxford University Press for the Institute of Race Relations, 1964), pp.193-209.

power, he realised that the article had touched Churchill's concern about the real position of the RAF. The first Lord set in motion an investigation by his statistical staff that helped to maintain a critical approach to this important subject.¹

Moreover some individual journalists commanded specialist knowledge which could not be denied. In the crisis of mid-1940, Oliver Harvey (by now a senior member of the Paris Embassy) was glad to meet Alexander Werth of the Manchester Guardian, who informed him about frequent recent meetings between Bonnet and Daladier - meetings which could have had important implications for the future of French participation in the war. In a similar vein, Harvey also saw Thomas Cadett of The Times, who was 'very close to Paul Reynaud' to ask him to bolster Reynaud's morale.² A Minister at the most important of all British Embassies was thus at times reliant on the special contacts and expertise of journalists, even in his own field. Nor was this an isolated example. In February 1940 Lord Lothian had written from the United States to Camrose, proprietor of the Daily Telegraph, asking him to ensure that the paper's Washington correspondent was not moved elsewhere, since the Ambassador thought Mr. Denys Smith to be 'of great value as a source of information as to what is going on behind the scenes in Washington...it is not always easy for us to get hold of inside information'.³ Ambassadors sometimes even had to rely on the press for knowledge about foreign policy in the

1 Cherwell Papers, OFF:1:1 Jan-May 1940, letters between Churchill and Lindemann of 2 April, and 26 April.

2 Harvey Diary, 19 and 27 May 1940.

3 Lothian Papers; Vol.399, Lothian-Camrose, 2 February 1940. Camrose replied on 20 February that he would be pleased to help.

countries which their colleagues were supposed to be reporting on, as in Warsaw in late 1938, when Kennard took his information about German attitudes towards the Hungaro-Polish border question, from The Times.¹

In circumstances where the Government clutched at any straw of potentially reliable news fact and opinion were inevitably difficult to distinguish, with the result that subjective press analysis also had a good chance of influencing policy. Some editors, for example, tended to pass on to the Foreign Office any private reflections they regarded as significant. In November 1938 Dawson sent on a memorandum from one of his correspondents to the effect that Sweden was going 'defeatist'. Cadogan, Halifax and Sir Lancelot Oliphant, three of the highest ranking figures in the Office, all gave this view serious attention.² For even after the administration had had time for research and reflection, it was still sometimes true that press commentary could add an extra perspective. In one meeting of the FPC during 1939 Ministers were read extracts from an article by the Naval Correspondent of the Daily Telegraph which compared unfavourably the technical merits of British and German naval strengths. The article was cited as authority for the opinion that the recent rupture by Hitler of the 1935 Anglo-German Naval Agreement was no great loss. To some extent the Telegraph's opinion was just a useful confirmation of an existing inclination. But it is interesting that the Committee was made aware of the point by a newspaper rather than the Admiralty.³ The press provided one way of short-circuiting the cumbersome procedures of bureaucracy.

1 DBFP III:3, p.227, Sir Howard Kennard-Halifax, 14 November 1938.

2 FO 800/322, H/XXXII/2; G. Dawson-Halifax 24 November 1938.

3 CAB 27/625, FP(36) 51st Mtg, 13 June 1939. Both the First Lord of the Admiralty and his Director of Plans were present at the meeting.

It was almost routine for press interpretations of events to be used as a way of cross-checking official conclusions. A Foreign Office minute of January 1939 (by Strang), discussing recent talks between Hitler and Joseph Beck, the Polish Foreign Minister, contained a typical paragraph summarising the reports made by British newspapers - in this case about a possible German move against the west. Strang attached cuttings from the Sunday Times, Manchester Guardian, News Chronicle and Daily Telegraph. The cause of Beck's new reticence with Britain was a matter for speculation, and Strang felt that the press at least were providing one plausible explanation of the mystery.¹

In the context of information the press also performed the lesser function of acting as a reference library for decision-makers. The files of the Cabinet Office are littered with cuttings, particularly from The Times, which record such things as ministerial speeches, relevant debates and questions in Parliament, reports from foreign correspondents, and the pronouncements of major foreign leaders. Such was the enormous and cumbrous nature of the Foreign Office's filing system that the Cabinet Office - which acted of course as a clearing-house for Ministers over information of this kind - felt it was worthwhile to cull its own references from the press.² During the war the subsidies to and extensive use of, the special section set up at Balliol College, Oxford to analyse foreign newspapers, testified to a real dependence on the press for news of day-to-day affairs in the absence

1 DBFP III:3, p.590; Minute by W. Strang on German-Polish conversations at Berchtesgaden; 17 January 1939.

2 This is the CAB 21 series of files. CAB 21/540, for example, contains a series of cuttings from The Times on Hitler's speeches.

of normal diplomatic channels.¹ It is admittedly true that the Ministry of Information's regular digest of the home press was actually stopped through lack of demand. But the summaries 'were never intended to be guides to the news of the day or digests of special articles' - they existed as a means of recording the expressions of public opinion found in the press. Furthermore the lack of demand was not caused by any doubts about the value of reading the press. The principal reason was the fact that it was quicker, more efficient and much cheaper for officials to read the papers themselves, than to wait for specially prepared précis.² Ministers, of course, were overwhelmed with paper-work and relied upon the bureaucratic machine to process information for them.³

As the creation of FRPS suggests it was foreign newspapers which provided the most extensive information service of all. It is noteworthy how much of British official information on international affairs originated from articles in foreign newspapers, albeit filtered through several intermediary sources. Ironically, many decision-makers, Chamberlain and Churchill among them, would not have recommended the British press to other governments as a fount of truthful data about British foreign policy. But in practice there were few alternative ways of amassing a detailed picture of a foreign country to use of the indigenous press. Diplomatic documents are full of references

1 Known as The Foreign Research and Press Service (FRPS), it was largely funded by the Foreign Office which found it of 'definite day-to-day value. In addition, of course, we anticipate using the organisation largely when the time comes for peace-making'. CAB 117/77, G.W. Harrison (FO) - T. Daish, 22 August 1941; also Arnold Toynbee - Sir George Chrystal, 2 January 1941, and R.A. Butler - A. Greenwood, 11 February 1941.

2 INF I/335: Reference Branch Section: Home Press Summaries. Passim.

3 CAB 21/1334, replies from Ministers to the Cabinet Office on the issue of circulating summaries of broadcast and press reports.

to local press views, especially in matters of immediate concern where press attitudes often helped to determine the salience of an issue. When a country was 'democratic', newspapers were scanned largely for their information about the constraints imposed by 'public opinion', rather than for what they revealed about policy itself. But in the cases of Germany and Italy diplomats referred to newspapers because they believed them to be fronts for official opinion. A telegram from the Berlin Embassy illustrates the point well. Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes, after reporting in some detail the views of the German press on rearmament, commented:

'It is difficult to anticipate what the aim of this propaganda is unless it be hoped to frighten His Majesty's Government into reconsidering their policy' ... 'On the other hand it may well be that the obvious reluctance of the people as a whole, when faced by the prospect of war last month, has moved the authorities to conjure up the British bogey¹ as being the only one left on the European stage'.

We have already seen how apprehensively the British Government responded to the Italian press's attacks on France in February in 1939. In the March of that year Halifax actually interviewed the Italian Ambassador to complain about constant threats of war in the Italian newspapers, on the grounds that they must have been authorised by Mussolini's Government. This image of government-press relations, with press views on foreign policy being seen as a manipulated instrument of official diplomacy and propaganda, was exactly that

1 DBFP III:3, pp.247-8, Ogilvie-Forbes-Halifax, 24 October 1938. (my italics). And see Dilks p.138. There was of course some justification for this view of the German Press. But there are few signs of decision-makers having looked for nuances of interpretation in the manner of modern Kremlin-watchers.

professed by Hitler about the situation in Britain. But decision-makers in Whitehall seem never to have turned their own analysis inwards, with the result that the gap of understanding between themselves and the Axis leaders continued to widen. Because their own manipulation of newspapers was only occasional, and subtle in its execution, His Majesty's Government tended to interpret Hitler's view of the British press being officially inspired as a deliberate misrepresentation rather than merely an exaggeration due to poor understanding. Like the dismissal of German and Italian newspapers as the broadsheets of totalitarian regimes, this only served to reinforce hostile stereotypes on both sides.

The Government had a second use for the press, more positive than that of a cutting service. In international affairs newspapers could sometimes be employed as an instrument of diplomacy, by using them as proxy spokesmen or trial balloonists. Because of the varied range of opinions encompassed in the press, and its constant search for news, almost any part of the political elite could be sure of finding somewhere to express views or drop hints. The higher the place the better the position from which to harness the press, and the Cabinet were no exception. In June 1939 they agreed to an expansion of the News Department of the Foreign Office to watch for information, but also to prepare and write more articles for inclusion in the press (presumably under pseudonyms) as a means of counter-acting hostile propaganda. A week later, when the further development of the planned Ministry of Information was being discussed, Halifax stressed that the Foreign Office was already doing much with regard to propaganda via the

press, the BBC, British Council etc.¹ At about the same time it seems that first the Daily Telegraph carried a Government-inspired denial of any return to appeasement, and then The Times included a similar rebuttal to accusations in other newspapers that the Wilson-Wohltat talks had arisen from an offer to buy off Germany.² The placing of a passage in a newspaper enabled a point to be made abroad without incurring any direct responsibility for it. Thus in May 1940, when the delicate question arose of warning Mussolini against attacking the Balkan countries without provoking him unnecessarily, a solution was found by agreeing that, to obviate the need for the Prime Minister to make a pointed public reference to the matter, '...it might be advantageous if a passage on the lines proposed were to appear in, say, The Times'.³

The very permeability of the press meant that Ministers could also act independently of the Cabinet, and even in competition with each other, by leaking material or inspiring campaigns which might lend external support to their own policy-preference. Robert Hudson used this technique boldly. The revolt of junior ministers against slow rearmament and the failure of diplomacy, in which he was involved during December 1938, was leaked to the Evening Standard, probably in the hope of mobilising public backing. As it happened the leak back-fired. The Prime Minister not only did not accede to the

1 CAB 23/99, CM 31-2(39), 7 and 14 June 1939.

2 F. Gannon: The British Press and Germany 1936-9, p.44; S. Aster: 1939, p.249.

3 CAB 65/7, WM 110(40), 2 May 1940.

dissidents' demand for the sacking of Hore-Belisha, but removed instead one of their own number (Lord Strathcona) from the War Office and reassured his Secretary for War by saying that he in his turn 'was having something inspired given out to the Press'.¹

Despite this failure Hudson continued to spray information to the press when it suited his purpose. Cadogan, who was admittedly unsympathetic, suspected him in February 1939 of having leaked details of his impending commercial mission to Germany.² Four months later Walter Runciman received a letter from a foreign diplomat complaining about remarks made by Hudson to senior Spanish journalists to the effect that he would welcome a war with Germany as the prospects were so good for Britain; and henceforth the only concessions which British foreign policy would make to Hitler would be the exchange of raw materials in return for a policy of disarmament, and the loan of funds to enable Germany to dismantle her war-based industries without economic hardship.³ Such folie de grandeur was certainly consistent with Hudson's behaviour at this time in the Wohltat affair - a strange embroglio which illustrates the disproportionate impact the ideas of a junior minister could have once taken up by the press.

Hudson was responsible in the first instance for the leakage about the separate talks which he and Sir Horace Wilson had had with Helmut Wohlthat, Economic Adviser on Germany's four-year plan. Then, once

1 R.J. Minney: The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha, pp.161-5; Crookshank Papers, Ms Eng.Hist. d 359, diary of 19 Dec. 1938; Harvey Diary 25 Dec. 1938, p.229.

2 Dilks, p.150.

3 Runciman Papers, R3/19/1-2. S^r.Moral?(illegible in mss.)-Runciman, 24 July 1939. The correspondent gave Runciman freedom to show the account to Hudson himself, in support of any complaint.

the News Chronicle story of 22 July had launched the controversy, he gave a formal interview to the Daily Express for the purpose of 'clarification', which released even more information. It is true that the views Hudson was publicising were intrinsically sensational, but had they not been taken up by the press they would probably never have commanded very much attention within the Government. Hudson spoke freely to Spanish journalists of his and Wilson's meetings with Wohlthat, although he of all people must have been acutely aware of how porous was the Embassy circuit to rumours and gossip.¹ It is therefore likely that he had some specific motive for leaking the information; either to give impetus to this new peace initiative, in which case his intention went badly wrong, or conceivably to make sure that any concessions to Germany were only made on the basis of the most tangible quid pro quo. Publicity would strangle any possibility of Chamberlain and Wilson quietly undermining the new policy of firmness, which Hudson may have suspected they were about to do. This latter interpretation has been given little attention by historians, but it is more plausible than those so far presented.

After all, the activities we have described already were not those of a man very sympathetic to the Prime Minister's belief in the importance of negotiation in international disputes. Nor were Hudson's other actions in 1939. When on tour of the Northern European capitals in March he had tried to press in Moscow for political agreement between Britain and the USSR. In July he had suggested that the whaling conference to be attended by Wohlthat should be enlivened by a demonstration of British

1 F. Gannon, op.cit. pp.274-7: Dilks, p.150: Runciman Papers, loc. cit.

air-strength. Further, his own statement to Wohlthat was belligerent, and talked only of loans from a position of strength, indeed impregnability.¹ All this is hard to square with any image of Hudson supporting a secret bribe to Hitler through fear of war. Important circumstantial evidence pointing in the same direction is the fact that Oliver Harvey, a strong supporter of Eden and Churchill, had recommended to Halifax on 26 March 1939, that Hudson should be promoted to the full Cabinet.² Finally, Chamberlain and Wilson were embarrassed by the furore which Hudson unleashed, and he would have had to have been politically innocent to a degree that his past history does not suggest, nor to have foreseen this.³ It seems quite possible, therefore, that Hudson deliberately drew attention to Wohlthat and his real importance in order to abort any serious negotiations. He may have seen the involvement of the press as the only way to deter Wilson and Chamberlain short of resignation. Even if Hudson's publicity-seeking temperament was in fact also an important reason, he certainly had no cause to be dissatisfied with the eventual outcome on the basis of the views he had previously expressed. It is difficult to see how any further meaningful talks could have been held with Wohlthat while the press was conducting an outcry that was bound to have serious reverberations both within the Conservative Party and the Government.⁴ The Cabinet were certainly careful to keep quiet their later dealings with the Swedish intermediary Dahlerus.

1 Aster, op.cit. p.244.

2 Harvey, p.269; Harvey-Halifax 26 March 1939. Hudson was grouped with Eden, Cranborne, Duff Cooper, Churchill and Crookshank as desirable new faces in Cabinet.

3 Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1092-1118, letters to Ida and Hilda Chamberlain, 23 & 30 July 1939. The Prime Minister clearly found Hudson's account to him disingenuous: 'He is a clever fellow with a persuasive tongue but he has a very bad reputation as a disloyal colleague'.

4 See also A.J.P. Taylor: Beaverbrook, p.510; letter from Beaverbrook to Rothermere, 29 July 1939: 'Strange to say Hudson was trying to place the story in various papers before publication took place. He did not seem to realise the nature of the political dynamite he was trying to throw hither and thither'.

It was especially easy for a Minister to change the terms of reference of policy-formulation in this way if he had close personal contacts with newspaper management. Such contacts were at their closest, of course, in the case of Beaverbrook and the Express paper. But the power thus conferred on Beaverbrook when he became a Minister was both untypical and unavailable; colleagues would not have tolerated the unconstitutional use of his papers for very long if used regularly. Beaverbrook thus almost always forbore from exploiting his great advantage. On the very few occasions when he did not, the action carried the greater weight through being so unusual. A.J.P. Taylor has pointed out that it was 'a remarkable coincidence' that just as Beaverbrook began to argue within the Cabinet for closer relations with the USSR after the beginning of Operation Barbarossa, the two Expresses and the Standard at once became 'the leading and most vigorous exponents of aid to Russia'. Control of these powerful newspapers enabled Beaverbrook to counter-balance the reluctance shown by most Ministers other than Churchill to aid the Soviet Union, and to give the issue a prominence it might not otherwise have had.¹

Attempts to use the press for diplomatic effect were not confined to politicians. Civil Servants seem to have had few doubts about undertaking political activity of this kind. Indeed from one viewpoint the News Department of the Foreign Office was an institutionalisation of the tendency to 'guide' the press on how to treat developments in international affairs - largely with the intention of easing the path of British foreign relations, but with the inevitable concomitant of

1 Taylor: Beaverbrook, p.613.

slanting the domestic debate over which policy ought to be followed in the first place. On 1 July, 1939, for example, Hugh Dalton recorded how he had heard that The Times, Telegraph, Herald, and Mail ' had been invited to receive "guidance" from a Government spokesman'. Ministers were apparently reluctant to issue an open warning to Germany about the use of force over Danzig and 'As an alternative they wished the press to carry a strong story of British intention to be firm'. Neither Dalton, nor his informant (Francis Williams) were happy about this.¹ The newspapers were being placed in a Morton's Fork whereby they either respected the Government's wishes and perhaps failed to carry out their responsibility to the nation at large, or they went their own way in the knowledge that the publicity might be over-turning a delicate Cabinet strategy in Europe.

Perhaps it was to the press's advantage in this dilemma that attempts at official direction were not always aimed at the same targets. Towards the end of the Munich crisis Henderson wrote to Halifax: 'The best help which the British press could give would be to write nothing awkward calculated to encourage the Czechs to resist'. Three days later his colleague in Prague was to write:

'British press will I earnestly trust be as objective
(? as possible) and at the same time show full₂ sympathy
for problems and sufferings of the Czechs'.

Such 'I trust the press will co-operate' messages were commonplace inclusions in diplomatic reports, and examples of them could be multiplied. Their effect was to make 'guidance' of the press a far more

1 Dalton Papers, Diary, Vol.20, 1 July 1939. Williams was Editor of the Daily Herald.

2 DBFP:III:3: p.56, Sir N. Henderson-Halifax, 30 September 1938; p.74 (referring to Henderson's telegram), Newton-Halifax, 2 October 1938. Bracket in text.

haphazard affair than it might appear on any one occasion, since different Ambassadors tended to interpret 'co-operation' in different ways. It is thus not surprising that the practice of leaking was hardly a well-co-ordinated tactic. During the vital negotiations with the Soviet Union in August 1939, Ambassador Seeds was forced to protest to Orme Sargent in the Foreign Office:

'I am placed in an impossible position vis à vis Molotov, when for example, a London newspaper publishes our proposals for a secret annex to the treaty almost at the same moment we suggest it to the Soviet Government'.¹

When Cabinet Ministers could not manage to liaise over leaks during the most crucial and delicate of negotiations their use of the press as a diplomatic instrument became a weapon that recoiled upon themselves. Successful manipulation had to be subtle.

Living abroad, British Ambassadors tended to assume that newspapers could be pressured even more readily than did their superiors in Whitehall. They tended to address the Foreign Secretary as if he were the chairman of the Newspaper Proprietors' Association. Henderson wrote on 13 October 1938, without much obvious relevance to the rest of his dispatch; 'In my opinion British press would be well-advised to welcome agreement of German and Czechoslovak to dispense with plebiscites'.²

1 Cited in R. Manne: 'The British Government and the Question of the Soviet Alliance', Note (a) on Press Leakages.

2 DBFP III:3: p.170, Sir N. Henderson-Halifax, 13 October 1938. Henderson was openly and naively anxious to guide the press. See Middlemas; Diplomacy of Illusion, p.289.

Likewise Perth could cable (about Chamberlain's proposed visit to Italy);

'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'.¹

Even Cadogan blandly assumed the right and the capacity to direct editorial comment when he told The Assistant Editor of The Times, of Mussolini's invasion of Albania, '...to soft-pedal. We shall have quite enough abuse of "Ice-creamers"'.² Halifax however, as a politician, could not help but realise the difficulties of regularly implementing such requests. In November 1938, when press comment on the 'colonial question' was having an 'undesirable effect', he noted:

'...it was difficult to prevent it. I had been able to moderate it in₃ some quarters and should continue to do what I could'.

Thus great amicability was required on the part of ministers and officials if they wished to harness the press to Government policy, however loosely. At one point Halifax went so far as to solicit Lord Lothian, a private individual at the time, to write to The Times explaining the Government's real attitude to the Czechoslovak problem, in the hope of mollifying Germany after a recent, antagonistic, British press campaign.⁴ Such tortuousness was exceptional, but the motive behind it was not. A more typical method was Lothian's own later letter (when

1 DBFP III:3, p.258, Perth-Halifax, 1 November 1938.

2 Dilks, p.171.

3 DBFP III:3, p.258, Halifax-Phipps, 3 November 1938.

4 Lothian Papers, Vol.362; Lothian-Halifax 31 May 1938. Lothian drafted the letter but was reluctant to do so and thought 'another short editorial in The Times would have been best'.

himself Ambassador to the USA) to Geoffrey Dawson, discussing in general terms the importance of better British propaganda in the United States about the need to resist Hitler. The Times was widely read in Washington and the hint would not have been lost on Dawson.¹ More straightforward, but still quite deferential, were the kind of requests which flowed frequently from Sir Samuel Hoare once ensconced as Ambassador in Madrid. In the summer of 1940 he wrote not only to Dawson but also to E.J. Robertson of the Daily Express, Crozier of the Manchester Guardian, Sir Walter Layton of the News Chronicle and the Economist, F.W. Ogilvie of the BBC, and Beverley Baxter of the Sunday Times, asking them for varying shows of sympathy towards Spain so as to keep her out of the war. There are records of favourable responses from at least Dawson and Robertson and also one from Kemsley of the Daily Sketch and Sunday Times. Since there are also later examples of friendly letters from Crozier, Baxter and Ogilvie, it may be presumed that they too were sympathetic to Hoare's approach.² The episode even stimulated Beaverbrook to tell his editors, and David Low, to 'lay off Franco', after a request from Halifax. Beaverbrook rarely interfered with his papers when a minister, and it is likely that he only did so to please his old friend (and financial beneficiary), Hoare.³

Paradoxically another aspect of the low-key approach which the Government was forced to adopt if it was to control the international impact of British newspapers involved almost complete inaction. For on

1 Lothian Papers, Vol. 400, Lothian-Dawson 27 September 1939.

2 Templewood Papers, Vol. 132; letters to the above pressmen were sent respectively on: 31.7; 27.7; 12.7; 4.7; 22.7; & 3.9.1940. In his reply Dawson talked of having read 'your admirable dispatches which were lent to me by the F.O'. Dawson-Hoare, 12 August 1940.

3 Taylor: Beaverbrook, pp.563, and on financial assistance to Hoare, pp.501-2.

occasions Ministers felt that there were positive gains to be had from 'allowing' the press a free hand. Direction need not be wasted on the already compliant. This was especially the case in war-time. No powers existed to compel the inclusion of material which the Government wished to see in print. But the Ministry of Information, by moderating its output accordingly, could encourage editorial choice of certain subjects. Thus at the very start of hostilities, the Cabinet refrained from issuing a communique recognising that Germany was obeying the rules of warfare -although the COS had advised in this sense - in favour of letting the press reach its own conclusions.¹ It is reasonable to infer that the newspapers were expected to take a hostile view of German conduct. Similarly, when formulating a response to Hitler's peace offer of 6 October, the Cabinet decided that the Ministry of Information should remain silent, so that:

'During the next few days the Press might devote as much space as possible to reporting neutral comments on Herr Hitler's speech'.²

The most blatant use of what we may call the technique of 'permissive guidance' came during the interrogation of Rudolph Hess in May 1941, when the Cabinet deliberately withheld any statement so as 'to let the Press have a good run for a bit and keep the Germans guessing', as Churchill explained it to Roosevelt. Beaverbrook told a lunch of pressmen that 'what was wanted at the moment was as much speculation, rumour and discussion about Hess as possible'. Manna from Heaven should not be spurned, and press speculation was the best means of capitalising on Hess's extraordinary approach. Despite an

1 CAB 65/1, WM 15(39), 14 September 1939.

2 Ibid: WM 40(39) 7 October 1939.

unenthusiastic response from journalists to this official passivity, the Government's purpose was in effect virtually achieved since the story had already been raging for four days. It was fair to assume that Hitler would be placed in a difficult position by the uncertainty.¹

It was not only the British Government which found the British press to be a useful medium of international influence. Foreign diplomats also sought to exploit newspapers, with the same varying degrees of success. Virgil Tilea tried to enlist the Daily Telegraph to help him press the Chamberlain Cabinet for a guarantee to Roumania.² This was a paper which was a favourite resort for Ambassadors seeking British help. The News Department told Cadogan that Corbin of France was 'in league' with the Telegraph in an attempt to hurry Britain into guaranteeing Greek independence.³ The Foreign Office was not unaware of the behind-the-scenes alliances designed to exert pressure. On the other hand some liaisons could hardly be ignored. The diplomatic correspondent of The Daily Herald, W.N. Ewer, acted as a go-between for Ivan Maisky and the Foreign Office on those occasions when the Soviet Ambassador did not want to have his opinions put on the record. The Foreign Office accepted the arrangement because it wanted the maximum

1 Churchill-Roosevelt, 17 May 1941, in W.S. Churchill: The Second World War, Vol.III, The Grand Alliance (London, Cassell, 1950) pp.46-7. Also CAB 65/18, WM 50-51 (41) 15 & 19 May 1941. Beaverbrook's remark is quoted in C. King: With Malice Towards None: A War Diary (London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1970), pp.129-30. J. Douglas-Hamilton: Motive for a Mission (London, Macmillan, 1971), p.176, notes how Churchill told the Duke of Hamilton that the press were 'not to be told a word' of the reasons for Hess's flight.

2 Aster: 1939, p.139.

3 Dilks, p.172.

possible information and because it felt that the 'level-headed' Ewer was a reliable source. Indeed on 4 April and 10 May 1939 Ewer submitted written memoranda to the office after talks with Maisky, firstly suggesting that Litvinov be invited to London, and later warning that unless the British Government acted positively, there could be no Anglo-Soviet agreement at all.¹ In themselves neither of these planted suggestions had a decisive effect on the course of the negotiations. However, each represented the way in which press channels could convey to the heart of the decision-making process inputs that might otherwise have had no access. Less straightforward was the use of the Opposition. In July 1939 Maisky let the News Chronicle and Daily Telegraph into the details of a current sticking point in negotiations with Britain so that his close contact Hugh Dalton would have 'an opening' to raise the issue with Chamberlain in the Commons.²

The circle of mutual influence is completed by the impact of British decision-makers upon the foreign press. We have already noted the close attention paid by Ambassadors like Henderson and Perth to their local press; it was their habit to feed the 'British view' to these newspapers in the hope of exerting indirect influence over the host Government just as Maisky did with the opposition press in Britain. That this role was taken no less seriously in Whitehall is demonstrated by the concern often shown to influence the American press. Before the outbreak of war the Foreign Office took care to ensure that US newspapers had full

1 See note 1, p.258 ; also S. Aster: 'Ivan Maisky and Parliamentary Anti-Appeasement, 1938-9' in A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.): Lloyd George: Twelve Essays (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1971) pp.317-57.

2 Dalton Papers, Diary Vol.21, 4 July 1939.

explanations of the British position in the Soviet negotiations, while in August 1940 A.V. Alexander at the Admiralty requested that as much information as was prudent be given from within the administration to the London Correspondent of the Chicago Daily News, on the grounds that the paper was owned by Knox, Secretary of the US Navy Department. The First Lord felt that it was 'all the more necessary that I should keep on good terms with Mr. Knox' now that negotiations about the destroyers-for-bases deal were underway.¹

Despite the occasional permissive actions we have noted above, it should be clear that the majority of ways in which the British Government used the press, were negative and involved attempts to restrain rather than stimulate. The 'trial balloon' beloved of diplomatic historians seems to have been a rare occurrence. Among the examples quoted here only Maisky's angling for an invitation for Litvinov qualifies, and we shall argue below that the famous Times' leaders of 7 September 1938 and 1 April 1939 both discredit the notion despite the usual tendency to view them as pieces of official litmus-paper. Positive use of the press was limited to requests like Hoare's for simple shows of sympathy towards particular countries. It was rarely used creatively in the sense of developing ideas by exposing them to unofficial debate before final decisions were taken. The reasons for this were partly those embodied in the Official Secrets Acts - the concern for security, for the preservation of civil servants' anonymity, and for the destabilising effects of populist politics - but were also to do with the fact that the press was a diverse and unwieldy phenomenon. The original terms of reference of an issue could soon become hopelessly submerged by both shoals of red herrings and the inability of officials

1 A.V. Alexander Papers, File 5/4/49-50: Alexander-Admiral Dunbar-Nasmith, 20 August 1940.

to do more than hint at the conditions which made some options more 'practicable' than others. The eddies of newspaper controversy make the formulation of Government foreign policy seem by comparison like the application of rational choice theory. As a result, decision-makers mostly confined themselves to containing the press's inevitable impact on the professional course of inter-governmental relations, and to conveying information or warnings in suitably unofficial forms. Such techniques were in regular use.

The attempt to contain press discussion for diplomatic reasons brings us to the third function of the press in the process of decision-making, since it rested on the perception that the newspapers together constituted an important independent actor in world politics. There is a wealth of evidence in the documents of this period to bear out this assumption. The Times' notorious leaders of September 1938 and April 1939, for example, caused decision-makers considerable embarrassment by the diplomatic turmoil they provoked. It is true that there is some doubt about whether Halifax himself may not have inspired the leader of 7 September (suggesting cession of the German-speaking Sudetenland). Certainly the Foreign Secretary was on the closest terms with Dawson, and R.A. Butler alleges in his memoirs that he saw the Editor of The Times leaving the Foreign Office after a long talk on 6 September. Butler is 'convinced that Halifax knew this article was to be published'.¹ But even if true, this is not the same

1 R.A. Butler: The Art of the Possible (London, Hamish Hamilton 1971) p.69. See J. Evelyn Wrench: Geoffrey Dawson and Our Times (London, Hutchinson 1955) & Donald McLachlan: In The Chair: A Biography of Barrington-Ward of The Times 1927-48 (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson 1971) for many examples of meetings between Dawson and Halifax.

as saying that the Foreign Secretary was the source of the proposal or that he was not caused considerable problems by it after publication. Moreover Butler is the only source to mention the meeting, and his book is on the whole neither a full nor a reliable historical record. The contemporary broadsheet The Week was also suspicious about collusion, but Eden, Churchill, the Labour leadership and the opposition press did not support the allegation, although the Dawson-Halifax friendship was common knowledge and they all had good motives for criticising it. Even that major figure in The Times' office, Stanley Morrison, who portrayed Dawson as a relentless appeaser, wrote that 'At no time during the period 1928-38 did Printing House Square seek to follow the inspirations of the Foreign Office. The policy of Dawson and Barrington-Ward was their own'.¹ Moreover the suggestion about the Sudetenland would hardly have been thought new or startling enough by either Dawson or Halifax to have merited a ballon d'essai, as Dr. Franklin Gannon has demonstrated.² Finally, the impression of independent activity is reinforced by what we know about the leader's ad hoc preparation. Dawson only read A.L. Kennedy's draft on the afternoon before publication, after returning from a month's holiday.³ This hardly suggests a carefully laid plan.

1 History of The Times, Vol. IV, Part II (1921-48) (London, Printing House Square, 1952), p.931. Barrington-Ward wrote in his diary 9 September: 'Outsiders always see some Machiavellian process at work. We don't!'. McLachlan, op.cit. p.148.

2 F. Gannon: The British Press and Germany, 1936-9, pp.178-81. The Times itself printed on 8 Sept. a collection of its expressions of the same view.

3 Dawson Papers, 1938-9 file; Dawson-Barrington Ward, 7 September 1938; also Dawson-Churchill, 26 Sept. Churchill had sent Dawson The Week's allegations, describing it as a 'scandalous leaflet'.

The effects of the leader were spectacular and embarrassing for the Cabinet. Dawson recorded that 'Practically all our contemporaries delivered 'a volley of abuse' against the suggestion of frontier revision. Runciman cabled from Prague that the leader was 'adding to the Mission's difficulties'. and Vansittart heard that in Germany the consequences 'have been disastrous, since it gives the impression that His Majesty's Government is on the run'. Bonnet urgently telephoned the British Embassy in Paris, causing 'Phipps to report that the leader had 'caused considerable excitement here', while the German Embassy told Berlin that although the Foreign Office had not inspired the article, it was possible that its seeds lay in the 'Prime Minister's emburage'.¹ Thus a newspaper had caused domestic controversy at a delicate diplomatic moment for the British Government, had directly upset relations with Czechoslovakia, and had probably reinforced German images of divisions among British decision-makers over the willingness to go to war for central Europe.

The leader of 1 April 1939, which aroused widespread speculation that the previous day's guarantee to Poland would not protect that country from territorial cessions to Germany, was a further demonstration of The Times' capacity to have a major impact on international relations without being a front for the Government. Again the author was A.L. Kennedy, and on this occasion there is no doubt that he was officially briefed by Cadogan beforehand. But Cadogan merely explained in advance the nature of the guarantee as he understood the Cabinet to see it without

1 Wrench, op.cit. p.372, Diary of 8 Sept.; FO 371(38)/21764, C9356/4770/18; Newton-Halifax, 7 Sept. FO 371(38)/21735, C9385/1941/18, minute by Vansittart to Halifax, 7 Sept; FO 371(38)/21764, C9361/4770/18, Phipps-Halifax, 7 Sept.; History of The Times, Vol. IV, p.933, note.

attempting to float subtle new qualifications. Although he gave Kennedy 'the low-down - hope I can trust him', Cadogan was himself in favour of the guarantee as an attempt 'to stop the rot', and had been intimately involved with the Cabinet in its formulation, so that this can only be read as a privileged advance briefing which Cadogan trusted would not be leaked.¹

Dawson's diary confirms that the leader was suspected 'quite wrongly' of minimizing the British undertaking. It also records that Halifax and Chamberlain saw the piece for the first time when it appeared in print on 1 April. That they found it 'just right on first reading and were only worried later by the Poles and others', was because the leader faithfully reflected the Cabinet's policy with all its attendant ambiguities.² The difficulty lay in the implementation of the guarantee; did Poland have carte blanche to bring Britain into war? How could Britain both underwrite Polish 'independence' and avoid fighting over trivial disputes about frontiers? The Cabinet had decided before 31 March that Poland must have the basic power to define a threat to her independence, but had also looked to their own freedom of action by allowing for consultation prior to any decision of war. They envisaged that a settlement of German-Polish differences might be obtainable without damage to Polish national sovereignty or strength. Frontier amendments need not necessarily affect Poland's independence. Nevertheless, the issue of territorial integrity remained confused; if Poland did choose to stand firm over 'every inch' of Danzig and her western frontier, even in the face of a 'reasonable' compromise, would

1 Dilks, p.165, 30 March 1939.

2 Dawson Diary quoted in Gannon, op.cit., p.264. See also Chamberlain Papers, Letter to Hilda Chamberlain 2 April 1939, NC 18/1/1092, where the P.M. talks of the important point about the Guarantee being 'perceived alone by The Times'.

not Britain then be forced to choose between war and a Munich of even greater dishonour and strategical disaster? It was this unresolved problem which was exposed when The Times spelt out on 1 April the fact that independence and not integrity was the key concept of the Polish Guarantee. The issue was never decided in principle but was worked out empirically during the events of August 1939.

Although in this instance The Times was only concerned to explain Government policy accurately, the effect of its doing so was to cause a brief but important crisis in Anglo-Polish relations. Indeed, the leader may be said to have forced the Government in conceding Poland a greater latitude over the implementation of the guarantee without proper consideration of the problems involved, since it led to urgent Polish demands for the British Government to make plain their unqualified support for Poland. Because Beck was threatening to cancel his imminent visit to London, Halifax had to issue an immediate assurance - without reference to the Cabinet - that the guarantee was complete, and that Poland would in the last resort be judge of a casus belli.¹ This was a public commitment which could not easily be forgotten, especially in the context of the embarrassing domestic furor which The Times had once again provoked. Fellow newspapers, Churchill and Dalton, all raised an alarm that was only put to rest in a full-scale Commons debate.²

Interference in diplomacy was a regular occurrence. Up to a point it was an inevitable product of the ambiguous relations between

1 DBFP III:4, p.575; Halifax-Kennard, 1 April 1939, 11.00 p.m. The Cabinet did not meet until 5 April, when it seems not to have discussed the matter. CAB 23/98, CM 18(39), 5 April 1939.

2 Dalton Papers, Diary Vol. 20, 1-4 April 1939; History of The Times Vol. IV, pp.962-3.

newspapers and governments. No foreign country was ever quite sure how unofficial any piece of press analysis was. In a never ending cycle the world's governments constantly read newspapers of all countries because they believed them to be important, and believed them to be important because they knew that they were closely scanned by other governments. In our period this phenomenon was naturally most evident in relations with the Axis countries. From the early 1930s there had been accusations from Germany that the British press was inciting antagonism between the two countries and was intervening in Germany's internal affairs.¹ The problem did not disappear with the more glacial relations of 1939. Just as Lloyd George's article in praise of Hitler in 1936 had heightened the Government's dilemma about how to treat the Nazi leader, so in July 1939 Chamberlain, Wilson and Halifax became sufficiently concerned about the effects of Lord Kemsley's private diplomacy (he had obtained a personal interview with Hitler) to supervise Kemsley's preparations carefully.² Since it is unlikely that the Germans were unaware of the official briefing, Kemsley's activities may well have accidentally reinforced Hitler's belief that conciliation was still Chamberlain's first priority.

At the very least, the British press performed the function, almost despite itself, of providing foreign decision-makers with data to reinforce existing preconceptions. This explains why the letter written by the Duke of Hamilton to The Times on 6 October 1939, and arguing

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- 1 In the case of the Manchester Guardian this had happened as early as 1933. David Ayerst: Guardian: Biography of a Newspaper, (London, Collins, 1971), pp.515-6.
 - 2 Paul Addison: 'Lloyd George and Compromise Peace in the Second World War' (pp.364-5) in A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.) Lloyd George: Twelve Essays, pp.361-84; H. Hobson, L. Russell, P. Knightley (Eds.): "The Pearl of Days": A Memoir of the Sunday Times, 1822-1972. (London, Hamish Hamilton, 1972), pp.211-3; Diary p.193; Lord Kemsley was head of Allied Newspapers, which controlled the Sunday Times, Sunday Graphic, & Daily Sketch. Neville Henderson and Halifax had agreed long before on 'the extreme importance' of these and 'the big group of provincial press under Lord Kemsley's direction' (Henderson's phrase). Correspondence of December 1937, in the Halifax Papers, A4.410.3.2.

for 'a just and comprehensive peace' as soon as 'the menace of aggression and bad faith' was removed (this was the day Hitler's peace offer was made known), was quoted on the 10.15 news by German radio that same night.¹ Although the Foreign Office in London probably paid little attention to the letter in itself, they could not ignore the German reaction. Unpredictable linkages were always liable to form between the press and elements abroad, because of the unmanageably large amount of foreign affairs comment produced by the newspapers. It was difficult to foresee, for example, that in October 1938 (rather than at any other time), the Deutsche Diplomatische Politische Korrespondenz would gather together a series of foreign references to the colonial issue, and make prominent reference to a letter by Lord Allen published in the Manchester Guardian.² Thus a home press could help to create foreign policy points of issue by the most roundabout routes.

There was undoubtedly a strong feeling of exasperation among Ministers and officials that the press could interfere so readily with the delicate balances of international relations. Understandings or images which might have taken months of subtle manoeuvre to construct could be placed suddenly at risk by blaring hostility or satire. Decision-makers were reluctant to accept the practical implications of the free press ethos to which they undoubtedly subscribed. This tension is evident in remarks made during the Cabinet of 26 July 1939. The Secretary of State for Scotland was worried about recent 'press stunts'

1 J. Douglas Hamilton: Motive for a Mission, pp.97-9. This was part of a somewhat embarrassing correspondence for the Government, on the issue of specific war aims. See The Times, 9-13 October 1939.

2 DBFP:III:3, pp.245, Ogilvie-Forbes - Halifax, 24 October 1938.

to the effect that Hitler was ill, or that peace was at the dictate of Germany:

'The effect of these announcements must be to make Germany think that we were in a state of nervous apprehension. German air manoeuvres were to take place in North-West Germany and if these were written up it might result in increasing the tension'.

The right of the press to carry such stories was taken for granted, but Halifax shared Colville's concern at 'the general tendency for newspapers to be inflammatory', and he promised to try to persuade the proprietors to get them toned down.¹ If he failed, he knew that he would be faced with embarrassing meetings with foreign Ambassadors such as the occasion earlier in the year when he had had to mollify Dirksen over an article by H.G. Wells in the News Chronicle which had called Hitler a 'certifiable lunatic'.²

Authoritarian regimes were particularly prone to be surprised and offended that the British Government could allow its press to behave in such an 'irresponsible' manner. Japan, for example, made several strong complaints about a series of leading articles in The Times. The Vice-Chief of the Japanese General Staff protested against the articles both for their own sake, as 'inaccurate, unfriendly, biased and occasionally insulting', and for the fact that 'This paper is universally held to reflect views of British Government'. Further, the leaders had led to 'smouldering resentment and anger...in wide circles' which promised to reach such a pitch that 'efforts of our

1 CAB 23/100, CM 39(39), 26 July 1939.

2 DBFP:III:3, pp.560 & 566-7. Correspondence between Halifax and Ogilvie-Forbes, 2 and 5 January 1939.

Government and yours to appreciate each other's point of view may be brought to naught and worse things may befall'. Some of this was routine diplomatic rhetoric. But the British Ambassador took it seriously enough. He commented:

'I feel sure that his statement has been made with sincere goodwill¹ and in the interests of both countries'.

Halifax himself was obviously alert to the harm that even the friendly Times could do to Britain's highly vulnerable situation the Far East merely by its reporting of information. Six months later he wrote to Dawson enclosing further Craigie telegrams about the harm done to Anglo-Japanese relations by two sarcastic leaders in The Times. He asked Dawson to pass on the message to Peter Fleming, who had written the articles and whom Cadogan privately dubbed 'irresponsible and harmful'.² For it took a great deal of official time and trouble to correct impressions given abroad by The Times. B.C. Cohen has noted that 'Governments, like private persons, do not publicly call attention to the frailties or infidelities of the people they have to live and work with...when to do so would be disruptive of ordinary good relations'.³ The press, however, with its vested interest in controversy did not always worry about disturbing diplomatic proprieties.

The onset of war made all Governments more sensitive to all kinds of press comment. Because the need to win over some neutrals and

1 DBFP III:8: pp.77-8, Craigie-Halifax, 9 September 1938; see also p.212, Halifax-Craigie 10 December 1938, and Vol. 9, p.88, Halifax-Craigie, 19 May 1939.

2 FO 371(39)/23555, F2965/176/23; Halifax-Dawson, 1 April 1939, & Minute by Cadogan, 31 March.

3 B.C. Cohen: The Press and Foreign Policy, p.200.

pacify others was the paramount aim of foreign policy in the early years of the war, the Government were always anxious that British newspapers should not be thought to be intervening in the internal affairs of non-participants. About an Italian Government reshuffle in October 1939:

'The Secretary of State thought it was unfortunate that the Press that morning had given so much prominence to the changes in Italy, and he proposed to take steps to moderate such comments'.

The press responded - and Halifax immediately invited them to show similar restraint over the coming visit of Goring to Rome.¹ With Mussolini in such an uneasy state of neutrality, Halifax evidently feared that it would take very little, perhaps even newspaper hostility, to drive him into the enemy camp.

More friendly neutrals inspired the same solicitude from the Foreign Secretary. British strategy did after all depend very heavily on outside help, in its emphasis on the military and diplomatic isolation of Germany, while large amounts of credit and supplies were necessary to sustain Britain herself. We have already seen how much importance the experience Samuel Hoare placed on press friendliness towards Spain.² Even more important was the United States. In March 1941 the Minister of Information was asked by the Cabinet no less to 'prevent publication of undesirable articles' on the matter of the American lease of some British bases, over which there had been 'some rather awkward references' in the press. Ministers may have had in mind their recent experience with Eire, with whom relations had deteriorated partly because of 'articles in the press commenting on the folly of Eire's neutrality' and despite the immense importance of the Berchaven

1 CAB 65/2, WMs 67 & 71 (39) 1 & 5 November 1939.

2 Note 2 p.260 above.

naval base to Britain.¹ These kinds of problems made Churchill in particular so sensitive that he felt even the most airy discussion of issues involving neutral states to be potentially embarrassing. Thus he furiously chastised Harold Nicolson in 1941 for allowing his speculations about a future world order to appear unvetted in New York's the Nation. The faux pas probably helped to lose Nicolson his ministerial post in the following July.²

The press was even thought capable of directly influencing the military progress of the war. It was central to British notions of victory that the German people might eventually turn against Hitler and end the war from within. The Cabinet hoped that they could be encouraged to do so by British propaganda, to which the press and radio willingly contributed. Conversely, any criticism of the Government at home was liable to be picked up and exploited by the Germans as encouragement for their own prospects of victory. The press attacks of November 1939 on new war-time controls, were said to have become:

'The daily provender of the German press and the German wireless. The German public was thus led to believe that we lacked the means or the heart to carry on the war to a conclusion and that our Government, being incompetent at home, was certain to be incompetent in the field. A similar effect was produced in neutral countries. We could not afford to allow this state of affairs to continue'.³

1 CAB 65/18, WM 23(41), 4 March 1941; on Eire, CAB 65/8, WM 209(40), 22 July 1940.

2 Harold Nicolson was Parliamentary Secretary at the Ministry of Information. PREM 4/100-8; Churchill-Duff Cooper, February 1941; replies from Cooper and Nicolson. Nicolson, Nigel (Ed.): Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters 1939-45 (London, Fontana/Collins 1970), p.141 & pp. 177-8.

3 CAB 65/2, WM 69(39) 3 November 1939. The row over the competence of the Ministry of Information was in full flood. See also Wallace Papers, Diary, MSS. Eng. Hist. 495, 24 October 1939.

Thus the press was one of the first 'trans-national actors',¹ after the Catholic Church but before General Motors. Even in 1939 world politics did not consist solely of inter-governmental relations. Much direct interaction occurred between the presses, publics and interest-groups of different societies. This in turn helped to change both domestic and international environments for the governments concerned, and could not be ignored by them. Public debate or internal pressure themselves easily became important factors in foreign policy issues.

Newspapers were parasites of inter-state relations, but acquired independent influence by giving Roosevelt and the rest a choice of different interpretations about British foreign policy and its internal constraints. Press diversity or criticism of the Government could be taken as evidence of British weakness; unity of support could be seen either as acts of hostility to foreign countries, or as the expression of official attitudes. Further, any press comment could be taken as indicative of British 'public feeling'.² Hitler continually complained about British newspapers, but he was also doubtless grateful for the extra difficulties which they caused British representatives in relations with Germany. Thus Göring could tell Henderson that the weakness of Chamberlain's position lay in 'his inability to eliminate what he described as "the opposition from within"'. The Germans always feign to believe

1 Defined loosely as 'non-state entities...able on occasion to affect the course of international events', in Arnold Wolfers' early formulation: Discord and Collaboration (Baltimore, John Hopkins, 1962 ; essay first published 1959).

2 See Chapter IV below, pp.341-6.

that England speaks with two voices'.¹ The doubt as to which voice the Germans and others would hear or respond to at any given time was a simple demonstration to the Government that the press could act independently in world politics. Newspapers added an important element of ambiguity to the images presented by states to the outside world.²

Press contributions to the world of international relations can be divided analytically into two separate categories: (a) direct comment on events and other states, as described above; (b) deliberate pressure on the home government in an attempt to influence its foreign policy. It is this second category which provides us with the last of the four functions which the press performed in the British foreign policy-process in the late thirties and early forties. Leverage on the Government was the most tangible method of affecting the direction of international change.

The clearest manifestations of deliberate pressure were the occasions on which various papers joined loosely together in 'campaigns' over specific issues. The debate about conscription in the first half of 1939 was a good example of both the effectiveness and the limitations of a press campaign. As with any single component in any causal process, it is very difficult to isolate the effect of the press in the formulation of the decision which followed to introduce compulsory

1 DBFP:III:4, p.593; Henderson-Halifax 22 February 1939 (private letter): 'They see, just like we do in certain matters mutatis mutandis and with doubtless far greater justification, eels under every rock where Great Britain is concerned'.

2 The problems of conscious and unconscious signalling are discussed in R. Jervis: The Logic of Images in International Relations (Princeton, Princeton University Press 1970).

military service, let alone to specify it as the primary factor. There were certainly major causes of this reversal in policy which had nothing to do with the press. The nature of the Government's recent guarantees to Eastern Europe, and their newly overt distrust of Hitler, combined to create a feeling that Britain had both to convince Poland and Germany that the guarantees would be implemented, and to achieve the necessary military preparedness for war. Conscription emerged as the only course to satisfy each of these criteria. Indeed the serious papers were affected by the same considerations and their enthusiasm for conscription only fully flowered after the March crisis - although still ahead of that of officialdom. Only the Daily Express had pushed for conscription throughout 1938.¹

The military implications of the new foreign policy found powerful and crucial expression from the Quai d'Orsay, fearful that another 'effort du sang' would fall on France alone. French arguments placed strong emphasis on both the military and diplomatic benefits of conscription, and their impact was considerable in London. As early as 29 March Chamberlain admitted that:

'He had a great deal of sympathy with those who said that there was nothing which would so impress foreign opinion as the adoption₂ by this country of compulsory military service'.

By 24 April the Prime Minister put the point more strongly:

'There was great pressure on this country to introduce some scheme of compulsory military training,₃ not only from France but from the United States'.

1 Gannon: The British Press and Germany, 1936-9, p.38.

2 CAB 23/98, CM 15(39), 29 March 1939.

3 CAB 23/99, CM 22(39), 24 April 1939.

He eventually explained to the House of Commons that the pressure succeeded primarily because of the quality of its argument:

'We cannot but be impressed by the view, shared by other democratic countries and especially by our friends in Europe that...nothing would so impress the world with the determination of this country to offer a firm resistance to any attempt at general domination as its acceptance of¹ the principle of compulsory military service...'.¹

With these substantive reasons for the change in policy on conscription, what room is there for the role of the press? More especially when we remember that Chamberlain had explained his reluctance to accept the policy, which he approved in principle, in terms of its divisive effects on labour relations, and consequently the appearance of British unity abroad. The trades unions and the British left in general were strongly opposed to conscription and the Prime Minister feared that strikes would interfere with re-armament.² Moreover because the Daily Herald, News Chronicle, and Manchester Guardian were the vociferous spokesmen of the left in warning the Government against conscription, the press was divided. How could it then have been an important factor in the adoption of the policy?

The answer lies in recognising that while the primary causes of the decision for conscription were the foreign policy developments discussed above, they were not in themselves sufficient to have brought

1 Hansard, 5th series (1939), Vol.346, col.1151. The Commons approved the Military Training Bill on the evening of 27 April. See also Harvey, diary of 19 April, p.281.

2 On Labour opposition to conscription see, inter alia, B.W. Donoughue and G.W. Jones: Herbert Morrison: Portrait of a Politician (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1973), pp.263-4.

about the change. It is certain that Chamberlain was genuine in refusing conscription earlier because he feared that it would jeopardise any chance of domestic consensus on foreign policy; and he held a consensus to be a pre-condition for strength in international relations.¹ It is therefore reasonable to infer that the Prime Minister changed his mind partly because he came to believe that there was less likelihood of serious opposition to the policy. The likelihood had diminished partly because the unions themselves were becoming aware of the need for better manning of air defences, and partly because the Government was preparing a way of presenting the policy which would mollify the left (measures against profiteering etc.).

Of greater significance however was the fact that the majority of newspapers had now deserted the principle of voluntary military service, and so far as they represented 'opinion', made very clear to the Prime Minister that conscription would command a great deal of public support. The newspapers provided the 'proper preparation' without which, Chamberlain thought, any decision would seem 'rash or sudden' and would provoke a 'violent reaction'.² A specialist historian of conscription in this period has argued that Chamberlain's switch of view can be explained by 'mounting criticism' which recruited several members of the Cabinet until finally the Prime Minister 'caught up with prevailing opinion'.³ Oliver Harvey noted on 29 March

1 Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1092, letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 2 April 1939.

2 CAB 23/98, CM 21(39), 19 April 1939.

3 Peter Dennis: Decision by Default: Peacetime Conscription and British Defence 1919-39 (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p.226.

that the 'demand for conscription or at least national compulsory register growing'.¹ Such generalised references to 'demands' or 'criticism' invariably refer to Parliament and the press, as the forums of public debate; in this case the newspaper campaign for conscription both stimulated and expressed discontent. The press twice reported meetings of Conservative MPs which had called for compulsory national service, and the Daily Mirror conducted a poll in which young people voted nearly 2:1 in favour of conscription. The Times carried a spate of articles and letters coming unmistakably down in favour of abandoning the voluntary principle, joining the Daily Mirror, and the Daily Express which stepped up their exhortations to conscript.² The three papers listed above as having opposed conscription, did not change their view, but this was no surprise from anti-Conservatives.

It was striking that the majority of newspapers, including The Times and the Daily Mail, neither of whom had taken up the cause before 1939 and both of whom were normally very loyal supporters of the Government line, had come to synchronise a vigorous campaign for a policy which the Cabinet seemed to have ruled out. The Lord President of the Council, on tour in the Dominions, heard from his Private Secretary that by 24 April the papers were 'practically unanimous as to the necessity for some measure of conscription'.³ This unanimity must have been foremost in the Prime Minister's mind when he wrote (in a memorandum explaining his change of view for the

1 Harvey, Diary, P.271.

2 Dennis, op.cit. pp.190-200, 209-13, 223-4.

3 Runciman Papers, R3/32/1-4, C. Hendricks-Runciman, 24 April 1939.

Cabinet) that public opinion in Britain and France was demanding conscription as an earnest of opposition to aggression.¹ Halifax too felt that domestic pressure was a major factor. He told Henderson that the decision 'is due very largely to a change in public opinion which has been developing steadily for some time'. There had been 'a widespread expression of feeling' that more than the Territorial Army was needed to train personnel.² It was this new perception that the weight of public opinion had swung heavily in favour of conscription - opinion largely expressed through the press- which enabled Chamberlain to think that the policy would not cause such domestic dissension as he feared, because the left would be isolated in its opposition. He was right; neither strikes nor rallies followed. Harvey wrote: 'conscription appears to be going down better than seemed likely at first. Labour is divided about it...'.³

The campaign for conscription epitomises the degree of influence which deliberate and specific newspaper pressure could have. Alone, press demands would have been impotent; foreign policy variables were the main precipitants of the change in policy. But without the strident presentation which external factors received in the press the need for conscription might have seemed less urgent to the Government; its embarrassing associated problems might have been shelved if Hore-Belisha had not had such vocal cohorts to argue his case outside the Cabinet room.⁴ The campaign declaimed the military and diplomatic

1 CAB 24/285, CP 91(39); Memorandum on Compulsory Military Training.22.4.39.

2 DBFP:III:5; pp.320-1, Halifax to Henderson and Sir N. Charles, 25 April 1939.

3 Harvey, Diary, 29 April, p.285.

4 See R.J. Minney: The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha, pp.185-203, on Belisha's difficulties.

necessity of compulsion while convincing decision-makers that domestic difficulties had been exaggerated. In this case the press combined its role of auxiliary voice in international relations with that of energetic domestic lobby, to important effect.

The convergence of these two roles always gave the press potentially significant influence over foreign policy decisions, particularly when there was an area of doubt among decision-makers themselves. It was not surprising that the eruption of journalistic outrage at the dismissal of Hore-Belisha in January 1940 should fail to ensure the Minister a quick return to high office or even to elicit the true reasons for the sacking.¹ There were no pressing military factors on Hore-Belisha's side, and the area of Cabinet appointments was not one where the Prime Minister felt vulnerable to home opinion. Not even the vigorous, widespread and persistent campaign of mid-1939 to bring Churchill back to the Cabinet could infringe on this prerogative. Most of the papers, led by the Daily Telegraph, came together in a co-ordinated call for a National Government, or at the very least the return of Eden and Churchill. But because there was no certainty or clarity as to the specific benefit that the move would bring in European politics, and because Chamberlain was set against it in the belief that it would actually do harm, the campaign came to nothing.² In this instance there was

1 See note 1 above, p.232 ; Dilks, pp.241-4; Even senior ministers remained in the dark. Inskip Diary, II: pp.97-9, 8 & 12 January 1940.

2 On the campaign to get Churchill into the Cabinet, see M. Gilbert: Winston Churchill, Vol.V, pp.1060-94; also Templewood Papers, X:4, Hoare-W.W. Astor, 11 July 1939, where Hoare refers to 'those personal matters' (the composition of the Cabinet) being 'solely in the discretion of the Prime Minister', and observes ironically that because both the left and right wing press are shouting for Churchill, the Prime Minister's position is made stronger.

no Trojan horse - no issue or personality - within the walls of government to give the press campaigners a point of entry.¹

Many press campaigns had little effect on policy for a more simple reason; that they were mounted on too narrow a base within the press. Almost by its very nature, the press was often deeply divided within itself, with the result that much of its advice to government was self-cancelling. One Minister wrote, on the evening of the Tory revolt against Neville Chamberlain:

'Esmond Harmsworth who now controls the policy of the "Daily Mail"...comes out strongly for Lloyd George as Prime Minister, whilst Lord Rothermere is sending telegrams to people like Henry Page Croft congratulating them on a magnificent₂ speech in support of the Prime Minister'.

Divisions like these made pressure hard to identify, and easy to resist. A newspaper whose campaign was not taken up by its peers was unlikely to carry much weight with decision-makers, however intensely prosecuted. Beaverbrook's strident isolationism continued after the Polish guarantee but was a voice in the wilderness despite the large circulation of his papers.³ He was advocating policies which were now beyond the pale of opinions considered realistic in Government circles, and he evoked no response from other sources of informed opinion. Although potentially Beaverbrook could have caused the Government severe difficulties abroad (specially when he vied with Lloyd

1 Chamberlain immediately responded to the campaign, sending for Camrose, but only to explain why he did not intend to give way. The P.M. was vexed to have lost Camrose's support. 'But since his illness Camrose is a changed man'...Chamberlain Papers, NC18/I/1092-1118, letter to Ida Chamberlain, 8 July 1939.

2 Wallace Diary, Mss. Eng. Hist. 497, 8 May 1940.

3 A.J.P. Taylor: Beaverbrook, pp.517-12; F. Gannon, op.cit. pp.34-8.

George during the first phases of the war as a focus for advocates of a compromise peace),¹ in practice he did not do so, and was himself forced around to the majority view.

On the other hand the conditions that brought the press influence in the case of conscription were not so unusual. Newspaper advocacy was an important influence over both the changed attitude of the British Government towards a Soviet alliance in the Spring of 1939, and the fall of the Chamberlain Government in May 1940. In the debate over an approach to the Soviet Union, for instance, a different press campaign might have tipped the balance against an alliance during the period of agonising in Cabinet during April and May. We saw in Chapter II how the Cabinet excluded the USSR from the negotiations with Poland during March, and how Chamberlain only agreed to seek an alliance with reluctance. Given that the press reached a new degree of unanimity after the Prague coup on the need for co-operation with the Soviet Union, and that it was during April and May that most ministers were won over to the extent of radically reversing British policy, there is at least a prima facie case for definite press influence.

To a degree newspapers and Government each arrived independently at the same conclusion. But the debate within Cabinet cannot have been unaffected by the way in which the public argument had swung in favour of an Anglo-Soviet agreement, pre-dating most of the important ministerial conversions. It can be argued that the mounting press campaign itself precipitated the split in the Cabinet. Whether or not

1 There are various hints that Beaverbrook was keeping his options open in 1939-40. See P. Addison: 'Lloyd George and Compromise Peace in the Second World War', in A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.): Lloyd George: Twelve Essays, pp. 371 & 377; Dalton Papers, Diaries, Vols. 23 & 24, 11 December 1940, and 18 & 25 June 1941; also PREM 4/100-6.

this is true, the general mood expressed in both newspapers and Parliament, each feeding off the other, undoubtedly contributed to the Prime Minister's feeling of being under pressure not to hold out against an alliance. In the Foreign Office paper of 19 April, presented to the FPC, there were several references to the need "to placate our left-wing in England" - presumably because of the unfortunate impression given abroad by domestic attacks on the Government.¹ In the following meeting of the Committee Chatfield argued that "the assistance which Russia could bring to bear was not really as great as certain quarters represented it to be".² However, 'certain quarters' both inside and outside the Cabinet succeeded so well in keeping the debate alive that Chatfield changed his own mind less than a month later. When the time came for Chamberlain to follow suit the Prime Minister actually used a suggestion in the News Chronicle as a peg on which to hang the new policy,³ which for a Conservative Prime Minister was clutching at straws indeed. For once Chamberlain found himself outside the Ministerial consensus as well as under fire in Parliament. A persistent campaign, joining hands with Parliamentary and intra-Cabinet opposition, had therefore managed to exploit the Government's indecision on an issue over which they were particularly susceptible to embarrassment.

1 CAB 27/624, FP(36) 43rd Mtg, 19 April 1939.

2 Ibid; 44th Mtg, 25 April 1939.

3 CAB 23/99, CM30(39), 24 May 1939. The paper had advocated an alliance as a development of the League of Nations' Covenant.

Three broad conditions needed to be fulfilled if a newspaper campaign was to be successful: press unity, uncertainty among policy-makers, and an international situation that put a premium on consensus at home. The campaigns over conscription and Soviet agreement fulfilled these conditions, as did that of May 1940, when increasing press criticism of the administration found a ready target in the Cabinet's faltering over the Norwegian defeats. This fuelled the Parliamentary unrest which soon brought down the Prime Minister. A strong base in the press was a pre-requisite for any serious movement of political dissent.

Lastly, newspaper advocacy was perhaps even more likely to make an impact on matters of routine importance than on great decisions of state. In the autumn of 1940 even the light-weight Daily Sketch managed to stimulate the Australian Prime Minister into reviving a proposal for an Imperial (Liaison) War Cabinet. Other newspapers then helped to keep the question of the Dominions prominent in the first half of 1941 until finally Churchill was forced to make a statement that ruled out an Imperial Conference for the time being but conceded its intrinsic desirability.¹ At the same kind of level, Churchill wrote to Attlee in 1941 suggesting changes in the administration of the war:

1 The Sketch's remarks were taken up by the Australian press.
PREM 4/43A-13: telegram from British High Commission to HMG,
26 October 1940: PREM 4/43A-12. Cranborne-Churchill, 17 June
1941: CAB 65/18, WM58(41) 9 June 1941.

'I feel that in view of the criticisms of thoughtful people and of articles in the Daily Herald, Manchester Guardian, Times, etc. it is necessary to feature more prominently¹ the work of the Lord President's Steering Committee'.

Two more examples may confirm that effective newspaper pressure was not confined to high politics. The Daily Mirror obtained a high-level ministerial investigation of inefficiency at a Vickers shipyard by reports in person to Bevin, Beaverbrook, and Morrison, while articles in the News Statesman led Churchill to send persistent reminders to Morrison about the dangers of the huge air-raid shelters in the East End.²

These then were the main functions of the press in the system within which foreign policy decisions were produced. The Press acted as: (1) a source of information; (2) a potential instrument of diplomacy; (3) an independent actor in the international environment; and (4) a domestic pressure on the Government. At least the last two of these functions tended to cause the Government embarrassing problems. How did they deal with such interference?

(ii) The Official Response:

The first normal line of attack was naturally the simple protest, intended either to appeal to 'reason' or to cow by a snarl of resentment.

1 Cherwell Papers, off 60: 1-14, Churchill-Attlee, 25 Jan. 1941.

2 Cecil King: With Malice Towards None: A War Diary, 18 July 1940, pp.62-3, E. Hyams: The New Statesman:- The History of the First 50 Years, 1913-63, (London, Longmans 1963), p.228.

Both forms of approach were used in the early stages of the campaign against the Daily Mirror in 1940, and the Daily Worker was lectured and warned before action was commenced against it. The tone of protest tended to be less severe before the war, when on matters of opinion there were precious few ways of bringing to heel a columnist who had given offence, but they were no less common. Herbert Morrison recalled Halifax letting it be known that he would like an interview to protest about certain anti-Nazi articles written by Morrison. When the latter made it clear that there could be no compromise, Halifax let the matter drop.¹

Although the peremptory nature of protests carried the risk that it might make future conciliation difficult, the other side of the coin was their informality and flexibility. Thus when Churchill had only been in the War Cabinet eight days Halifax was quick to arrange for him 'to explain the position privately to Mr. Lloyd George', after the Foreign Secretary had been disturbed by the latter's provocative article on the Italian army in the Sunday Express.²

Likewise, protests made about an article Hore-Belisha was to write for the News of the World about the Scandinavian front in February 1940, managed to remove the sting from the piece even though Hore-Belisha was still intensely resentful over his recent removal from

1 A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.): Off the Record: Political Interviews 1933-40 of W.P. Crozier, (London, Hutchinson, 1973), p.153, interview with Herbert Morrison.

2 CAB 65/1, WM12(39), 11 September 1939. Halifax said that: 'It would be possible to take action against the Sunday Express, but he did not consider that this would be advisable': P. Addison, op.cit., in A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.) Lloyd George, pp.366-7.

the Cabinet. The Northern flank being such a sensitive subject, Halifax baldly presented Hore-Belisha with a re-written version of his own article in which the author appeared to be arguing two contradictory cases in the same breath. In addition both Simon and Reith paid calls on the ex-Secretary of State for War, the one to suggest that 'people might say you were doing it all for the sake of money' if he persisted, and the other to propose that Hore-Belisha should collect the fees, but allow the Foreign Office to vet his script. Hore-Belisha did not react kindly to these insulting approaches, but nor did he stand and fight on his legal right to publish in full. The article appeared with its original text, but with three spaces left blank.¹

When a protest proved insufficient to control embarrassing press activity, Ministers inevitably considered the question of sanctions. To what extent were they able to coerce their critics in Fleet Street? The Official Secrets Acts, which in theory conferred such extensive powers, in practice were not readily available as instruments of pressure. By restricting information they weakened the general position of journalists vis-à-vis policy-makers, but when it came to particular conflicts about press criticism or abuse of foreign countries, they were only applicable in the rare event of a breach of national security.²

1 CAB 65/11, Confidential Annex, WM44(40):5, 17 February 1940; also A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.): Off the Record, pp.149-51, interview with Hore-Belisha. (*Italics in text*).

2 See pp. 234-6 above.

More easily available as a form of leverage was the withdrawal of official co-operation from the press, since newspapers could hardly hope to do their job in the teeth of hostility from their major subject. Normally the press could rely at worst on the Government being as forthcoming with information as they judged the situation to allow. In conditions of dispute, however, it was open to Ministers to make a linkage between press co-operation and the continuation of official briefings, both on and off the record. There exist two contrasting interpretations of the degree to which decision-makers used this lever in their actual relations from the press, emanating from the two independent enquiries made into the activities of the press during our period. The report by Political and Economic Planning published in 1938 noted that 'The Foreign Office has for a good many years had the best organised Press department of any of the senior ministries', and went on:

'As a result of its general open-handedness in giving information, the Foreign Office is in a position to exercise pressure when it does, in the national interest, want to have a particular news item or subject glossed over... The pressure is more effective where it takes the form of asking newspapers to tone down their comments on a particular situation, or to refrain from remarks that may incense a particular dictator' (than where it took the form of asking for complete silence on a topic).¹

On the other hand the Royal Commission on the Press, conducted ten years later but very much concerned with the immediately pre-war period, found that:

'The evidence put before us does not suggest that up to now any harmful influence is being exerted on the Press through the medium of the Government information services'.²

1 PEP: Report on the British Press (1938), p.123.

2 Cmd.7700, Royal Commission on the Press, 1947-9, Vol.II, The Report, pp.146-8.

The members of the Commission followed the views of their witnesses in arguing that while decision-makers certainly did ask journalists from time to time to present a story in ways which would not damage the 'national interest' or make difficulties for them, this was an entirely legitimate activity since the pressmen were free to accept or reject the appeals. Impropriety would only arise if pressure were exerted, through threats to restrict access to official sources, or bribes of improved access.

Examples of this kind of pressure can be found, nevertheless, and even in the proceedings of the Commission itself. When asked whether Sir Samuel Hoare ever exerted actual pressure on the Daily Herald, the paper's Editorial Director testified:

'Yes. He was Home Secretary in the Chamberlain Government and it is common knowledge in Fleet Street that he did, as a fact (there is no doubt about this because I have got it direct from Lord Southwood) see the proprietors of national papers when he thought they were over-stepping the mark,¹ in what he called "inciting war with Germany"'.¹

This was hardly a very specific accusation, and Percy Cudlipp (the Herald's Editor) later admitted that he had never felt in any way constrained by Government pressure to avoid taking a line he thought right. On the other hand because the Herald cared less about good relations with Conservative Ministers than most newspapers, it was less open to leverage. The majority were likely to take notice of the type of political direction offered by Halifax after the Italian invasion of Albania, when he told the press that he was giving them as much information as possible, but added in the same breath that

1 Ibid; Vol.I, Minutes of Evidence, paras. 9118-24; and see note 1 below, p.294.

'it was undesirable that they should reach any very definite conclusions until more was known of the position'.¹ The Foreign Secretary was being so open only on the assumption that journalists would respect Foreign Office sensitivities when presenting the matter to the public.

Such vague intimations were as far as the Government tended to go, and did not extend to crude blackmail over information. There is no evidence to overturn the Royal Commission's general view that it was not regular practice for decision-makers to threaten the withdrawal of facilities from critical journalists or explicitly to exchange confidential information for co-operation. At one point Chamberlain even warned his colleagues not to talk to three particular correspondents in case the rumbles of discontent to be heard from certain papers should grow into full-scale accusations of privileged access.² While there were natural tendencies for some journalists to develop closer contacts with some Ministers, it was readily apparent that press goodwill could only be lost by any active attempt to favour the already compliant.

As indicated above one potentially effective sanction available to the Government was to appeal to the proprietors over the heads of an editor. A Minister as eminent as Hoare could easily awaken a sense of 'national responsibility' in the businessmen who owned newspapers but were not necessarily so attached to the journalist's ethic of free comment. Action of this kind was a fairly frequent occurrence. Hoare's lack of compunction, when Ambassador in Madrid,

1 CAB 23/98, Notes of a Conference of Ministers, 11.30 a.m. 8 April 1939.

2 Ibid; CM20(39), 13 April 1939.

about asking Layton, Kemsley, and Beaverbrook to rein in their journalists over France, derived from his previous duties as Home Secretary when he had been delegated by the Cabinet (on Beaverbrook's suggestion that the newspapers were 'greatly in need of guidance') to be regular intermediary between Government and the proprietors.¹ The arrangement meant that all the press lords received the kind of confidential information which Beaverbrook used to receive illegitimately through Hoare. It made possible the kind of incident recorded in the Cabinet Minutes for 13 April 1939, which refer to the Prime Minister's indignation over a claim in the News Chronicle that a Minister was responsible for leaking the news of a possible Anglo-Italian agreement. Neville Chamberlain sent for the paper's Chairman and delivered a strong protest.² Even with none of the powers of emergency legislation, or the unifying effects of war at his disposal, the Prime Minister had still felt able to reprimand the News Chronicle by going to its proprietor. Indeed Sir Walter Layton seems quite often to have been responsive to political appeals over the head of his Editor. In 1940 Sinclair wrote to Churchill about a lunch he had arranged with the Editorial Staff of the News Chronicle: "I have, as you know intervened before and with some success on those occasions because I was working through Walter Layton. In his absence the paper lacks a strong central control and it is a little more difficult to influence, but you may rely on me to

1 This was from September 1938. Taylor: Beaverbrook, p.499. For examples of Hoare's early efforts, see Templewood Papers, X:3, letters to Beverly Baxter and Emrys Jones, 22 & 20 Dec. 1938.

2 CAB 23/98, CM20(39), 13 April 1939; Chamberlain thought he gave Layton 'what I think must have been the most unpleasant quarter of an hour he ever had in his life'. The paper published an apology the next day 'and has been extremely subdued ever since'. Chamberlain Papers, NC18/1/1094, letter to Hilda Chamberlain 15 April 1939.

do my best".¹

Ministers seem to have regarded the proprietors in the light that Halifax once cast them in during a Cabinet discussion. He argued that:

'the newspaper proprietors were open to persuasion on individual questions. He instanced a series of articles on the Secret Service written for the Evening Standard which were filled with undesirable matter, and which he had hoped would not appear₂ as a result of representations he had made'.

On specific issues politicians felt there was a good chance of making the NPA, or an individual member, see the Government's point of view. In December 1937 Hore-Belisha saw every head of a newspaper personally to explain forthcoming Army Council changes. The next day, he was able to note in his diary: 'Changes announced in the Press. Went over far better than we anticipated'.³ Three years and numberless cases later Sir Campbell Stuart of the Censorship Division in the Ministry of Information wrote: 'I have found the proprietors most willing to be of help and fully of my view that the matter (of foreign propaganda) should not be discussed in the press'.⁴ Not surprisingly Churchill also thought that 'much can be done with the newspaper proprietors', and he set in motion the first of what was to be a series of personal meetings throughout the war.⁵ The personal request

1 PREM 4/66-2; Sinclair-Churchill, Oct.1940. Churchill had asked Sinclair to intervene over 'reckless, mischievous articles' (criticising Halifax) 'which so greatly endanger this country in a situation already serious enough'. Ibid; Churchill-Sinclair, 5 October.

2 CAB 23/100, CM 39(39), 26 July 1939.

3 R.J. Minney: The Private Papers of Hore-Belisha, pp.75-6.

4 PREM 1/394; Sir Campbell Stuart-Cadogan, 10 November 1939. Stuart had formed a secret committee of the proprietors which met under his chairmanship. Only Beaverbrook would not attend. Meetings were held in camera.

5 PREM 4/99-4A; Churchill-Duff Cooper, 30 June 1940; also Churchill: Their Finest Hour, p.151.

to a proprietor to control his editor could backfire, however as Harvey once warned Halifax, reminding him of the "disastrous" effect Hoare had had in the autumn of 1938 on Lord Camrose.¹ Moreover with Beaverbrook, Kemsley and Harmsworth also active as amateur politicians, the Government had to tread carefully. But the risks were manageable.

The war-time period throws particular light on the Government's capacity to twist the arms of recalcitrant journalists. In war decision-makers disposed of their maximum political leverage. Any limitations on their influence then, must have applied to a much greater degree in normal circumstances. This is quite apart from the issue of the legal direction of the press in war-time.

The press themselves felt that there could be no doubt about the limits placed on their freedom by the powers of a war-time Government, as stormy relations with the Ministry of Information in the first few months of war went to show. When in 1949 the Chairman of the Royal Commission on the Press asked the former Diplomatic Correspondent Philip Jordan about his characterisation of government-press relations as amicable, Jordan replied that 'The circumstances in war, of course, are completely different'.² The bitter clashes between the Cabinet and the Daily Mirror and Sunday Pictorial throughout 1940, 41 and 42, when the press as a whole reacted against the threats of suppression hanging over the two papers, were the sharpest cases of a general pattern. In war-time the question of censorship was a regular irritant over and above conflicts about policy.

1 Harvey, diary of 5 May 1939, p.288. Hoare had alienated Camrose's son, Seymour Berry, by extreme superciliousness at the time of Munich. F. Gannon, op.cit. p.45.

2 Cmnd. 7700, Royal Commission on the Press, Vol.I, para.11,743.

These inevitable disagreements should not lead us to suppose that press-government relations were qualitatively changed by war-time conditions. On the contrary, it is surprising both how limited were the apparently all-embracing emergency powers in their practical expression towards the press, and how the forms of influence which the government did enjoy, were largely the same as those available to them in peace-time. Even over matters of secret military detail, departments often found prosecution either too difficult, or counter-productive in its loss of press goodwill. In July 1940 Duff Cooper at the Ministry of Information wrote that this departmental reluctance to press charges had been a great weakness of the current system of censorship, and noted that since the outset of war there had not been a single newspaper prosecution.¹

The Defence Regulations were intended to make possible the control of dangerous campaigns of opinion, as well as inconvenient revelations of Britain's difficulties in mounting an effective war effort. Yet here too the law was more easily passed than implemented. In the first place, the system of press censorship remained almost entirely a voluntary affair - a fact the War Cabinet several times overlooked. This in itself was an implicit admission of the Government's reliance on press co-operation. The new D Notices were still only advisory, and editors were asked rather than required to submit for official perusal any material which might conceivably embarrass the Government. The Press and Censorship Bureau of the Ministry of Information could advise and exhort but not compel editors to omit even military data,

1 PREM 4/66-2, Duff Cooper-Neville Chamberlain, 17 July 1940.

let alone general comment. Even less could it insist on the inclusion of particular items. Moreover, as the Cabinet agreed in June 1940, 'In the last resort the only remedy in the hands of the Government was to order prosecutions'. At that juncture Ministers felt such a remedy to be 'undesirable'.¹ With the intensification of the war from 1940 few moments indeed were to present themselves as opportune for internal strife over the suppression of news.

This weakness was the cause of much ministerial unrest, but the Cabinet never found it practicable to introduce as a solution compulsory prior censorship, although they considered it in 1940 and again in March 1942.² In April 1940, when ministers were upset by press coverage of the Norwegian operation, the Lord Privy Seal thought that it would even be an 'extreme step' to forbid the publication of any reports which had not been submitted for censorship.³

Nevertheless an inter-departmental committee was set up by the next Government in the hectic days of June-July 1940, (which shows the importance they attached to press activity) to consider the question of compulsory censorship. The matter got no further than consideration. Chamberlain and his colleagues retreated before implacable opposition from the NPA, and the Cabinet accepted their recommendation to issue yet another revised, extended, but still voluntary set of D Notices.⁴

1 CAB 65/7, WM 170(40), 17 June 1940.

2 As above, and CAB 65/25, WM 32(42), 9 March 1942.

3 CAB 65/2, WM 88(40), 11 April 1940. Hoare was Lord Privy Seal.

4 CAB 65/7, WM 170(40), 17 June; CAB 65/8, WM 207(40), 18 July 1940. In Cooper's view: 'The Press are very sensitive and must either be humoured or completely squashed. The great argument against the latter method is the shock it would give to public confidence and also the recent and melancholy example of France. It would also shock the United States'. PREM 4/66-2, Cooper-Chamberlain, 17 July, 1940.

The Cabinet were thus quite prepared in principle to suspend the traditional liberties of the press in war-time. They were simply deterred from doing so. Moreover they felt constrained to go cautiously in day-to-day relations with the press. When unhappy with an item, it was a more natural response for Ministers simply to point out the problem to those responsible than to threaten reprisals or demand withdrawals. For instance the War Cabinet decided in October 1939 that the Editor of the Daily Telegraph should merely 'have his attention drawn' to the undesirable character of a paragraph revealing that an expert on Roumanian oil was in London.¹ Similarly, in the following month the Government responded to the wave of vituperation sparked off by the new system of central controls, by deciding to consider relaxing some of the regulations rather than by waving a big stick. Chamberlain was asked to think about how best the NPA could be asked to call off the hostile campaign. The Prime Minister himself took it for granted that the only choice open to the Government was to demonstrate that the charges of mal-administration were 'false or exaggerated' and to make 'a patriotic appeal' to the press lords despite being sanguine about neither course.²

When the war began in earnest, a low-key approach was still the first preference. On the crucial issue of the Norwegian operation,

1 CAB 65/3, Confidential Annex WM54(39):7, 20 October 1939. The Cabinet was reminded that censorship was only voluntary: 'editors could submit articles as to which they were in doubt'.

2 CAB 65/2, WM69(39), 3 November 1939.

Chamberlain suggested that two only senior Ministers:

'should see representatives of the press, and bring home to them the unfortunate consequences from a public point of view, of publishing sensational reports without taking steps to ascertain whether they had any foundation'.

Although the Prime Minister added that 'further action' could be held in reserve, the import of his words was clearly that the Government should make a civilized protest and hope that to be sufficient.¹

The fundamental reasons for this tentative official behaviour lie in the deep penetration of the decision-making process by the press which we have already outlined. The reverberations of conflict were too great to make coercion a first option. Yet we must also note two special factors of war-time which, by pulling Cabinet policy in opposite directions, served to perpetuate the peace-time pressures for an attitude of conciliation on the part of the authorities.

On the one hand there was the regular feeling of near-panic which arose about the supposedly damaging effects on neutral opinion abroad of Fleet Street's 'derisive criticism' of the prosecution of the war.² At times this led the Government to feel that an extension of formal controls was imperative. A second condition of war-time however, helps to explain why the inclination could not be realised.

To a siege society the need to transmit a torrent of new information to the population at large was just as important as security. And if the monolithic war economy, not to mention the structure of civil defence, was to function efficiently, then the expertise and active co-operation of the press was indispensable. The Ministry of

1 CAB 65/2, WM88(40), 11 April 1940.

2 See pp.273-5 above of this chapter.

Information saw newspapers as potential agents of enormous value, simply because they were trusted sources of fact to so many millions of British families. A fully controlled press would have ensured the reliability of the news that was being put out, but at the expense of dissipating readers' basic trust in the medium. Little psychology was required to realise that official broadsheets were no more captivating to the average reader than the shipping forecast. Thus Walter Monckton could write:

'The active support and satisfaction of all sections of the press - Foreign, Dominion, provincial, London - are the surest basis for the¹ successful publicity for our aims and actions'.

On top of this was the sheer impracticability, on stretched human resources, of taking on the huge administrative operation of a detailed management of the press, as opposed to the monitoring and exhortation to which the Ministry of Information in practice was limited.

Moreover the Ministry itself was a main focus of press criticism. Its emergency status and powers actually undermined its authority, because of the inevitable resentment caused by even its limited interference. When Euan Wallace complained to the Minister of Information about journalistic exaggerations of British shipping losses:

'MacMillan confessed his complete inability to² control the Press or their contents bills'.

1 PREM 1/439; Walter Monckton to Horace Wilson, 3 November 1939. Monckton was Director-General of Press and Censorship at the Ministry of Information.

2 Wallace Papers, Diary, Mss. Eng. Hist 495, 12 December 1939.

This was not merely a case of an inefficient Minister, uneasy as his colleagues were about MacMillan. His successor Reith, speaking in the ministerial Civil Defence Committee, asked;

'how many of us knew that in present circumstances the Ministry of Information controlled neither the Press, the BBC nor the Foreign Propaganda Services'.¹

Even allowing for frustration, these remarks illustrate the weakness of the Ministry's position if the active co-operation of their clients was withheld. This was not just true of the confusion of the Phoney War. More than eighteen months later, in June 1941, the Cabinet decided not to attempt the channelling of all press relations with departments through the Ministry of Information, because (1) this scheme had failed in late 1939, and (2) 'the press would protest strongly against being cut out from direct contact with Government Departments'.² Conversely, at the next meeting of the Cabinet one major reason for supporting an extension of the Ministry's powers to restrict the practice of 'leaking', was that 'the Press generally favoured giving further powers to the Ministry of Information'.³ Either way round, the views of the press were crucial.

The main functions of the Ministry towards the press were thus simply advisory. It acted as a clearing-house for departmental protests and requests, and gave newspapers a safety-net against the Official Secrets Act (by clearing material in advance for publication)

1 Ibid; 496, 28 February 1940. Wallace was also a member of the Cabinet's Home Policy Committee, where on 12 Dec. he had observed 'growing anxiety and irritation' at MacMillan's 'general attitude'. See also entries of 20 Dec; and Vol. 498, 4 October 1940.

2 CAB 65/18, WM62(41), 23 June 1941.

3 Ibid; WM63(41), 26 June 1941. Press views had been deciphered from a debate in the Lords.

in return for accepting a wider interpretation of the Act. Newspapers were deluged with endless hand-outs, mixing news with interpretation and advice with propaganda, as the young profession of public relations reaped the benefits of Government sponsorship and a captive market. Undoubtedly many routine requests were heeded; to this extent the Ministry of Information was a success. But the welter of regulations and advice bred a generalised scepticism which correspondingly reduced the effectiveness of individual requests for political co-operation.¹

In war-time therefore the officially-felt need to control press comment was irritatingly matched by increased difficulties in doing so. There were occasions on which the Government did use its full powers, and effectively so. Action, The Week, the Daily Worker and the Daily Mirror/Sunday Pictorial axis were all silenced by suppression or the threat of it. In their own way however these cases too illustrate the hesitancy (and continuing attachment to principles of free expression) of the Government in the face of disconcerting domestic dissent.

The Daily Worker for example, was an obvious candidate for prompt closure after the Nazi-Soviet pact and the start of the Communist Party's campaign against the war. In fact it was only shut down, with The Week, in January 1941. The Cabinet actually rejected the idea during the emergency of the previous July, on the grounds that 'public opinion was, at the moment, very sensitive in the matter of free speech'.²

1 Recognised as much inside the Ministry as outside it. N.Nicolson (Ed): Harold Nicolson: Diaries and Letters, 1939-45, 3 August 1940, p.102.

2 CAB 65/9, WMs 193-194(40), 4-5 July 1940; CAB 65/21, Confidential Annex, WMS(41):8, 13 January 1941.

The Mirror lasted even longer as a gadfly, until March 1942, although admittedly its castigations were reserved for the running of the war. Up until these dates there flourished the same kind of semi-public wrangle that usually characterised press-government relations, with the latter reluctant to use its unfamiliar powers. In part this was due to the checks and balances of a National Coalition from May 1940. Labour Ministers almost certainly moderated action against the Mirror until it could no longer be denied that appeals to 'reason' did not work. Likewise, it was probably because the Daily Herald represented 'the second largest party in the Government' that it escaped the Mirror's fate, despite Churchill's resentment of its 'carping, niggling criticisms' and its insistent attacks on Halifax during 1940.¹

It is worth isolating the case of the Daily Mirror, which was not just the longest and bitterest dispute between Government and Press; it also illustrates vividly the ambivalent attitude of the Cabinet towards free criticism in war-time and the consequent dragging of feet over the use of coercion.

The dispute spluttered on from 1940 to 1942, escalating through five distinct phases.

1 A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.): Off the Record, p.313, W.P. Crozier's interview with Churchill, 20 March 1942; for criticisms of Halifax, see PREM 4/66-2 Halifax-Churchill, 19 Nov. 1940, asking the PM to get 'our Labour colleagues' to do something about criticisms in the Herald.

- (1) June-July 1940: The first differences emerged briefly after the fall of France. Churchill complained to various papers, including the Daily Mirror, about attacks on the Chamberlainite rump left within the new Government, and asked for a cease-fire until the next Parliamentary debate in secret session. Cecil King agreed to hold back as a temporary measure, and noted cynically that the Prime Minister had 'apparently fixed the Herald through Bevin, and the News Chronicle through Layton and probably Lloyd George direct'. Churchill and King actually met the next day but this did little to shake either's conviction of rectitude. Churchill was 'very friendly' and 'on three separate' occasions had asked King to come again. But the causes of their disagreement remained intact.¹
- (2) September-November 1940: The incompatibility of the two sets of views did not take long to emerge. In October 1940 the War Cabinet held two long discussions about the threat to military discipline and civilian morale posed by 'insulting' and 'scurrilous' attacks in the successive issues of the Sunday Pictorial and Daily Mirror on both the Government, and soldiers like Ironside and Gort. The Cabinet restrained Churchill's fury somewhat but still authorised Attlee and Beaverbrook to convey their serious perturbation to the NPA in the hope that the delinquent papers could be controlled by their peers without

1 C. King: With Malice Towards None: A War Diary, (hereinafter War Diary), entry of 7 June 1940, pp.49-53: CAB 65/7, WMs 168 & 170(40) 16 & 17 June 1940; Templewood Papers, XIII:16, Hoare-Churchill 27 June 1940, Churchill-Hoare 14 July 1940.

public controversy.¹ In the event the NPA simply put Attlee in touch with King and his colleague Guy Bartholomew, resulting in the newspapers once more agreeing, as Beaverbrook put it, 'to amend their behaviour, at least for the time being'.² Cecil King also recognized that the problem had only been shelved:

'Obviously the Government will do nothing more about it, and obviously we shall pipe down for a few weeks until the course of the war alters the whole situation'.³

The Government did in fact take the quiet precaution of preparing for another outbreak of the conflict by ordering more extensive investigations into the shareholders of the two papers. If this had become widely known it might have fuelled even more angry comment. But the Cabinet disregarded the risk. Since Churchill had referred in the Commons to the articles in question as 'vicious and malignant', they were clearly beginning to take adverse criticism very seriously.⁴

(3) January-February 1941: Neither party held back for long. In early 1941 there was an extensive and at times vitriolic exchange of letters between King and Churchill after yet another sharp attack on Churchill's choice of Ministers in the 'Cassandra' column. Again King bowed the knee:

'...we now have your point of view clearly before us. The staff have had their instructions and you may already have noticed a change in tone. If in the future you have any fault to find with our contribution to the nation's war effort, I hope you would let us know at once'.

1 CAB 65/9, WMs 267-8(40), 7 & 9 October 1940; Dilks, p.329.

2 CAB 65/9, WM 272(40), 16 October 1940.

3 C. King: War Diary, 12 October 1940, pp.81-4.

4 CAB 65/9, WM 268(40), 9 October 1940; PREM 4/66-2, H. Morrison-Churchill, 11 October 1940; Hansard, 5th Series, (1940), Vol.365 Cols.300-1.

5 C. King: War Diary, p.106, King-Churchill, 11 February 1941, also pp.94-112 inclusive, 24 January-19 February 1941; PREM 4/66-2 contains a full record of this period of correspondence.

Such concessions were the result of Churchill's uncompromising belligerence, expressed in four letters and two lengthy meetings over less than four weeks. The Prime Minister was now highly motivated on the issue and had no intention of letting persistent 'malevolence' wear him down. For his part King had several good reasons not to be unduly provocative. But he continued to believe that the war had to be prosecuted both more efficiently and with a view to the future. On the first point he believed that Churchill was surrounded by stupid and ineffectual subordinates. On the second he thought that the Prime Minister 'has no contribution to our future...he personifies our present and our past'.¹ The combination of these views with an assertive temperament meant that the Mirror's noises of conciliation were ultimately little more than lip-service.

(4) October-November 1941: Churchill returned to the fray with growing impatience. He asked the Home Secretary to decide whether a recent article in the Sunday Pictorial constituted sufficient grounds for suppression. The Director of Public Prosecutions concluded in the event that it did not, and the Prime Minister let the issue drop for what proved to be the last time.²

(5) March 1942: This chronic conflict finally culminated in the affair of Zec's 'Oil cartoon'.³ A major crisis was almost inevitable to resolve the differences between the sides, which had only become the more entrenched over time. Zec's cartoon was simply the instance

1 C. King, op.cit. p.103, 31 January 1941.

2 PREM 4/66-2; Churchill-H. Morrison, 26 October 1941; and see CAB 66/19, WPs 262, 268-9,(41).

3 Daily Mirror, 6 March 1942. The cartoon implied that sailors were dying in the convoys of oil-tankers only to line the pockets of profiteers at home.

of the crisis. Herbert Morrison told the Commons:

'The cartoon in question is only one example, but a particularly evil example, of the policy and methods of a newspaper which, ...with a reckless indifference to the national interest...has repeatedly published scurrilous misrepresentations, distorted and exaggerated statements, and irresponsible generalizations'.¹

Continued attacks on individual Ministers and on Blimpishness in the armed services apparently tended to 'undermine the army and depress the whole population'. The Cabinet spent long parts of meetings on deciding their best course of action, and set up a special ministerial committee.² Brendan Bracken made several attempts (largely unsuccessful; of the nationals only the Daily Telegraph and Sunday Times seem to have supported the Cabinet's action) to recruit the rest of the press, Morrison summoned representatives of the Mirror for a harangue, and both Churchill and Sinclair attacked the paper strongly in conversations with the editor of the Manchester Guardian.³ A further days acrimonious debate took place in the Commons, when Morrison's pacifistic writings from the Great War were aired. The result of all this was a formal warning to the Mirror of imminent suppression if it did not conform, and a notice to William Connor (Cassandra) that he would be called up into the armed forces. The Daily Mirror was hereafter not a major source of disturbance to the Government.⁴

1 Hansard, 5th series (1942), Vol.378, col . 1665, 19 March 1942.

2 CAB 65/25, WMs 32,35,36(42), 9, 18 & 23 March 1942. The Committee consisted of eight senior ministers. See PREM 4/66-1 for the Prime Minister's concern for the effect of press criticisms on military morale.

3 C. King, op.cit. pp.163-72, 11-28 March 1942; B. Donoghue and G.W. Jones: Herbert Morrison, pp.297-301; A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.): Off the Record, pp.311-4, Crozier's interview with Churchill and Sinclair.

4 Hansard, 5th Series (1942), Vol.378, Cols.2233-2308 26 March. Michael Foot thought the paper had been 'disembowelled...for a year or so the Daily Mirror was a very tame newspaper'. Cmnd 7700, Royal Commission on the Press, 1947-9; Vol.I, Evidence, paras. 1938-44.

It should be clear from this account that the intensity of disagreement between the two parties mounted slowly yet steadily during the 21 months in question. Time and again the Government protested to the Mirror or Pictorial, each time gradually increasing the weight of its pressure, but each time only with temporary success. The Cabinet was willing to go a long way to achieve a solution based on agreement, on the apparent preservation of democratic freedoms, and on informal arrangements. They greatly preferred to avoid involving the law. While Ministers took it for granted that criticism could only be allowed to operate within certain limits, they also wanted to preserve the spirit of their peace-time relations with the press - paradoxically because of the continuing military crisis. It took a long time for the Cabinet to recognise that they could not have it both ways, and that their capacity for 'managing' critics was relatively limited. Coercion had to be kept as a last resort for papers which ran systematic campaigns either advocating withdrawal from the war or seeking flatly to damage public confidence in the Government's ability to wage it. In the final analysis, a short furore plus the sacrifice of some 'democratic' values was thought to be an acceptable enough price to pay to be rid of a relentless scourge, but only if the choice were inescapable.

For much of the time the press had considerable freedom of tactical manoeuvre, enlarged by the administrative problems of central control in war-time. Persuasion, flattery, and recruitment remained the principal methods of official action even if Ministers did sometimes slip into the assumption that newspapers were at the beck and call of Government. Although more appeals were made, more pressures were applied with fewer scruples, 'national security' was interpreted

more broadly than usual, and the newspapers themselves were undoubtedly more receptive, all this amounted only to an extension of the Government's influence over the press. Their powers fell a long way short of the totalitarian. Within the broad consensus on the war which the potential power of suppression helped to preserve, the basic relationship between Government and Press remained one of advice and consent, for relations of habit among individuals and institutions were not to be blacked out as simply as the street-lights.

In times of both war and peace, therefore, politicians adopted a strategy towards the Press - or perhaps only an attitude - of seeking an ambiance of mutual regard in which to minimise the impact of particular quarrels. For as Halifax pointed out, while 'the Newspaper Proprietors were open to persuasion on individual questions' it was 'more difficult to deal with the general tendency for newspapers to be inflammatory'.¹ The point was brought home to them in the following year on the occasion of more 'objectionable articles' by H.G.Wells, this time in the Sunday Dispatch calling for the execution of the King of the Belgians. The Cabinet agreed with more hope than confidence that Halifax should make 'representations' to Esmond Harmsworth, but expressed the view simultaneously that 'it was impossible to stop attacks being made on the King of the Belgians, or to muzzle a well-known writer like H.G.Wells'.² More serious

1 CAB 23/100, CM39(39), 26 July 1939.

2 CAB 65/9, WM274(40), 21 October 1940. Even though 'it was probably well-recognised that H.G. Wells in no way represented public opinion in this country'.

dilemmas could be caused by the innate press interest in wringing every possible element of drama out of political developments. Hitler's peace offer of 19 July 1940, for example, led to a good deal of hesitancy in Cabinet about what kind of public response to make. Eventually it was agreed that the press should just be 'discouraged' from suggesting that 'there was anything in Herr Hitler's speech which called for an official reply from this country'.¹ At this military nadir, the Government were aware that while a peremptory command to stop comment on the speech would stimulate controversy, failure to give any lead might allow the debate to grow beyond the point of controllability. Any prolonged discussion of Hitler's persistently conciliatory moves towards Britain might have the very unfortunate effect of encouraging popular support for a compromise peace. In such circumstances the press had to be handled very delicately.

The fact that a good overall climate of relations was clearly in decision-makers' interests led to an automatic concern for the likely reaction of the press on almost every significant issue. Observations to this effect recur in the diary of Euan Wallace about wider matters than his particular responsibility for transport:

'The Prime Minister is concerned at our general unpopularity and extremely bad Press, which had culminated in a leading article in this morning's Times making a general attack on the administration of a number of departments'.

By 7 December he was pleased that a speech by Oliver Stanley on exports had 'succeeded in debunking a good many of the rumours and propaganda statements which have been so prominent in the Press lately,

¹ CAB 65/8, WM211(40), 24 July 1940.

more particularly The Times', and in April 1940 he rejoiced that the Government reshuffle had got 'a much better press than most of us expected' and again, on the Sunday, 'a good reception from reputable newspapers'.¹ Wallace's colleagues displayed the same concern. The official records are spattered with mentions of 'awkward references' or 'undesirable articles'. In October 1939 a member of the Cabinet Office even stressed that War Cabinet agendas should not be sent to Junior Ministers because 'if one or two get a regular right of entry, there will be trouble with e.g. The Times'.²

The solicitude shown by decision-makers for the press was cemented by an extensive and interlocking web of personal contacts with journalists. For a number of major figures, indeed, newspapers had been almost as much a career as politics. Quite apart from the exceptional example of Beaverbrook, Churchill, Hore-Belisha, Brendan Bracken and Lord Lothian were among the more prominent of those who moved easily between the two circles. In addition Sir John Reith came from the BBC to the Ministry of Information. Even those who did not pursue both careers tended to meet regularly at the same clubs and formal occasions. Cecil King's war-time diary is full of references to such engagements as lunch with Duff Cooper and Monckton at Windhams Club, or a dinner to celebrate the 50 years of Sir Emsley Carr as Editor-in-Chief of the News of the World, at which Duff Cooper,

1 Wallace Papers, Diary, Mss. Eng. Hist. 495, 24 Oct. & 7 Dec. 1939: 496, 4 & 7 April 1940.

2 CAB 21/1324; minute by Mr. Wilkinson, 25 October 1939.

Beaverbrook, Kingsley Wood and the Prime Minister were all present.¹ Also at Windhams, Monckton met Francis Williams to offer him a post in the Press and Censorship Division. If the most exclusive meeting-place of all was Cliveden, where Garvin and Dawson mixed with various members of Chamberlain's Cabinet, there was also a whole range of lesser rendezvous for the London elite. Harold Nicolson used to frequent the Beefsteak or the Travellers Club in the fairly sure knowledge that he would meet the like of Barrington-Ward or Thomas Martin (Political Correspondent of the Daily Telegraph) from the one side, and Walter Elliot or Edward Grigg from the other.² One example, trivial in itself, conveys well the flavour of this day-to-day intimacy. Euan Wallace recorded how the imminent change of Ministries between Hoare and Kingsley Wood was already "pretty generally known; one particular source of leakage is alleged to be Esmond Harmsworth as a lady friend told it to everybody in the Four Hundred Club last night".³

Certain individuals acted as axes for the rotation of whole groups, linking pressmen and policy-makers who might not otherwise have come into contact. One name that occurs in many of the relevant diaries or papers is that of Lord Camrose, who knew Bracken, Churchill, and

1 C. King: War Diary, pp.119, 123.

2 See, among many examples, Francis Williams: Press, Parliament and People, p.10; N. Nicolson (Ed.): Harold Nicolson Diaries and Letters 1939-45, pp.76-7, 173; Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1071-91, Letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 27 Nov. 1938, recounting a weekend with the Stanhopes at which Peter Fleming of The Times, Lord Rosebery, and an Admiral of the Fleet were also present. The Prime Minister regularly spent his weekends at house-parties in the country.

3 Wallace Papers, Diary Mss. Eng. Hist. 496, 3 April 1940.

Chamberlain well, and gave or attended frequent luncheons for the political haut monde. Bracken in turn was close to Beaverbrook, and Beaverbrook so close to Hoare that he made the latter a secret yearly allowance of £2,000, to enable him to continue in politics. Beaverbrook was also in regular touch with Neville Chamberlain until March 1939, and claimed that during 1939 he talked privately about foreign policy with almost every member of the Cabinet.¹ Once the war began his friendship with Churchill gave him even better access to Cabinet thinking, and ultimately to high office.

Churchill himself counted as many newspaper men as politicians among his contacts; in his long years out of power the press had provided him with one of the few means left available of retaining public prominence. He had long-standing ties with the Daily Mirror, ironically enough, and with Camrose. He kept a watchful eye on the rise of Hugh Cudlipp, and his personal adviser, F. Lindemann, corresponded with Lord Rothermere.² Moreover even when most hard-pressed he continued to give W.P. Crozier of the Manchester Guardian a lengthy and helpful interview every three months or so.³

1 e.g. PREM 4/19-1, V. Cazalet - J. Martin, 30 October 1940 (inviting Martin to dine with Lothian, Camrose and Halifax; Colin Coote: Editorial (London, Eyre & Spottiswoode) is little else than a catalogue of personal relationships in the world of press and politics; A. Boyle: Poor Dear Brendan, passim; Templewood Papers, X:3, Beaverbrook-Hoare, 22 Nov. 1938, 1 Sept. 1939 and Nov. 1939. Cmnd 7700, Royal Commission on the Press, 1947-9, Vol.I: evidence by Beaverbrook, para. 8756.

2 Maurice Edelman: The Mirror - A Political History (London, Hamish Hamilton 1966), pp.77-9; Kingsley Martin: Editor (London, Hutchinson 1968), pp.250-2; PREM 4/66-2, Report by R. McCorquada M.P. on a talk with H. Cudlipp; P.M marked 'put by'; Cherwell Papers, D:2-II, private correspondence of June 1939.

3 A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.): Off the Record, refers to 16 interviews with Churchill between Sept. 1939-Oct.1943.

The list of these interweaving links is too long to be manageable. Typical was Kingsley Martin, Editor of the New Statesman, who had a whole range of acquaintances among politicians and diplomats.¹ It is sometimes almost easier to mention the public figures whom an individual did not know. Diplomats like Maisky or J. Dulanty tended to make it their business to talk to anyone involved in political affairs. In the relatively narrow world of public life it seems that most eminent people were at least on nodding terms with their peers. Common backgrounds and tastes could reinforce elite contacts, if not actually create common attitudes. Cecil King met R.A. Butler through 'Chips' Channon whom King had known at Christ Church, and a life-long friend of Colin Coote of The Times was Walter Elliot, Minister of Health under Chamberlain. A.V. Alexander was attached to Frank Owen of the Evening Standard.²

More noteworthy than the simple extensiveness of contacts that happened naturally between people of this class in London, were the particularly close relationships that some pressmen enjoyed with policy-makers. W.P. Crozier, for example, although less well-known and gregarious than Beaverbrook, Camrose, or King, still saw a great number of eminent figures during the special visits which he made to London. From 1933 until May 1940 Crozier had 55 semi-formal interviews with 19 different front-bench politicians. Between May 1940 and 1943, his circle of such interviewees narrowed to 8, but the frequency of the meetings increased two-fold, to 56 in 41 months. More generally, over the period 1938-41, Crozier had 141 recorded meetings with 33 different politicians, officials, diplomats and miscellaneous others.³

1 K. Martin: Editor, passim.

2 C.King: War Diary, p.64; Colin Coote: Editorial, p.172; Alexander Papers, 5/6/6-7 & 9.

3 A.J.P. Taylor, (Ed.): Off the Record; data from lists of interviews, pp. V-XVIII.

It stands out from Crozier's record that at least some of these policy-makers ranked him highly among those people they thought capable of making their own work substantially easier or more difficult, to the extent of giving long interviews and some confidential information, even during the stresses of war. Crozier was more than just^a/well-known face in the Athenaeum, like Tom Jones or Victor Cazalet. He was given what amounted to regular and lengthy briefings by several members of the Government, more often than not in departmental surroundings. Crozier's activities were the living proof of the desire to co-operate that generally characterized press-Government relations over foreign policy.

One qualification must be entered about this tendency. Although contacts were not made entirely on political lines, in general it was true that close relationships were more likely to form between those who shared the same political outlook. It was inevitable that Francis Williams should have close relations with the Labour leadership, and few with the National Government until 1940, because of the TUC's shareholdings in the Daily Herald.¹ The News Chronicle was closely tied to the Liberal Party, although by sympathy and tradition rather than institutionally. Both Hoare and Cadogan saw Sir Walter Layton from time to time, but Sinclair had to mediate when the Government wished to approach the Editor, Gerald Barry.²

1 Odhams Press Ltd held a majority share in the Daily Herald, but with editorial freedom supposedly guaranteed. PEP: Report on the British Press (1938), p.6.

2 Dilks, pp. 88, 115, 168; Templewood Papers X1:2, Notes for 15 Sept. and 10 Nov. 1939. PREM 4/66-2: Churchill-Sinclair, 5 Oct. 1940.

Less consistent over time but displaying the same tendency, were both The Times and the Camrose press. It is well-known that while Dawson was Editor and Chamberlain Prime Minister, contacts were as intimate as they could be between a newspaper and the Cabinet.¹ Once Robert Barrington-Ward became the power in Printing House Square, and Churchill Prime Minister, intimacy was gradually dispelled. What was begun by Churchill's lack of warmth towards a paper whose attitudes to foreign affairs he had strongly opposed, was finished by the swing of The Times itself, partly under the new influence of E.H. Carr, towards the advocacy of radical reform at home and co-operation with the USSR abroad.² In the case of Lord Camrose and the Daily Telegraph, although Camrose became involved in the press campaign against Chamberlain's foreign policy in the summer of 1939, his contacts were largely with the Conservative opposition that supported Churchill. It was more a case of switching allegiance to a faction within the party than of a Conservative paper aligning itself with Labour politicians. Labour divisions on rearmament saved Camrose from that dilemma.³

1 J. Evelyn Wrench: Geoffrey Dawson and Our Times, pp.373-7, 408. This did not stop The Times being an irritant to the Government far more often than is usually recognised. See pp.272-3 (of this chapter) above.

2 Dilks, pp.686, 696, Angus Calder: The People's War, pp.337-8.

3 See note 1 p. 284.

(iii) Assessment:

We have seen how close personal contacts provided decision-makers with a useful means of reinforcing their good basic relationship with the press, which war-time did not seriously disrupt. It is the implications of this relationship that take up the final section of this chapter. What overall conclusions can we draw about the role of newspapers in the foreign policy-making process?

The burden of the argument is that the press was 'in' rather than 'out', was 'court' rather than 'country', to an extent that sets it on one side from other domestic groups and invalidates any picture of its influence over policy as having been mainly confined to domestic affairs. The press is seen as having been a central factor in the formulation of foreign policy, if not as important as a department of state then far more consistently involved and effective than Parliament. The measures and analogies are crude, but the alternative - of shying away from any explicit judgement-is alien to the spirit of this whole enquiry.

The justification for this interpretation of the press rests firstly on the fact that the close relations which existed between individuals were themselves only part of an institutionalised pattern of collaboration and inter-penetration between the two groups, Government and newspapers. Sir Walter Monckton said in late 1939 that editors should not rush into criticisms of the Government until they were 'satisfied that the matters about which they feel anxiety cannot

be put right by private discussion',¹ and this epitomised the recognition by those on the Government side that journalists had the very best access to official departments. The arrangements for 'the Lobby' and for the specialist correspondents, bestowed on the press a special position of closeness to policy-formulation.

A.P. Waterfield of the Ministry of Information described in 1939 how this proximity normally operated. Pressmen were divided into (1) editors; (2) specialists; (3) reporters:

'The first group will never deal with anyone except Ministers or very high officials, whom they meet in clubs or special ministerial conferences...the second group, who are the real backbone of a paper, will always claim the right to go to the parent Departments where they will talk, not only to the Press Relations Officers but with individual Civil Servants whom they have got to know personally. The Lobby Correspondents will also,² of course, talk to Ministers at the House'.

(Reporters were dismissed as the mere recipients of hand-outs). Both sides placed great importance on the privileged access described by Waterfield, as one of his colleagues emphasised. D.B. Woodburn wrote of the press:

'They consider that the work of their Parliamentary correspondents, who are in close touch with Ministers, would be of even greater importance in these conditions than it now is, and they take it for granted that the right of access to Ministers of such correspondents,³ and of editors would continue to be recognised'.

1 PREM 1/394, W. Monckton-A.Rucker, November 1939 (no exact date).

2 INF 1/156: Organisation of the Ministry before Oct.1939: liaison between the News Division and other Government departments. Minute from A. Waterfield to D. Woodburn, 25 July 1939. The habits and functions of the lobby are surveyed in J. Tunstall: The Westminster Lobby Correspondents (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1970).

3 INF 1/156, Memo. by D.B. Woodburn to the Co-ordinating Committee for Publicity, July 1939.

The fact that when war came the Foreign Office continued to deal directly with journalists on important matters, missing out the Ministry of Information, indicates how firmly entrenched these procedures were. They did, after all, make life so much easier for the individuals concerned, who simply ducked beneath the red tape. Philip Jordan described how:

'It was a regular practice for diplomatic correspondents if they felt inclined to call daily at the Foreign Office and to have talks with members of the News Department, sometimes individually,...sometimes with quite a number of people. It is never difficult for anybody who is a recognised diplomatic correspondent of a newspaper to see the head of any particular section of the Foreign Office'.¹

Professional relations of this kind were well-established and not to be disrupted by minor disagreements, even if they were rather more formal than the contacts that could be established with politicians. Either way, the serious commentator on foreign affairs was prominent in the daily life of those who held the responsibility for making public policies.

The institutional basis of press-Government intimacy is most strikingly illustrated by these instances where journalists actually took on quasi-official roles, or looked after the Government's interests as if they were their own. As early as 1935, when the war was little more than a gleam in Hitler's eye, Crozier had refused to publish a note from the French to the British Government (about sanctions against Italy) obtained by Alexander Werth and R. Dell

1 Cmd. 7700. Royal Commission on the Press, 1947-9, Vol.1, Evidence, paras. 11,736-42. Jordan added that unless 'a personal friend' of the diplomat in question 'as a matter of courtesy one asks the News Department to arrange it'.

with the frankly expressed purpose of helping the Opposition's Election campaign. They argued that since the Manchester Guardian opposed the Government's foreign policy this was a perfectly proper aim. Crozier did not agree, and appears to have felt that foreign policy was outside the normal considerations of ideological conflict, and that the Government's immediate needs in that sphere corresponded more closely to the national interest than did the provision of full information to the public.¹ A similar willingness to deprive readers of debate in order not to make life difficult for Ministers was evident during the first few months of the war, when J.M. Keynes threatened to resign from the board of the New Statesman if a letter from George Bernard Shaw advocating peace were to be published. This action forced Editor Kingsley Martin to approach the Foreign Office for a view before he proceeded. In the event the Office did not object to publication, for once being more tolerant of non-conformity than journals anxious about their 'responsibilities'. The letter appeared with one 'dangerous' passage excised.² It was probably out of the same concern for Government policy that the Sunday Express in 1940 suppressed Godfrey Winn's reports of bad morale in the East End of London.³

1 David Ayerst: Guardian; Biography of a Newspaper, pp.522-3.

2 Kingsley Martin: Editor, pp.268-70. In places this book does not inspire trust in the author's memory, but the story is confirmed in E. Hyams: The New Statesman, pp.219-22. All this took place in the first week of October 1939.

3 C. King: War Diary, 30 Sept. 1940, p.78. By this time Beaverbrook had entered the War Cabinet.

The sense of 'responsibility' often evident in press behaviour over foreign policy made possible instances of practical collaboration with the Government. The story of Ian Colvin's warnings of an imminent German attack on Poland in late March 1939, is well-known. Although a relatively junior journalist with the News Chronicle, Colvin obtained personal interviews with Max Leeper, Halifax, Cadogan, Simon and ultimately Chamberlain between 28-9 March 1939. As Colvin himself realised, his news did not precipitate the Guarantee to Poland itself, but it did serve to accelerate the announcement.¹

The Colvin episode goes to show how natural co-operation was when the journalist's perpetual desire to achieve access and to have a responsible influence over policy, coincided with specific Government needs for information. But events did not need to be as pressing as those of March 1939 to bring about collaboration. In September 1938 a booklet printed for the guidance of a future Ministry of Information is interesting for its expectations about the sympathy to be shown by editors to the Administration.

'Confidential letters may also be addressed by the Ministry to editors to give advance information of certain events, in order that they may be on the look-out for any hint of indiscretion, possibly quite innocent, on the part of their staffs. These letters may often be secret and personal, and for the information of the editor himself only'.²

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- 1 There are numerous accounts of this episode, all deriving in the first instance from Ian Colvin: Vansittart in Office, (London, Gollancz 1965), pp.303-11, see also S. Newman: March 1939, pp.182-7.
 - 2 INF 1/181, booklet entitled 'Defence Notices and Press Instructions' marked 'very secret' and almost certainly dating from late September 1938.

Already by the time of Munich, press representatives were beginning to advise on the best paths of development for the embryonic Ministry. Further close co-operation was built into the plans being made. The Minister was to be helped by an Advisory Council on which the heads of all the various joint newspaper organisations were to serve. In February 1939 Sir Evelyn Wrench was appointed special Press Adviser to the Ministry. Contacts increased with the worsening of the international crisis. A meeting was held in July between officials and W. Will of the Newspapers Emergency Council, and Brigadier F. Lawson and Mr. Bailey of the NPA, at which the Press's objections to the introduction of the Ministry before the outbreak of war, were heard and accepted. The problem of setting up a censorship system without alienating its victims did not prove so formidable when the victims helped to work out the procedures from the outset, and the censors felt that good informal channels existed to convey delicate requests. When at this stage Hoare began to take 'a great interest in the problems of press control', he went as a matter of routine to see 'two or three of the big proprietors' to smooth the way for official discussions about the acceptability of the draft D Notices.¹

Just as journalists sometimes deferred to Government notions of responsibility, so some officials were capable as acting as proxy spokesmen for press interests within officialdom. In February 1939 it had been agreed by those responsible for the Ministry of Information that Waterfield and Wrench should assess the first

1 INF 1/156 & 181, passim, especially (in 181) minutes between Hoare and Waterfield, 11-13 June 1939.

booklet of draft regulations 'particularly on the question of whether they left the Press sufficient freedom'. This concern for press interests stemmed from the realisation that without co-operation 'the Ministry of Information may ship a great deal of water' through the public outcry that could follow the onset of emergency powers. Consequently it was agreed that some of the proposed D Notices covering relations with foreign powers should be toned down - even though the Treasury disapproved. W. Ridsdale at the Foreign Office was more than willing to liberalise the Notices, 'working as we are on the assumption that the newspapers will be anxious to co-operate'.¹ This was a reasonable assumption given the press attitude evident in these private consultations. Will wrote on 21 July that he and his colleagues had no major objection to the draft guidelines on any point of principle. The friendly tone of his letter epitomised the consensus which at this stage existed on the existence of the Ministry. He expressed the hope that censorship would work harmoniously and added that 'the Notices are largely what one must expect in war-time'. Furthermore it had been a member of The Times' staff whose letter to Woodburn had begun the discussion about whether or not to extend D. Notices to include foreign affairs. Herbert Shaw was concerned that the press should act together with the Government in an endeavour to avoid alienating the neutrals during a war.²

Despite later arguments over the Ministry of Information the degree of

1 INF 1/181, Extract from Minutes of a Meeting on Draft D Notices, 14 Feb. 1939; INF 1/155, J. Beresford-Sir Stephen Tallents, 22 Oct. 1938; INF 1/181, C.Waley-D.Woodburn, 5 June, and W. Ridsdale-D. Woodburn, 15 June 1939.

2 Ibid; W. Will-D.Woodburn, 21 July 1939, and 28 July; R.J. Herbert Shaw-D.Woodburn, 25 Jan. 1939. Shaw had been an Assistant Press Censor in Ireland, 1916-18.

co-operation shown by both press and decision-makers both in peace and war, is most striking.

The many differences of interest between the two sides should not be disguised. Some will have been apparent in previous sections of this chapter. The argument here, however, is not that conflicts did not occur, but that at the most fundamental levels there were powerful countervailing common interests and values which contained disputes within acceptable limits, so that the underlying relationship of co-operation and inter-penetration was perpetuated. The bitterness of late 1939 arose not from hostility to the official management of news as such, but from particular inefficiencies or methods of operation, like the claim of the Ministry to centralise in itself the distribution of information to the Press, in place of the system much prized by journalists whereby individuals went direct to the departments concerned.¹ It was a paradox that the dispute essentially revolved round competing views of how best to organise and sustain the existing close relations between the two sides.

If this underlying intimacy had not continued to exist, it would not have been possible for the staff of The Times in 1941 to send in their own memorandum on war aims to R.A. Butler, for the attention of Greenwood's Cabinet Committee on Reconstruction. The paper was intended as the draft of a statement that Barrington-Ward and his colleagues hoped that the Government would make about the circumstances in which the war might end and about the kind of new world to follow.

1 CAB 65/1, WMs 5 & 30(39), 6 & 28 Sept. 1939.

It was an attempt 'to take time by the forelock and to get essentials set out'. In assuming the role of direct participant in policy-making the staff of The Times displayed a revealing preference for the private, personal, input over public pressure through the editorial column.¹

The concluding stage of the case for seeing the press as uniquely entangled with decision-making, rather than as an outside pressure-group, must focus on the question of the actual content of policy. On the face of things the Press was both heterogeneous in its views and involved in frequent attacks on Government policy. This seems to invalidate the whole argument.

That it does not do so is because, on the fundamental issues of British foreign policy in this period, the press showed a surprising tendency to share the conclusions arrived at by those in power. Through the dramatic changes of outlook and circumstance between 1938-41, newspaper opinion developed in parallel with policies actually pursued. Attitudes are inevitably circumscribed by the events which produce them, but it is still noteworthy how little variety and how much consensus characterised public discussion of Britain's developing commitment to war against Germany.

After Munich, for example, despite subsequent accusations that a craven Cabinet ignored the warnings of far-sighted commentators,²

1 CAB 87/1, R.Barrington-Ward-R.A. Butler, undated, but probably early 1941.

2 E.g. A.L. Rowse: All Souls and Appeasement (London, Macmillan, 1961) p.83, on Chamberlain's trust in Hitler at Munich: 'Vain old fool - his impression against all the evidence of perjury, torture, murder, thuggery that had accumulated since 1933'. (Italics in text).

the press as a whole did not step out of line. W.W. Hadley, the Editor of the Sunday Times, analysed articles from 50 papers after the Conference and concluded that:

'(These) representative journals were all but unanimous in their expression of the warmest gratitude to the Government, and especially to the Prime Minister, for the maintenance of peace. In not one of them was it suggested that in the discussion with Germany about Czechoslovakia any issues were raised which justified war'.

Only Reynolds News opposed Munich. Even the Edenite Daily Telegraph could not bring itself to attack such a monument to the desire for peace.

During the six months up to the invasion of Bohemia, subsequent disenchantment with Chamberlain's policy took the form of laments for Czechoslovakia; they were not retrospective arguments for a tougher line. For no paper disagreed with those tenets of Government policy which held that Germany entertained some just grievances for the Versailles settlement, and that Britain had only a limited liability for managing the affairs of Continental Europe (quite apart from the problems of military deficiency). Equally, no newspaper (except perhaps the Daily Mail) showed any desire for a special relationship with Hitler's Germany.¹ In this they were also running parallel with official attitudes; Chamberlain wanted to negotiate reasonably with Hitler so as to solve the problems which were liable to inflame Europe. He did not want an Anglo-German entente.

1 F. Gannon: The British Press and Germany, 1936-9, pp.7, 44-5, 197 212-3, 217-8, 294, is the main source for press views in the six months after Munich. The Herald was the most sceptical of Munich, but even it thought that 'Hitler has had to abandon the most brutal of his Godesberg terms...For the first time he has had to realise that there are forces in the world more powerful than the absolute will of a dictator'. Daily Herald, Editorial, 1 October 1938, p.8.

The events of March 1939 did not dissolve this parallelism. The British press hardly felt that the invasion of the 15th called for a British military response. The previous six months had made it clear to them, no less than to the Cabinet, that Czechoslovakia had been emasculated at Munich. Diplomatic action was another matter; only the isolationist Daily Express disapproved of the guarantee to Poland, and from that point the Express found itself intellectually isolated from the main stream of debate, just as Beaverbrook's personal links with Chamberlain also ceased. The other papers had been clamouring for some earnest of the Government's intention to prevent further aggression since before Chamberlain's speech on the 17th. When war soon followed even the Stornoway House papers joined the consensus in accepting that the Cabinet had no alternative but to implement its guarantee.¹

It is true that during the summer months of 1939 the Government came under considerable pressure from newspaper criticisms. However, these differences did not occur over the issue of whether or not Britain had a commitment to help halt German expansionism on the continent of Europe. They concerned the clamour for Churchill to enter the Cabinet, for the pace of rearmament to be speeded up still further, and for an agreement with the USSR to be concluded as quickly as possible. These were issues involving the methods and tone of policy, not its scope and central aims, since the Cabinet agreed with

1 See, for example, satirical responses to Goering's 'peace try-on' and Hitler's threats of victory, in respectively, Sunday Express 10 Sept. 1939, and Daily Express, 9 November 1939.

the premisses that an attack on Poland would mean war, that re-armament per se was vital, and that the USSR should at the least, be involved in a 'Peace Front'. Further, Churchill was brought into the Government on the outbreak of war, conscription was announced, defence expenditure continued to increase, and Ministers came round to seeking a full alliance with the USSR by 24 May. As we have seen, the press did exert an influence on such matters. While these criticisms were important, and it is still just plausible to argue that they prevented Chamberlain's Cabinet from thinking about reneging on the Polish Guarantee, the time-lags between campaign and decision were too short to justify a theory of press leadership in the search for a new British foreign policy. The views of decision-makers and their critics did not long remain out of phase even on tactical questions like the timing of conscription. On the central issue of when and for what reasons to risk a war with Germany, a consensus was forged that made it doubly difficult for challenges to the orthodoxy to be heard.

Thus Government and newspapers, between them a considerable part of the political elite, were unanimous on 3 September about the rightness of the ultimatum to Hitler.¹ Agreement on the basic question continued once the fighting had begun. Such differences as there were did not arise at the level of primary aims or values, except through the fringe papers like Action, and the Daily Worker, which opposed the

1 The Daily Mirror, 4 Sept. 1939, was not untypical: 'Rejoice that our choice is made; rejoice that our choice is just; know that we shall win through'.

war. They were shut down between May 1940 and January 1941. Herbert Morrison saw all the chairmen of the newspaper companies at the time, as well as the editors, but only Frank Owen of the Evening Standard made any protest against the suppression.¹ Most of the press felt that opposition to the war fell outside the scope of the principles of free expression which they normally espoused. As Gerald Barry of the News Chronicle replied to Churchill defending his right to "honest and healthy criticism":

'We are naturally most anxious at all times - and more than ever at the present - to be scrupulously fair in our comment and to do nothing that might affect adversely the war effort₂ of the nation under your inspiring leadership'.

Even over the less subversive Daily Mirror and Sunday Pictorial, where the press did at the last condemn Government action, most papers were anxious not to escalate the dispute into a major rift. One Minister went so far as to say that:

'there was reason to believe that the Press as a whole took strong exception to the systematic publication of articles of the type which had been so frequent in the Daily Mirror, and was unlikely to be critical of an announcement on the lines proposed'. (i.e. that future articles would incur Defence Regulation 2(d)).³

Ironically, the Mirror was passionately in favour of a crusade against Hitler, and echoed Churchill's belligerence throughout 1940. It was critical simply of inefficiency and 'blimpness' in the prosecution of the war. King observed:

1 C. King: War Diary, 21 Jan. 1941, pp.93-4; this was not what Duff Cooper had predicted. CAB 65/21, Confidential Annex, WM5(41):8, 13 Jan.

2 PREM 4/66-2; Gerald Barry-Churchill, 4 Oct. 1940.

3 CAB 65/25, WM35(42), 18 March 1942.

'If we criticize the Government we can be quite fairly accused of "rocking the boat", "causing alarm and despondency", and so forth. If, on the other hand, we give the Government our full support, we are then sharing the responsibility for all the jobbery and incompetence that are dragging this great country to defeat. Clearly,¹ the right line is some form of compromise'.

Perhaps it was Cecil King's fundamental respect for strong leadership that led him not to challenge the threat of suppression in 1942 by holding out for due process of law under Regulation 2(c).² Once more disagreement had turned out to run no deeper than a clash over the form of policy, compounded by a clash of personalities.

Thus although embarrassing disputes flared up a number of times both in the run-up to the war and during the war itself, the persistence of a consensus over primary goals acted as a prophylactic to the emergence of sustained, destructive schisms of the kind that dogged France in the same years. It also killed at birth any public discussion of delaying war in 1939 or agreeing to a compromise in 1940. It is impossible to prove that 'the British people' would have favoured different policies from those pursued, (although to judge from Chamberlain's post-bag in September 1939 they might not have risen up against a continuation of peace until Hitler attacked the West).³ The most that can be said is that insofar as the press determined the parameters of debate about foreign policy, no leadership was provided for any serious opposition to the Government's stance between 1938-41.

1 C. King, op.cit. 28 Jan. 1941, p.98.

2 2(d) had been introduced only for use in the circumstances of imminent invasion, which did not apply in 1942. Francis Williams: Press, Parliament and People, pp.26-39; B. Donoghue & G. Jones: Herbert Morrison, pp.299-300.

3 Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1120-39; letter to Ida Chamberlain, 8 Oct. 1939: '...in three days last week I had 2450 letters and 1860 of them were stop the war in one form or another'.

In some respects the conclusions of this chapter appear to support a theory of 'convergence'. Radical critics of the press have frequently argued that editorial opinion is too easily co-opted into the Establishment world, trading good access to the top for sympathy towards the problems of practitioners. 'Background' information cannot be used; the 'lobby' is a form of elite recruitment, and a continuing period of crisis 'might tend to evolve a virtual censorship out of such pressure', as the PEP report surmised.¹ Relations between editors like Crozier ('as well-informed as any man in England about European affairs') and Ministers like Alexander ('I have been more communicative to you than to anyone else since I took on this job') were more those of colleagues than antagonists.² A free press is therefore an illusion.

So the argument can run. It is plausible but simplistic, with a conspiratorial flavour that diminishes the force of such elements of truth as it contains. The dichotomy between a free and compromised press is fundamentally misconceived. The first part of this chapter was designed to show that by the very nature of foreign policy formulation in a liberal society, the press deeply penetrated both the machinery of government and the nexus of inter-state relations. The 'functions' it performed made it inevitable that the actions of either side reverberated in the halls of the other. Furthermore the consensual character of democracy in Britain meant that

1 PEP Report on the British Press, pp.178-9.

2 David Ayerst: Guardian, p.499; A.J.P. Taylor (Ed.): Off the Record, p.184, Crozier's interview with Alexander 26 July 1940.

governmental responses to the press were more co-operative than coercive. A relationship of interdependence was consolidated in which disputes could be kept within manageable limits, and which even war could not disrupt. The Press was therefore neither the bought woman of government (to turn Baldwin's simile on its head) nor simply a coalition of pressure-groups. It was an integral part of the milieu in which public policies gestated.

This is why it is also wrong, as is often attempted, to single out The Times as a special case of influence. The Times has always been the flagship of the press and under Dawson it was as close to Downing Street as it has even been. But its role is far more easily understood when placed in the context of the press as a whole, which as an institution always loomed large in the world of those who took decisions on foreign policy. Some papers were more serious than others, and some nearer the government of the day. Yet when issues and contents are examined in detail, it becomes clear that discussion about foreign policy cannot be characterised as a clash between the Cabinet/Establishment/Times view on the one hand, and the views of outside critics on the other. In this period what differences of opinion there were tended to cut across institutional divisions, so that at times one group of Ministers might sympathise more with a section of the Press than with their own colleagues. Equally, The Times proved itself a not infrequent source of irritation and embarrassment to the Cabinet, and the News Chronicle surprisingly susceptible to appeals for co-operation.¹ The serried ranks, drawn up in apparent battle order, dissolve on close inspection.

1 See pp.272-3 and 330 above.

The effect of the intimate relationship that has been traced here was not to subvert journalists into a conspiratorial allegiance to Government policy. Less dramatically, but just as importantly, it tended to narrow the area of discussion and thought for all concerned. The critical faculty of the press was weakened to the extent that their censure focused more on questions of timing and instrumentality than the important issues of purpose, principle, premise and prediction. Decision-makers and press often diverged between and within themselves on attitudes towards Hitler, fascism and international morality. There were narrower limits, however, to their divergence on the question of which foreign policy commitments could be squared with the national interest. The 'fourth estate' may well have exerted checks and balances, but they were able no more than the government, to impose intellectual order on the flux of events or to set out the likely future opinions for British policy. How this fact affected public opinion, and to what extent decision-makers were in contact with the public other than through the press, is the issue to which we must now turn.

Chapter IV: THE OUTER CIRCLE: PUBLIC OPINION

The impact of public opinion on the making of foreign policy is at once the most attractive and difficult of subjects. The reason is the same; any discussion of public opinion is nearly coterminous with an investigation into the workings of the democratic polity itself. If the public and their views are difficult simply to identify, then the nature of their inputs into policy-making is positively mysterious. The problems of method confronting attempts to deal with this difficulty will be apparent. The use of detailed case-studies, as in our treatment of the Cabinet, is ruled out by the inconvenient tendency of decision-makers to talk and write about substantive matters, without often making explicit (or even being aware of) the nature of such domestic influences as are at work on their decisions. And for our part we the public do not leave records of the kind that makes it easy to trace political influence at the highest level.

By the same token, the public are not an institution in even the loosest sense. Overt popular interest in foreign policy matters is an intermittent, erratic affair, not susceptible to the analysis of 'functions' that was found helpful when looking at the professional activities of the press. A concern with interest-groups, which are exempt from this caveat, is no more satisfactory. For the late 1930's it soon leads to a depressing sense of distance from events, since those sufficiently committed to whip up pressure on official policy tended to be concerned with long-term solutions at a time when the Government was increasingly forced to deal with short-term crises. The study of the Peace Pledge Union, Federal Union, or the Imperial Policy Group

is crucial for any understanding of the culture in which British foreign policy evolved during these years, but it can only act as background material for an analysis of decision-making in the period of Britain's drift to war.¹

If this is so it might be thought to obviate any concern with public opinion whatsoever. If articulate and organised voices only filtered through into policy indirectly, it was much more difficult for the mass public to be heard. It can be argued powerfully by 'realist' commentators that the populace as a whole has always had little interest and less clout in foreign affairs, just as pressure-groups have been far more influential on domestic than external policies. Britain, furthermore, has never possessed the constitutional checks on executive freedoms to be found in the American provisions for the Senate or the Third Republic's inbuilt tendency to coalitions.²

In an attempt to make the case without falling foul of problems of method the approach will be more discursive than it has been in the close-textured scrutiny employed so far. Because public opinion is so amorphous the main focus will be the public as perceived by decision-makers and the wider implications of these images for theorising about

1 Surprisingly little work has so far followed the lead set by D.C. Watt on the subject of pressure-groups in Personalities and Policies, particularly Essay 6, 'German Influence on British Opinion, 1933-8', pp.117-35.

2 A brief history of the 'Popular Control of Foreign Policy' can be found in P.G. Richards: Parliament and Foreign Affairs (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1967), pp.16-35. The realist view is expressed by Georg Schwarzenberger: Power Politics: A Study of World Society, Third Ed. (London, Stevens 1964), pp.136-9.

democracy.¹ Not only is this treatment manageable, but it will also set the tone for the final chapter of the thesis, which briefly considers the meaning of 'the domestic sources of foreign policy' in the context of this case.

By way of structure, what follows breaks down into four main sections. After some precursory remarks about problems of interpreting public opinion we shall look at: (1) the sources of decision-makers' knowledge of public opinion; (2) their images of public wishes and the implications for policy; (3) evidence, such as exists, of what the public might actually have wanted; (4) what all this reveals about the ideology of politics and government prevalent in decision-making circles.

Interpretations of Public Opinion:

The view that public opinion is of marginal importance for makers of foreign policy, is based on the assumption that decision-making is best understood through an analysis of pluralist politics; that powerful groups will be able to participate in policy by forcing Government to take note of their demands, or at worst refrain from taking unacceptable action. By the same token weak groups in society will be able to exert little pressure, and will perhaps be unable even to formulate their views properly. Consequently they will inhabit the

1 The pros and cons of taking perceptions as the level of analysis are recounted in 'The Premises and Promises of Decision-Making Analysis' in J.N. Rosenau: The Scientific Study of Foreign Policy, pp.256-64, 270-3.

nomansland of politics, involved only as a battleground for the rest. It is easy to see how a consensus on the virtual irrelevance of public opinion could derive from this view. Also based on a 'power' framework, however, is the interpretation of public opinion which seems diametrically opposite. British politicians in particular¹ have often expounded on the theme that while, of course, neither foreign nor any other policy can be expected to follow the twists and turns of public feeling, and while decision-makers must be allowed scope for leadership, expertise, and flexibility, foreign policy has still to reflect the mood and interests of the British People, and in the last resort has certainly always been subject to their veto on all major decisions.²

These two views, that on the one hand foreign policy has essentially been 'democratic', and on the other that it has inevitably been the preserve of the executive, occupy the two ends of a scale, on which, by extension, the influence of the various potential participants in decision-making may be measured. Accordingly various compromise positions are possible, where the power of influence of public opinion is assessed relative to other groups and to government. All of these positions to some extent imply a zero-sum game, where greater influence for some means less for others.

The existing conceptual literature on this subject largely operates on these assumptions, with the occasional exception. We owe to Gabriel Almond, for instance, an important scene-setting discussion of the ways

1 Kenneth Younger: "Public Opinion and Foreign Policy" in British Journal of Sociology, Vol.VI, No.2, pp. 169-75 (June 1955) is distinctly ambivalent.

2 For a recent academic assertion of this view see K. Robbins: 'Appeasement: New Tasks for the Historian' (Review Article), International Affairs, Vol.48, No.4, October 1972, pp.625-30.

in which public opinion and American foreign policy can interact, including in particular the distinction between 'mass' and 'attentive' publics.¹ Far more recently, Bernard C. Cohen has revived interest in the whole subject by showing in specific detail how empirical research can chart the physical meeting-points (or lack of them) between foreign policy-makers and the citizens for whom they are acting- again with data drawn from the United States.² His valuable book stresses that public opinion cannot always be usefully seen as an independent variable. Because there are no agreed indicators for public opinion, especially in the period before the introduction of reliable polling, it takes on the character of a chameleon, changing in appearance over time and place and according to point of view.³

Despite these advances, however, we still have only the haziest understanding of the ways domestic views or interests get incorporated - to the extent that they do - in foreign policy. Moreover, the subject throws up some interesting and unexplained paradoxes that bear directly on the whole nature of representative democracy. First of these is the problem of why, if public opinion is virtually impotent in the area of foreign policy, a widening gap between elite and mass interests has not occurred sufficient to cause more discontent and

1 Gabriel A. Almond: The American People and Foreign Policy, (New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1950).

2 Bernard C. Cohen: The Public's Impact on Foreign Policy, (Boston, Little, Brown, 1973).

3 These points have recently been reinforced persuasively by Marlis G. Steinlert: 'Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: Reflections and Suggestions of an Historian'; paper written for the European Consortium for Political Research's London Sessions, 1975.

agitation for change. Equally, why should the documentation of British foreign policy, the public speeches and the private letters or memoranda, be littered with references to public opinion, if policy-makers are in fact going their own way?¹ Along the same lines, why does domestic opinion seem to have striking effects in a limited number of spectacular circumstances, like the Bulgarian atrocities or the Hoare-Laval Plan, when it is otherwise anaesthetized?² Lastly, and probably less surprising, why do political scientists and political practitioners seem to have such opposite views on the subject?

Knowledge of the complexities of politics as well as psychology makes one reluctant to find the answers to these paradoxes in hypocrisy, deception and 'fixing'. All three are the daily fare of politics, but they would need to have been organised on a vast, conspiratorial scale to account for the problems outlined. Broad assertions of either popular sovereignty or power-elitism, therefore leave a vacuum of explanation which insights from the literature on foreign policy decision-making and political sociology in general may help to fill.

Routes to the Centre: How Decision-Makers Experienced Public Opinion

It would be easy but pointless to provide a catalogue of the different forms and channels of public opinion, from the MP's post-bag through the mass demonstration to meetings of local party workers.

1 Documentation of this statement is impossible; a random survey of Cabinet papers, private letters, and departmental records will, however, witness to its truth.

2 Daniel Waley: British Public Opinion and the Abyssinian War 1935-6, does not address itself directly to these questions.

Clearly there are a number of different ways in which opinion gets access to policy circles, but this does not help us to find out which were most effective. It may be more useful to group the main forms of communication between society and government and to ask how the information they generated was received in Westminster and Whitehall. The channels to be charted are the Press, the Parliamentary process, and decision-makers' personal experience of the public and its pressure-groups.

The Press has already been discussed at length, but its unique importance as an actor linking the three circles of government, world affairs, and domestic society, should not be underestimated. Accordingly a brief description of its role in relation to public opinion is not out of place here. First and foremost the press was taken by many people of all kinds to be a simple conveyor-belt for the views of the public to be brought to the notice of Government. A desire to know what is happening 'at the grass-roots' is one of the clichés of British politics, and the extensiveness of press coverage made it easy to slip into the habit of taking newspaper evidence as conclusive. From 1939-41 the Home Press Summaries Section of the Ministry of Information had as one of its explicit briefs the task of indicating 'public opinion as reflected in the press', while Kenneth Clark (later Lord Clark)'s view that 'two sources for judging public opinion are the "Opinion" column in the Express and the leaders by Jennings...in the Mirror' was typical

of the kind of references used in the Ministry.¹ If the officials with responsibility for public relations saw opinion as relayed through the press it was not surprising that Cabinet Ministers should do the same. In April 1939 Chamberlain himself asked the Editor of the Birmingham Post:

'...how he thought public opinion stood now. He said he had not only many contacts in Birmingham but that he had also been visiting the South and people there and he had formed the opinion that the country was more solidly behind me than had been the case with any Prime Minister he could remember'.

Since this was just after the invasion of Prague had shattered his previous foreign policy, the Prime Minister was understandably reassured, as again in June, when the proprietor of the Western Mail told his wife that 80-90% of the people were 'solidly behind me and it certainly looked like it' (to judge from a 'quite sensational' welcome in South Wales, the 'enemy stronghold').² Thus any biases or omissions in the press's transmission of public opinions were likely to be absorbed into decision-makers' conceptions of that opinion. Their use of the material presented was not, in the heat of party politics, notably critical.

The potential for distortion, or even for the invention of public 'moods' for which there was little concrete evidence, was

1 INF I/335, memo. by J.O. McLachlan, 23 April 1940.

2 Chamberlain Papers NC 18/1/1092-1118, Letters to Ida Chamberlain 23 April 1939 and 25 June 1939.

compounded by a tendency to react to the press as if it were not only a passive notice-board, but also an active mediator of conflicts or misunderstandings between government and governed. The press helped to convey the impression of a conversational and participatory political process, in that it suffered from neither the transience of face-to-face encounters, nor the reliance on piecemeal and often third-hand evidence that characterised Parliament. As a means of disseminating information, the BBC was already looming as a powerful rival, but in the absence of telephone ownership it could not compete with newspapers in providing a meeting-place for opinions.¹ The principle on which letters were selected for The Times epitomises how this bridging function was noted in Fleet Street itself:

'the principle...is based partly, no doubt on the eminence of the writers but also upon the volume of letters received upon a particular subject... That has always seemed to me the only method by which we could give expression of public₂ opinion as represented by our correspondents'.

Other than letter-columns, reports of interest-group activities, and generalised discussion about 'what the public will stand' were ways in which the press brought specialist foreign policy debates into contact with wider opinion. Equally important was simply the fact that the press was almost the only major phenomenon of daily life that policy-makers and ordinary people had in common. This

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- 1 The fast-growing importance of the BBC as a channel of information to the people is chronicled in Asa Briggs: The History of Broadcasting in the United Kingdom: Vol.III, The War of Words (London, O.U.P. 1970), pp.94-5, 209-21.
 - 2 Cherwell Papers, file 42; G. Dawson to F.A. Lindemann, 15 May 1929. Dawson also revealed that about one-tenth of letters received were published.

tended to foster what was perhaps an illusory feeling of intimacy with the public, among those at the top.¹

Identification of the press with public opinion was further confused by the fact that it was clearly possible for newspapers to manipulate mass feelings, both actually, and in terms of the impressions received at the centre. On the other hand, this role was not entirely unwelcome to decision-makers, since it provided them with a potential agent for persuasion, and in war-time propaganda. Churchill instructed the Minister of Information during the Fall of France:

'The Press and broadcast should be asked to handle air-raids in a cool way² and on a diminishing tone of public interest'.

The lack of qualms about using the press in this way to manipulate an issue, and the conviction that it would be possible to do so, come across equally strongly in an extraordinarily frank letter from the Director-General of the Ministry of Information to the Secretary to the Chiefs of Staff:

'I believe that through the Press and BBC we can do a great deal to guide the channels along which people's minds work when they speculate, as they must, about the war. We can influence the Press to take points, sometimes (not so easily) to drop them, and we can generally get them to modify tone and emphasis. But we can only do this or (in what ought to be rare cases) deceive them, if I know enough of the truth myself to take action against the right background'.³

1 In May 1941 it was thought 'that public opinion would favour giving the topic (of Rudolf Hess) a rest'. As it happened this insight into the popular mind fitted in neatly with Ministerial tactics. CAB 65/18, WM 51(41) 19 May 1941.

2 Winston Churchill: Their Finest Hour, p.151: Churchill to Duff Cooper, 26 June 1940.

3 CAB 21/1069: W. Monckton to H. Ismay, 1 January 1941.

The other side of the coin was the fear for morale. In April 1940, Oliver Stanley as Minister of War warned his colleagues that:

'Unless the Press were suitably prepared to alter their tone, the public might suffer¹ a severe shock if things went badly at Namsos'.

The paternalistic tone betrayed a basic fear that unless the public were suitably 'prepared', they might become hostile towards the Government. Even after the removal of the Chamberlain Ministry, the Coalition was no less stern in its disapproval of 'demands for inquests' which 'could only engender a spirit of doubt as to our strength'² Ministers inevitably sought to use the press when guiding the public seemed desirable but showed strong resentment of press influence that ran counter to Government policy.

Such feelings were naturally heightened in war-time, but the images and basic attitudes which lay behind such actions were continuous. Paradoxically these attitudes were imprecise, and their very imprecision made real contact between decision-makers and the rest of society the more difficult. At times the Press would be fully equated with public opinion; what the newspapers said was what the public was feeling.³ At others, newspapers would be recognized as a specialised form of opinion in their own right, using their breadth of contacts and professional expertise to lend 'informed' advice. A further confusion was that between the press as window

1 CAB 65/12, Confidential Annex, WM(40), 100:3, 22 April 1940.

2 CAB 65/7, WM 168(40), 16 June 1940.

3 E.g. FO 371(40) 25208; Halifax to a Mr.R.G. Lewis, 18 Dec. 1940 noting a suggestion that the public should be invited to submit views on war aims, but pointing out that whatever is published in the press is 'always carefully scrutinised by this department'.

on public opinion, and as shaper of opinion. Newspapers could both articulate half-formed moods and actively persuade their readers about the necessity of a certain course.

Practitioners did not make these scholastic distinctions themselves. But the consequence of not doing so was a vague and stereotyped thinking about public opinion which tended to reinforce the intimate relations between press and Government at the expense of outside influence. By looking to the press for the views of the people, while at the same time being inconsistent and unsure in doing so, decision-makers stopped short of the admittedly difficult task of actually examining how the public's views might be ascertained, and which indicators were the most reliable. They thereby dodged the issue of the circumstances in which the general will should be followed when it differed from their own. Because the press trod a grey area between partiality and representativeness, those in Government were always free to find the public mood elsewhere.

Many of the same remarks apply to the other routes on which opinion was carried to the political centre, as to the press. In particular, Parliament both provided Ministers with information about events in the constituencies, and, as the pinnacle of the democratic system, itself counted as the popular voice in the formal political process. On the second score, if the House of Commons in 1939 did embody popular feelings on foreign policy, then it was more by coincidence than design. The General Election of 1935 had indeed

partly been fought on the issue of foreign policy, but the National Government's programme had been as ambiguous as the Opposition's had been divided.¹ A voter who might have cast his vote for the League of Nations and rearmament in the event saw the League wrecked on the rocks of the Abyssinian affair only months later, and significant rearmament postponed to the point where the Munich crisis found the Chiefs of Staff arguing that Britain was too weak to risk war.² Despite the dramatic developments of 1938-9, another election was not, of course, due until November 1940. There was much speculation about an earlier date at that time, but the Chamberlain papers confirm what one suspects from the huge size of the Government's Parliamentary majority - that the Prime Minister did not intend giving way to pressure for an election.³ Fear of electoral defeat is always a factor that has to be taken into account in British political life, but even on this basis it is difficult to argue that Parliament acted as an important constraint on the Chamberlain Cabinet. With the Labour Party still divided and lacking in confidence, a defeat for the Government was not widely expected.⁴

1 See D. Waley, op.cit. pp.37-43, and K. Middlemas and J. Barnes: Baldwin, (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969), pp.863-9.

2 M. Howard: The Continental Commitment, pp.108-20.

3 Chamberlain Papers, Letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 15 July 1939, and to Ida Chamberlain 5 August 1939, for example.

4 Excluding 'Don't knows', in Feb. 1939 53% said they would vote for the Government in a General Election, and 47% for the Opposition. H. Cantril (Ed): Public Opinion 1935-46 (Princeton N.J., Princeton University Press 1951) p. 195.

As for by-elections, the evidence they provided of public opinion was piecemeal and inconsistent enough to make for varying interpretation. Those of 1938-9 averaged around a 3.5% swing against the Government, with high standard deviation figures around the mean swing, which gave both the Cabinet and its critics ammunition in the argument as to who commanded the greatest support. At the three famous contests where foreign policy issues were salient, the results went no further towards providing a public verdict. Bridgewater (17 November 1938) was fairly clearly a victory for Chamberlain's opponents, but it had been preceded by Oxford (27 October 1938), in which Quintin Hogg had held the seat for the Government with some comfort, despite being faced by a single opponent representing all major strands of criticism. Bridgewater was then followed by Kinross and West Perthshire (21 December 1938), in which the incumbent Conservative MP resigned to fight the seat as an Independent against Neville Chamberlain's foreign policy - and lost by 5.8%, after increasing the Opposition share of the vote since 1935 by 7.3%. What was to be made of all this contradictory evidence? In war-time the popular voice was further muffled to the point of inaudibility. The electoral truce between the major parties, the low turn-out (c. 34% for our period), and the great mobility of the population, made interpretation impossible for contemporaries, as it does for us. The Government's appeals for national unity tended to set the scales in advance, and no doubt they interpreted the results (in which from 1939-41 the Government easily defeated

anti-war independents) as an overall endorsement of the Government.¹

If voter's general views did not emerge very clearly from the Parliamentary system, their particular concerns were not likely to fare much better. Question-time is one of the most famous institutions of British democracy, but in practice Parliamentary Questions (PQs) on foreign policy had little chance of affecting policy-making. Occasionally a clarificatory statement or even minor change of legislation would be achieved by back-bench pressure,² but the normal rule was for both Ministers and officials to regard PQs as acts of aggression, to be turned to advantage if possible. Consequently they were either parried with the release of minimum information, or actively exploited as means of making statements as and when it suited the Government.³ The length of Parliamentary recesses did not help the cause of communication. The Commons did not sit for five months during the 1938-39 session, and that in a year which saw the emergency recall of the House during August. Finally, that the theory of representation emphasises an MP's freedom to act in the House as far more than a messenger for his local area, added yet more distance to the gap between popular discussion and debate at Westminster.

It would be a mistake, nevertheless, to see Parliament as a cipher in foreign policy matters, cynically disregarded by the

1 The above paragraph is based on figures and analysis provided in Chris Cook and John Ramsden (Ed.): By-Elections in British Politics, (London, Macmillan 1973), pp.359-99, and Chapters 6 & 7 by Iain Maclean and Paul Addison. See also Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1092-1118, letter to Ida Chamberlain, 21 May 1939.

2 For instance see CAB 23/99, CM32(39), 14 June 1939, and CAB 23/100, CM35(39) 5 July.

3 For example, CAB 23/98, CMs 16 & 17(39), 30 & 31 March 1939, CAB 65/12, Confidential Annex WM(40) 65:6, 11 March 1940, CAB 65/25, WM 35(42) 18 March 1942.

Executive. A close look at the distribution of the time actually spent in session by the Commons from the period 31 January-10 March 1939 (two volumes of Hansard and a fairly typical month for foreign policy in the late 1930s) shows that c. 23% of the time taken by oral and written PQs was devoted to foreign affairs, which also took up 29.6% of debates. At the same time well over 200 MPs spoke in questions or debates on international matters - at almost one-third, a high figure.¹ Cabinet Records and the private papers of Ministers show that while mainstream policy was hardly ever affected significantly by points made in this way, (unless their author was an exceptional figure with the status of a Churchill or Lloyd George), forceful speeches were often noted and the general temper of the House was always watched for.² It is impossible to say whether or not the attitudes of decision-makers were subtly altered by absorbing material through such means.

In their collective, party, form MPs were certainly taken seriously by the Cabinet. It is arguable that even with their large majority, the Chamberlain Government were partly (if intangibly) swayed towards a firmer policy in 1939 by the increasing vociferousness of the Opposition, crucially supported by the groups of Tory rebels led by Churchill or Eden. The subject of party politics in 1939-40 is a large and complex one that has been dealt with fully elsewhere.³

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- 1 Hansard, 5th Series, Analysis of vols. 343 & 344. In 'foreign affairs' is subjectively included everything which either directly affects, or is affected by, Britain's relations with other states. E.g. some material on air-raid precautions, and defence, but not such purely internal matters as the conditions of naval ratings.
 - 2 E.g. Templewood Papers, X:6, text of 'Golden Age' speech of 10 March 1939, in which Hoare makes much of the extensive debates on Defence Estimates.
 - 3 M. Cowling: The Impact of Hitler, N.Thompson: The Anti-Appeasers, P.Addison: The Road to 1945.

Its importance here resides in the spark given to Parliament as an institution by the relative lack of respect for the Whips shown by the Conservative anti-appeasers.¹ When party discipline did occasionally waver, Parliament was considered both a loud-hailer for public opinion, and its constitutional embodiment. David Margesson wrote of the fall of Chamberlain:

'The House of Commons is a mighty queer place but its collective voice does represent the country's views, right or wrong. Last May the country took the view...that you can't₂ fight a war on a division of political opinion'.

But for all that is usually said about the spectacular impact of the dissenters in the crises of September 1939 and May 1940, they do not suggest that Parliament can take major initiatives in foreign policy. Certainly the Conservative revolt of 8 May 1940 more than any other factor brought down the Government. Yet essentially it changed the degree of dynamism in war policy, not its direction. Further, it was an exceptional event. No Prime Minister this century has been dislodged by Parliament on an issue of foreign policy.³ Similarly, for the events of 2-3 September 1939 most modern commentators would agree that the influence of Parliamentary (as of Ministerial) unrest was confined to shortening the delay

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- 1 J.S. Rasmussen: 'Government and Intra-Party Opposition: Dissent Within the Conservative Parliamentary Party in the 1930's'. Political Studies, Vol.XIX, No.2, June 1971, pp.172-83.
 - 2 Margesson Papers, 1/4; Margesson-Stanley Baldwin, 4 March 1941.
 - 3 Lloyd George resigned after Chanak in 1922 because of a private vote in the Conservative Party to end the Coalition Government.

between the German invasion of Poland and the issuing of the British ultimatum. Many MPs thought, of course, that the Government was about to repeat Munich and that only a major upheaval in the Conservative Party would stop them. Not for the first time, however, Westminster opinion was somewhat out of touch with diplomatic realities. As we have seen, Halifax and Chamberlain were ham-strung by the French.¹

Both these violent rows, then, contributed less to British foreign policy than at first appears, and were relatively untypical. More usual was convergence between the two main front-benches, if not full bi-partisanism. Historical mythology to the contrary, the only major issue arising out of policy towards Germany over which the Opposition significantly differed from the Government, was that of the Soviet Union, an arrangement with whom they were urging well before the Cabinet reluctantly sought an alliance in May 1939. For the rest of the time - including the months after Munich, the policy of Guarantees, the Phoney War, and the emasculation of Parliament under the Coalition - the major parties were in agreement by default over the direction of foreign policy. At a time when the Spanish Civil War was no longer such a burning issue, the Government was criticised more for the quality of its administration than for its assumptions about Britain's international interests.²

1 See pp. 138-158 above, Ch. II.

2 See particularly Hugh Dalton's diary, in his collected papers; Vol. 20, entries of 2 April, 10 May; Vol. 21, 10 July and 6 September 1939.

Thus whether it is seen as society's constitutional constraint on the executive arms or more humbly, as one forum of public discussion, Parliament had certain intrinsic deficiencies. If public opinion is conceived as consisting inevitably of a broad range of views, from the very critical to the very favourable, and from many different angles, then a House in which the Opposition parties were outnumbered, divided, and even reluctantly in agreement with the Cabinet, neither constrained the Government very effectively nor constituted an adequate stimulus to public debate on the great issues to be faced in 1939-40. Further, the lively personal interest shown by many MPs in the great international happenings of their day, hardly compensated for the inadequacy of elections and Parliamentary Questions as a means of opening up foreign policy formulation.

This does not mean, however, that decision-makers themselves looked upon Parliament as remote and ineffectual. The sheer stress of appealing in a noisy Chamber, together with the reverberations of debate around the political elite in London, seems to have been enough to keep the House of Commons firmly associated in Minister's minds with public opinion, and with a potentially effective public opinion at that.¹ The generalised whiggish images of British democratic institutions working more effectively as history progressed, survived intact with little anxiety as to whether the Commons was truly in touch with attitudes in the country at large. Ambivalent feelings about Parliament - that it represented at once an irritant to be circumvented and the source of ultimate legitimacy in the

1 E.g. CAB 23/97, CM 8(39) 22 Feb 1939, where a certain apprehension over public/Parliament responses to the as yet unrevealed lack of preparedness of the BEF is shown.

political system - therefore hardly dispersed the cloud of imprecision which already surrounded the notion of public opinion. It served only to keep the concept, non-specific and inconsistently used as it was, in the forefront of their daily vocabulary.

The last channel by which opinion was carried into the councils of state is far less tangible. The personal experiences of decision-makers also appear to have perpetuated a superficial understanding of the public's role in politics, but it is inevitably difficult to be certain about this. Chamberlain certainly had access to various different indicators of public mood (if such a phenomenon existed), but tended to interpret the information they provided in a very superficial way. He was easily impressed by cheering crowds and by admiring mail, frequently noting in letters the extent of his own popularity as measured by such things.¹ He was also selective and uncritical in his reactions, essentially taking public opinion to be embodied in the people who wrote to him, or who were said to have rushed to apply for photographs of the Prime Minister and his wife (up to a number of 90,000 plus) offered by the Daily Sketch.² It does not seem to have occurred to him that those who sent gifts to Conservative politicians, and who read the Daily Sketch, might not be speaking for the country as a whole. Chamberlain gives the strong impression, that when he saw working-class people applaud him, or was congratulated by a Labour voter on the Munich peace, he made the logical jump of assuming overall support of the groups from which they came. The emotional back-wash of Munich undoubtedly left the Prime Minister with the feelings that on foreign policy

1 E.g. Chamberlain Papers NC18/1/1071-91, 15 Oct. 1938 to Hilda Chamberlain, 17 December to Ida Chamberlain, NC18/1/1092-1118, 28 May 1939 to Hilda.

2 Ibid; Letter of 15 October 1938 to Hilda Chamberlain.

issues he alone could appeal over party differences to the ordinary man.

This impression is reinforced by the fact that Chamberlain preferred one kind of partial evidence of majority feeling to another without obvious logical justification. Letters and crowds seen with his own eyes, or reports from his sisters of local attitudes, all of which were largely favourable, he saw as more real than (his perception of) a critical and quarrelsome House of Commons.¹ The latter worried him, but never made Chamberlain doubt his 'position in the country' (although he did choose not to hold an Election). More striking was the doublethink in October 1939. At this point the Prime Minister came to realise from his mailbag that there were many more people in Britain wanting 'peace-at-any-price' than appeared the case: 'For instance in three days last week I had 2450 letters and 1860 of them were stop the war in one form or another'. But whereas his mailbags earlier in 1939 (or a word of reassurance from the Tory Chief Whip) had encouraged Chamberlain in his existing stance, these new and dissident messages did not seem to have stimulated any reconsideration in his mind of the legitimacy of the decision on 3 September.²

The pitfalls waiting for any politician judging mass attitudes, especially in an age when opinion polls were not thought important, can be demonstrated by one further example, showing that Chamberlain's personal vanity did not make him a special case. Erratic, simplistic,

1 NC 18/1/1071-91, Letter of 26 March 1939 to Ida Chamberlain.

2 NC18/1/1120-1139, Letter of 8 Oct. 1939 to Ida Chamberlain; see also CAB 65/1 WM 39(4), 7 Oct. 1939 which shows that he took the letters to indicate that a 'small section of society' was pacifist.

and subjective images were difficult to escape from in men virtually required by their position to 'speak for England'.¹ Contrast the different treatment that letters on the same subject from individuals to Ministers could receive. In October 1939 the Home Secretary, Sir John Anderson, wrote to Sir Horace Wilson for the Prime Minister's attention enclosing a letter from a Glasgow constituent. The letter was articulate, responsible, intelligent, and typed. Its author was opposed to Hitler's foreign policy but felt that a cease-fire and hard-headed negotiations would make a settlement possible without the blood-letting of a war or the dangers of a clean-sheet peace. Anderson urged - and Chamberlain himself saw the letter - that a reply to Hitler's peace offer should be firm but also constructive, since 'the number of people-decent and thoroughly loyal - who are thinking like the writer of the enclosed is I believe very large'.² Why did Anderson think the letter was important? It made a reasonable point, but no more so than hundreds of letters received by Ministers. It is likely that it impressed by resembling an official memorandum, with enumerated points that contrasted strongly with the usual looping scrawl on Basildon Bond. More important it probably struck a chord in Anderson's psychology at the time, expressing his own concerns and intuitions. The Minister could have had no other basis for regarding the author as so typical as to deserve drawing to the attention of his head of Government.

1 See INF I/845, in which Leo Amery is recorded as having reported good morale on the basis of entering a few shops in Birmingham.

2 PREM I/395, Anderson to Sir Horace Wilson, 11 October 1939.

The case of Ernest Bevin is similar although the details differ. Among the boxes of constituents' letters that survive are some from those on the Left opposing war, and in particular one from a pensioner in Bristol; it complained about the terror of air-raids and argued that workers have to suffer the wars caused by others. Bevin found it necessary to ask the Foreign Office for a suggested reply, which he passed on. This made the standard point that because Hitler could no longer be trusted he had to be fought. The point about the war being for Capitalist interests was ignored. This is not surprising; Bevin was hardly going to change his outlook at the behest of the odd critic. What is interesting is that there was no sign of this cri de coeur, from the horse's mouth as it were, being incorporated into his picture of public opinion, even as an indication of bad morale and conditions. For Bevin, as for Churchill, winning the war was the first priority, and the important avenues to the public were via the factory workers producing the arms. These could be rallied in personal contacts. Many of the letters he received, indeed, have 'Junk' scrawled across the top. Like his Conservative colleagues, Bevin felt he knew what the country was feeling, and like them he had his personal ways of divining it.¹ Who did not?

1 Ernest Bevin Papers, Box 45, letter of July 1940. For Bevin's basic priorities, see A. Bullock: The Life and Times of Ernest Bevin, Vol.II, Minister of Labour 1940-5 (London, Heinemann, 1967) pp. 3, 38-40.

Images of Public Opinion:

Despite the intrinsic difficulties of deciphering public views, and despite their lack of sophistication in handling them, decision-makers continued to see public opinion as a political force with a real, independent identity. This is not to say that the notion of public opinion was not exploited. As one might expect, it was a dialectical stock-in-trade, being used to excuse or claim support for almost any conceivable position, many of them contradictory. At various times during this period, opinion was said to favour 'international co-operation', rearmament, the League of Nations, revenge on the Germans, a conference of Dominion leaders, and non-Departmental Ministers in the War Cabinet, and to be against the USSR and Anglo-French Union.¹ These are only a few examples from the mountain of supposition that existed at Westminster. On the other hand, beneath the multifarious interpretations of particular public views, there were certain consistencies.

Chief among these was the treating of opinion as if it were animate, with a single heart, soul, and mind. This was something of a contradiction in the light of the tendency outlined above, but it does not seem to have caused any mental 'dissonance'. For neither approach required much introspection.

It was natural in a universal suffrage society for everyone to regard the public as a central political actor, but one which was

1 See, respectively: CAB 65/2, WM 105(39) 6 December 1939; CAB 27/624 FP(36)32, 14 November 1938 and FP(36)41, 10 April 1939; CAB 21/551; Cherwell Papers, 11 OFF.11.1-2, secret note of 15 October 1940; PREM 4/43A-12; CAB 65/5, WM 7(40) 9 January 1940; Hankey Papers 4/32, Hankey to Halifax, 22 June 1940.

dumb and relied on translators. And politicians even more than the rest felt professionally qualified for such a task. Inskip was demoted in 1939 because his 'position...in the country', (as well as the Press and Germans) had 'gone back lately', and Hankey told a friend at about the same time that 'public opinion here is aroused'.¹ Generalisation easily slipped into the assumption that the British people responded almost organically to any given response, like the collective swoops of migrating birds.

This approach accounts for the treatment of morale during the war; at the highest political level the cautious distinctions made by Ministry of Information reporters tended to get forgotten in talk of morale going 'up' or 'down' as if it were the temperature of a single patient.² Likewise, R.A. Butler could write that 'any slowness or inefficiency in the Government is quickly jumped on by public opinion' and in 1941 it could be said in Cabinet that 'We were committed to restoring the independence of Ethiopia. Any hesitation in this matter would not be tolerated by public opinion in this country...'.³ But perhaps the most classic instance of rationalisation was provided by Churchill, who in this case seems to have taken a

1 Inskip Diary, II, 17 Jan. 1939; record of conversation with the P.M.

2 E.g. contrast Hoare's Diary note of 15 Sept. 1939; 'Danger of slump in the country's morale,' with his letter to Lothian of 7 October 'the morale of the country as a whole is good'. Templewood Papers, XI:2, XI:5.

3 Templewood Papers, XIII:17, Butler to Hoare, 20 July 1940; CAB 65/17, WM9(41), 23 January 1941.

pantheistic view of public opinion. He said that:

'...if Eire had been willing to come into war, he thought that public opinion might well have brought about a united Ireland; but that if Eire insisted on retaining her neutrality, public opinion would be most strongly opposed to putting any constraint¹ upon Northern Ireland to join in a united Ireland'.

The second component of the basic image of public opinion was the continual need felt to justify actions to the public. Far from being cynical realists glad to exploit the powers given them by a gullible populace, decision-makers showed a striking concern for the image presented by their own behaviour, even when there was no obvious compelling reason to do so. In doing so, a wider reference group than just domestic opinion was at stake. 'World opinion', comprising the reactions of other states and commentators over the whole diplomatic network, became part of home opinion for such issues as that of the possible recall of Neville Henderson from Berlin, in March 1939, which Halifax was against because 'although it was easy to recall an Ambassador, it was not easy to find reasons to justify his return'. Fear of close questioning was a deterrent in itself. Three days later Halifax stressed 'the undesirability of leaving public opinion in any doubt as to our attitude to Germany's action' (the invasion of Czechoslovakia).² That it was not enough to know a fact, or to believe a policy to be correct, is even more clearly illustrated by Samuel Hoare's argument in October 1939 that Hitler should be asked to clarify his peace proposals further, so

1 CAB 65/9, WM 298(40) 28 November 1940.

2 CAB 23/98, 15 & 18 March 1939, CMs 11 & 12 (39).

that even if there were nothing in them 'we shall prove to this country and the world the emptiness of his words'.¹ For British politicians reputation was a basic and indivisible resource, home and abroad.

At times this self-consciousness became almost agonising. When Mussolini invaded Albania, Britain did nothing. In Cabinet Sir John Simon urged that 'we should not appear to condone aggression while, at the same time, we should not indulge in such strong rebukes as to make ourselves appear in a weak position'.² The reason for being concerned to such a great extent with cosmetics was partly that of international image, but it was also to do with inbred apprehensiveness about domestic reaction against policies that could not easily be explained in terms of prevailing values. As a process, this is the familiar phenomenon of 'anticipated reactions', whereby influence is exerted by A not through any action of his own but through B taking into account A's views when deciding on his own action. In this context, however, decision-makers were engaged in a particularly speculative exercise when anticipating public views. Chamberlain himself was on occasions so concerned not to upset opinion as to venture strikingly specific predictions. Hence in

1 Templewood Papers, XI:5, Hoare-Lothian 7 October 1939.

2 CAB 23/98, 8 April 1939, 'Notes of a Conference of Ministers'; (My italics).

May 1939:

'...public opinion would be shocked if German demands in regard to Danzig were completely conceded without any attempt at proper negotiation. Equally, public opinion would be disturbed, and rightly so, if we left it entirely in Poland's¹ power to involve us in a major war.'

Public rows and storms of criticisms may have involved few definite sanctions, but they were clearly disliked and to be avoided if at all possible.² Yet there was also the question, intimately bound up with that of avoiding argument, of living up to the democratic values which a British Government was supposed to espouse and which Ministers had undoubtedly internalised and made part of their self-image. Hence it was important in 1941 when the Cabinet banned the Daily Worker, not to appear ideologically biased; this would totally discredit the Cabinet's already shaky claims to be supporting free speech:

'The Prime Minister emphasised the importance of acting in a way which would convince public opinion that we were meting out evenhanded justice to those who fomented opposition to the successful prosecution³ of the war, whether Fascists or Communists'.

If 'public opinion' did not feel that 'even-handed justice' was being done in accordance with traditions of impartiality, then this would not only cause trouble, but it might undermine Minister s' confidence in their own adherence to the values for which they saw themselves fighting.

1 CAB 23/99, CM 26(39) 3 May 1939.

2 Examples are to be found in CAB 23/99, CM 28(39), 17 May 1939, and CAB 65/8, WM 194(40) 5 July 1940.

3 CAB 65/21, WM 5(41), 13 January 1941.

Public opinion was seen as a constraint, therefore, but only in a loose sense. Although decision-makers often referred to being subject to the will of the nation, they kept discussion at this high level of generality. It is difficult to see which if any specific components of 'the country' they were wary of. To the extent that the public did constrain the Government, at least half of its effect came from Ministers' self-denying ordinances, themselves as much the product of basic belief-systems as of physical pressures and hard evidence. This is nicely illustrated by a remark of Chamberlain's about 'the art of statesmanship' lying in accurate timing. He based this generalisation on the decision to start conscription, since there 'I believe we hit on the right moment when public opinion was ripe for the move...and when the foreigners would not have been satisfied to wait for it much longer'.¹ The Prime Minister obviously felt that he had gauged a changing climate of opinion to the minute, but why that opinion (as opposed to circumstances in general) should have been deemed unripe for 'education' say six months before remains mysterious. His own view notwithstanding, the Prime Minister allowed himself considerable latitude for interpretation.

The last important characteristic of the images of public opinion held by protagonists was that which might be termed the paternalist view. As with any ruling group in an industrialised society, even those apparently totalitarian, Ministers and their officials recognized that foreign policy could not ignore the needs of mass society outside

1 Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1096. Letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 29 April 1939.

the world of professional diplomacy. They held it as an article of faith that the public would, in the last analysis, insist on its interests being looked after. But this strategical point made, decision-makers felt both free and obliged to exert positive leadership over policy by defining the best interests of the people overall. Halifax once distinguished between American ultra-sensitivity to every 'ripple' of public opinion, and Britain, where that feeling existed but 'is corrected by a considerable force of tradition on the other side, and also by the different position held by our executive'. He harked back nostalgically to Burke's message to the electors of Bristol, 'which still luckily influences our thought in considerable degree'.¹ Perhaps aloofness was a requirement in appointees to the Washington Embassy. Lord Lothian, no Tory after all, was Ambassador-elect when he subscribed to the conventional wisdom that:

'Public opinion is a vacillating thing...The essential thing is to get a Government which can govern long after the shifting currents₂ of the period of a general election have changed'.

If the public's interests were seen as entering the policy process only in the most general way, the concomitant belief was that society needed to be educated into giving adequate support to the measures conceived by its Government as best serving an aggregated 'national interest'. Few doubts existed as to either the necessity

1 Halifax Papers, A4:410:4:15, Halifax to Anthony Eden, 4 Feb. 1941.

2 Lothian Papers, Vol.372, Lothian to Earl Grey, 6 March 1939.

or practicality of such an approach.¹ Even if the public did not agree with a given policy, they were likely to be brought round in the end to see their own self-interest. There is an interesting parallel here with the Marxist doctrine of false-consciousness. In the contrasting tradition of John Stuart Mill, British policy-makers have tended to attribute to themselves the same qualities of foresight and political understanding needed to operate democracy that Leninists annexed for the Communist Party to a far greater degree.

How can this be squared with our previous argument about the public constituting a broad constraint on Government actions, albeit one operating largely through anticipated reactions? The answer lies to an extent in the haziness of the constraint, which was not comparable to the practical day-to-day pressures of financial difficulties, or the actions of foreign governments. Partly according to their perceptions, and partly due to the extreme intermittence of passionate criticism from press, Parliament or the crowd, public opinion was not always brought into sharp focus and only rarely into close-up. Another part of the explanation, however, lies in the distinction implicitly made by practitioners between the long and short term roles of public opinion. In the long-term the public needed to be 'prepared' for major changes of outlook or policy, to be 'encouraged' to face difficulties, and to be 'guided' through the complexities of international relations by those professionally responsible. In the short-term this process might prove to have

1 Hankey Papers, 4/33, Hankey to Chatfield, 19 March 1941,....'so convinced am I as to the need of educating public opinion'...

failed, leaving a public that became hostile because it did not understand the Government's position. Further, the twists and turns of events would from time to time inevitably expose the weak points in however carefully nurtured a relationship between politicians and the people. The unexpected had always to be allowed for, and this goes some way to account for the degree to which the public remained perennially in the minds of those at the centre, who felt that the political system always had the capacity to upset their best-laid plans, even if it did not do so all that often.

It is not inconsistent, therefore, to argue that public opinion was seen at once as a constraint and as needing education. For one thing the noise of disagreement tended to reinforce the feeling of restriction without necessarily living up to it. For another, the issue often appeared to decision-makers simply to revolve around bolstering the 'confidence' of the public, not changing their opinion.¹ 'Confidence' was as powerful and elusive a concept then as it is today in the field of international finance. It was among the reasons for Admiral Chatfield being brought into the Government in January 1939, and a major factor in the calling of a special conference of Ministers during the following summer recess.² It was just beneath the surface in October 1939, over the important

1 Labour leaders as much as Conservative held this view, although at times with different ends in mind. They were keen for instance, to start getting people 'informed' as to the importance of post-war changes. See for a good example, CAB 117/208, A. Greenwood to Duff Cooper, 19 March 1941.

2 Inskip Papers, Diary, Vol.2, 17 January 1939; CAB 23/100, CM39(39), 26 July 1939.

issue of war aims, when the Government had no wish for the public discussion of such matters, and so were embarrassed by Hitler's openly-made peace offer. The Home Policy Committee was concerned:

'as to the manner in which Herr Hitler's speech should be presented to the British public. The latter might well be bewildered if any specious offer which Herr Hitler included in his speech were allowed to appear in a favourable light, while nothing was published simultaneously by¹ way of semi-official British comment'.

As the war developed, a quasi-military ethos took hold of political decision-making, and efforts were made to keep out of public discussion the proposals for mediation made by both Mussolini and Roosevelt. The reasons were clear enough - the fear that 'resolute' morale might be shaken.² References were frequent to Churchill's 'hold' over opinion, as if without his uniquely powerful influence, it might have wavered and split - as it might have done.³ But the home population were not troops, and in this attitude was the implicit admission that under war conditions democracy was taking second place to leadership even on the biggest issue of all, whether or not to compromise in the face of increasingly heavy military odds. At stake, it appeared, was solely the question of the public's nerve, not the question of eliciting views on future strategy.

1 CAB 65/1, WM 39(3), 6 October 1939.

2 See PREM I/443, Chamberlain to Lord Brocket, 2 February 1940, where the Prime Minister disagreed with Brocket's views that the public might want peace: 'On the whole I think the public confidence has been extraordinarily well-maintained'.

3 Halifax Papers, A4.410.4:5, Hankey to Halifax 1 May 1941 & Hankey Papers 4/33, Hankey to Hoare, 11 September 1941; Templewood Papers, XIII:2, W.P. Crozier-Hoare, 19 March 1941.

In terms of the images held in Westminster and Whitehall of the rest of the nation, it remains only to outline how the public's actual views on the course of events in this period were seen. Although many qualifications can be made to the bald generalisation, it would not be too far from the truth to say that the inner circle believed the people to be generally and positively behind them right through the years which immediately followed Munich.¹ In brief, it was thought that the public was greatly relieved to be at peace after the crisis of 1938, became rather confused during the next six months of uncertainty, but after the March invasion of Prague reversed their position, coming to rank resistance to aggression above the avoidance of war.² In the next period, until 3 September, the people were seen as perhaps not always realising the full gravity of the situation, but nevertheless closing ranks behind the Government so that the ultimatum to Germany was fully accepted by the community.³ Thereafter, although 'a small section' of society showed itself to be pacifist, the great majority were said to have continued their support for the war, and indeed, to have been discontented with the lack of aggression shown in the Phoney War. Even the defeats and suffering of 1940-1, it was believed, had not eroded this support, although as we saw in the case of 'morale' the Government was taking no chances and kept up a barrage

1 This generalisation applies to the Cabinet and their immediate senior advisers. Officials lower down, particularly in the Ministry of Information during war-time, sometimes made more qualified judgements.

2 See CAB 23/98, CM 12(39), 18 March 1939; Templewood Papers, X:6 - the 'Golden Age' speech; Halifax Papers, A4.410.12:1.

3 Chamberlain Papers, NC18/1/1092-1198, Letter to Ida Chamberlain, 23 July 1939; CAB 23/99, CM30(39) 24 May 1939.

of home propaganda.¹

It will be noted that the view held of the development of the public's views on peace and war bore a remarkable resemblance to decision-makers' own, as revealed in their policies. A more detailed look at the record would reveal occasional doubts and fears that the situation in 'the country' might not be quite as it seemed, but ultimately there was confidence that rallying cries for national unity would do their work. To see if this confidence had any foundation, it is important to take time off from analysing how public opinion was perceived, to look at what evidence there is of the public's actual views.

The Substance of Public Opinion:

It is still difficult with modern sampling techniques to be sure what public opinion is even on concrete issues. Thirty-five years ago, when opinion polls were just beginning, the problems of accuracy and conceptualisation were far greater.² On the other hand there do survive several different sources of 'objective' opinion, which enable cross-checking and therefore tentative generalisation.

The British Institute of Public Opinion (BIPO) published regular Gallup polls from 1937, some of which were printed in the News Chronicle. Although their accuracy cannot be taken for granted -

1 Many examples can be found of the belief in strong unity. See Cherwell Papers, OFF:1.1, Lindemann's Minute of 2 February 1940, and PREM 4/83-1A, Bevin Churchill, 3 June 1941.

2 On the wider difficulties facing the scholar see D.G. Boyce: 'Public Opinion and Historians', History, Vol. 63, No.208 (June 1978), pp.214-28.

they reported in January 1945 that only 17% named a Labour leader when asked whom they wished to see leading the post-war Government - they did ask some standard questions over longish periods.¹ For example, to inquiry about their satisfaction with Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister, an average of c. 52% of people expressed satisfaction between October 1938 and July 1939, 40% being dissatisfied, and nearly 8% Don't Knows.² In the first months of the war Chamberlain's support rose to 66%, but tapered back to 57% by March 1940. In May, the month of the Parliamentary crisis and violent press criticism, it fell dramatically to 33%. For Churchill, as Prime Minister of the National Government, the key figures between July 1940 and June 1941 were 88% in favour, 7% against, and 5% Don't Know. When looked at together it is not easy to see what these figures signify, more than the levels of support that one might predict for a Party Prime Minister on the one hand, and a new all-Party leader on the other. Yet that Chamberlain did command a clear majority in the polls in 1939, while in the fourth year of the Government, does go some way towards backing up his own picture of enjoying public approval, while the high percentages obtained by Churchill rule out suggestions that many people actively wanted peace after the Fall of France.

Nevertheless the figures available are undifferentiated and tell us little about attitudes to specific policies. There is little choice

1 The source for the following data comes from H. Cantril (Ed.): Public Opinion 1935-46, (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1951), especially pp. 96, 106, 273-9 & 365-9.

2 Ibid: These figures have been calculated by integrating those given for the 'Don't Knows', with the positive answers, which previously were expressed as a break-down of 100%. The figures for February 1939 have been excluded altogether as they seem to be anomalous, differing by some 30 points from the months before and after.

in being asked to be 'in favour of' a Prime Minister or not. This problem is heightened by certain ambiguities hinted at in the B.I.P.O. data. For example, while 52% were satisfied with Chamberlain (and presumably with his foreign policy), 57.5% had no thought at all in December 1938 of volunteering for some kind of National Service under the Register System. Moreover, although in April 1939 nearly three-quarters of respondents favoured the policy of Guarantees, at the same time (i.e. before the Cabinet decision of 24 May) 87% wanted an alliance with the Soviet Union, following a similar figure for March, when the Government had been privately engaged in side-stepping the USSR so as to soothe Poland. Furthermore the polls also indicated (1) that Chamberlain was wrong in thinking the public supported his refusal to take Churchill into the Cabinet, and (2) that only a minority would have opposed an all-party Government led by Eden.¹

Mass Observation (M.O.) also used formal statistical methods, but its main purpose was to lend meaning to the figures by extensive grass-roots reporting. Its archives, a memorial to the imagination of Tom Harrison, contain material that cannot be discounted by any student of modern British society, even if the impressionistic methods used to obtain data require cautious interpretation.² For our purposes the M.O. evidence tends to qualify significantly the simplistic pictures of public opinion held by contemporary politicians

1 Ibid;

2 Available at the University of Sussex, and used for various MO publications from 1937 onwards.

and romantics thereafter. For one thing, it is clear that in the first years of the war there did not always exist the united, resilient spirit so often claimed. While the number opposed to the war never got much above 10% (and this is not so small a figure when one considers the interest of those questioned in giving 'safe' answers), positive enthusiasm was sometimes lacking. A report of February 1941 summarised the situation by saying that:

'Ordinary people feel that they are caught up in a process of war which is largely beyond their understanding and entirely beyond their control'.¹

And: 'Few people contemplate defeat. But few can visualise victory'.

This relative detachment from the siege mentality of the Cabinet is also strikingly illustrated by the fact that although the Government had stated the war would last at least three years - and it was difficult logically to see how it could be won even in that time - in November 1939 only 20% had expected a contest of this duration.²

Such remoteness from realities is partly explained by sheer lack of information about and interest in current affairs. In August 1938, as the Czech crisis built up, a survey found that only about a quarter of people felt any increasing interest in the crisis.³ This helps to make sense of a Mass Observation table covering 1940-1 which shows a steady and extraordinary (considering subsequent images of 1940) rise in the proportion of those saying they were not following the news and were not interested, from 9% in June, through 22% in October

1 MO File 568.

2 MO files 98 and 688, and typed report 15A. 19% thought the war would last three years or more; 1% thought it would last forever, 42% less than 2 years, and the rest either didn't know or didn't care.

3 C. Madge and T. Harrison: Britain by Mass Observation, (London, Penguin Special, 1939), p.26.

to a peak of 39% in February 1941.¹ Perhaps such figures also reflect a determination simply not to consider the unpleasant fates that seemed quite possible in 1940, and which most people were impotent to prevent. The Newsreels notwithstanding, many of Britain's 40 million adults were more concerned with their own daily parochialisms than with rallying to the flag, and they left politics and the war to be settled by those whose profession it was.²

Other important insights provided by Mass Observation concern the effects of bombing. Until the Blitz, MO argued that it was broadly possible to generalise about a fairly high morale, subject to the points made above and to the vagueness of the concept itself. But once the Blitz began, depression and shaken nerves appeared in many centres, contrary to Ministerial beliefs, which continued to assume an unwavering national spirit.³ Failure to go much beyond the stereotypes of courage and unity went hand in hand with a lack of differentiation among the regions of the country. MO evidence is convincing on the shaken morale that at times was to be found in at least Portsmouth, Plymouth, Coventry, Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol, and the East End, and Harrisson suggests that if the Germans had continued with effective raids, unrest might have become

1 MO File 568.

2 It should be remembered in this context that in the six general elections between 1922-35, an average of 26 in every 100 eligible adults did not vote. Figures from D. Butler & J. Freeman: British Political Facts, 1900-68, pp.142-3.

3 Ibid; see also T. Harrisson: Living Through the Blitz, (London, Collins, 1976), especially pp.280-92, 196, 213; also W. Rankin: 'What Dunkirk Spirit?', in New Society, 15 November 1975, pp. 396-8. Other historical evidence, however, suggests that even severe bombing does not crack morale easily. C. Webster and N. Frankland: The Strategic Air offensive against Germany 1939-45, Vol. III, (London, HMSO 1961) pp. 302-3.

undisguisable. Much local government was both inefficient and demoralised, and ordinary people were too busy trying to survive the consequences to feel much sense of an ennobling patriotism.

The Ministry of Information used Mass Observation, but they also had their own Home Intelligence Unit. The latter's reports complemented the findings of M.O. in that they gave a detailed and not always rosy picture of morale. However they do not seem to have filtered well enough through to decision-makers at the top to improve the realism of their outlook on public opinion. In one Cabinet meeting, just before Eden actually raised the question of a 'not very encouraging' report on 'the state of public opinion', Churchill can be found asserting that the whole of opinion was 'at present united and flexible'.¹ If opposing perceptions were compartmentalised even in face-to-face discussion, it is not surprising that for most Ministers their optimistic, generalised images of morale survived any mere factual quibbles intact. There were mixed feelings in principle about the value of surveys in any case, and Churchill's deep scepticism did not help them to be taken seriously.²

Foreign Policy, Public Opinion, and Representative Government:

By juxtaposing political perceptions of public opinion with more

1 E.g. INF I/846, and CAB 65/7, WM 168(40), 16 July 1940; Confidential Annex, in CAB 65/13.

2 PREM 4/40-10, also PREM 4/66-2, Churchill-Layton, July 1943.

independent evidence, we have inevitably pointed to a form of 'reality-gap', to the way in which decision-makers held false or unsophisticated ideas about the public for whom they were acting. But it has not been the intention to argue that during the years under review the public held sharply different views from a Government that nevertheless imposed its own policies upon them. A more subtle point is at stake, namely that while it was intrinsically difficult for anyone to determine what public opinion wants, decision-makers continued as a matter of course to assume direct knowledge, to make over-simplifications about society at large, to conduct relatively narrow policy debates on the basis of these assumptions, and to sustain a theory of living democratic politics with their help.

Clearly the general public were not at odds with the government over the issue of the war. When asked, although the evidence is scanty and the answers somewhat ambiguous, they indicated approval of the general thrust of British foreign policy during this time. There were no significant demonstrations or episodes of non-cooperation, either in 1939 or once the war was under way. It is often assumed, however, that the public held their views with the same strength and for the same reasons as decision-makers. At times perhaps, an official lead would be followed, but at others Government would have to take notice of the country's feeling and adjust policy accordingly. It is this image of the public as an

independent actor that is contested here.¹ Although the issues of war and peace rebounded directly onto the lives of everyone, ordinary people did not at this point have much control, either actual or potential, over them. Rather, they were highly susceptible to suggestion and leadership. To those formally responsible for foreign policy, 'public opinion' was only a hazy outline on a large canvas; detail and colouring awaited the artist and his assistants.

For, as we have seen, politicians and their advisers enjoyed considerable freedom to decide who represented/constituted public opinion, and to focus on some opinions rather than others. The general public would not or could not provide any clear inputs into policy-making. As we know from modern surveys of British and American society, the average citizen tends to care little about politics, be especially apathetic about foreign policy, and be strikingly ill-informed about issues remote from his own immediate environment.² The evidence from this case-study supports such hypotheses, although the perspective is of course that of policy analysis rather than mass sociology. In the late 1930's decision-makers tended towards generalisation, confusion and contradiction about public attitudes, and it would be surprising to find substantial differences in other periods. Their very image of public opinion as a

1 Typified by the Daily Telegraph's first leader of 15 July 1940: 'Mr. Churchill spoke for a people united in iron resolution when he declared that he would rather see London laid in ruin and ashes than suffer the tyranny of Hitler to prevail'.

2 'Voting and Foreign Policy' by Warren E. Miller, in J.N. Rosenau (Ed.): The Domestic Sources of Foreign Policy, (New York, The Free Press, 1967); D. Butler and D. Stokes: Political Change in Britain, pp.24-7 & 343-4.

unitary force, was itself a sign of how little the difficulties of deciphering and aggregating mass views were appreciated.

On top of this partial ability to choose their own public opinion, there were three principal powers exercised by those responsible for public policy. One was the freedom to define the nature of threats to the national interest; that first Hitler's 'untrustworthiness' and, eventually the nature of Nazism in Germany, were deemed sufficient dangers to require contesting, emerged imperceptibly from inner councils with little explicit public discussion of the criteria for determining a threat to British interests. The second power was that of initiatives: The crucial guarantees policy, its implementation, and the decision to fight on in a desperate military situation in 1940, were all the result of unilateral executive moves. The third main power was that of organisation and control. Both in peace and war, although to different degrees, there were ways in which decision-makers could significantly affect the agenda of public debate. Chief among them was simply the restriction of their own discussions to a certain range of options, which thereby achieved the further weight of 'feasibility' in the eyes of professional commentators seeking to engage the Government in dialogue. Some options - like waiting until Hitler attacked Western Europe before going to war with him, or accepting mediation in May-June 1940 - were excluded either because the public would not 'stand' for them, or without reference to public wants at all. Others, like the development of a debate on

war aims, were stigmatised as being against the public's own interests at the time.¹ Either way society at large played little part, except to the extent that informed opinion had a special access under the banner of representing the general public. Because the vast majority did and said nothing politically, they only found their way into the policy process by indirect, subterranean, routes.

Nevertheless the inference should not be that public opinion was a non-existent factor in foreign policy-making. Rather, it operated through a real but non-tangible presence in the minds of decision-makers. In this crucial sense, public opinion can be seen as a 'notional constraint'. For there is no reason to suppose that there was anything conscious or cynical about the way in which their imagination played with the concept of public opinion. On the contrary it was central to the ideology of all British politicians at this time to see themselves as agents of a mature democratic society, whose modernization had brought about a sovereign House of Commons elected by universal suffrage to meet the requirements of the new interdependence between social classes. But - in this interpretation of history - despite the consequent changed balance of class power, a fundamental consensus remained on institutions, liberties, and ultimate goals. Thus Conservatives preached Tory Democracy and Labour (despite their contempt for Ramsay MacDonald) fully accepted the supremacy of Parliament and the need for social stability.²

1 CAB 21/1583, Churchill-Bridges, 4 Jan. 1941; PREM 4/100-2, Churchill-R.R. Stokes, 23 July 1940.

2 See CAB 21/1581, for example, containing early draft statements on War Aims; particularly interesting is WA(40)10, Halifax's own memo, in which he talks of the war already having 'broken down many old barriers and prejudices' and the need 'to overhaul our economic and social practice', 25 November 1940.

It is against this background that foreign policy should be seen. Despite special characteristics, it was not isolated from the main stream of British politics. Those who made foreign policy felt genuinely and often strongly that their decisions would be neither legitimate nor implementable without the basic support of the people. This was in the familiar tradition of the need for national unity against the outside world, but it was also a special legacy of the pain and guilt surrounding memories of the Great War.¹ As a result they reflected frequently on how the nation would react to changes in circumstances, and flitted erratically from one apparent indicator to another in the search for the real voice of opinion. The paradox of the public's apparent impotence yet regular appearance in the Cabinet Minutes can therefore be explained in terms of decision-makers' obsession with the idea of public opinion rather than with the details of popular behaviour. Ministers acted under the anticipation of a constraint that was at least partly dependent upon their own perceptions.

Consequently neither the 'democratic' nor the 'manipulative' models of foreign policy and public opinion turn out to be very helpful. The one derives from politicians' own rhetoric and self-image, and the other overlooks the importance of this same self-image in favouring policies that enjoyed an apparent consensus, or at least

1 The importance of this factor is brought out by M. Gilbert: The Roots of Appeasement (London, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966) especially pp.20-31. Chamberlain was genuinely in horror of war. Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1163, letter to Hilda Chamberlain, 29 June 1940, can stand for many examples.

did not disrupt continuity too severely. Decision-makers may have rationalised their own wants by referring to public opinion, but they did so automatically, and thereby helped to perpetuate a political culture in which the nostrums of representation, responsibility, and democracy were prominent, if not altogether dominant. This culture in its turn had profound effects on the substance of foreign policy because it embodied the values that, however ill-defined, were the source of the more specific images of Britain's needs and 'roles'. In their own way, both the slowness of initial rearmament, and the eventual implacable hostility to Nazism, were as closely tied to the main ideas of British domestic politics, as to the imperatives of international relations.

For want of a better description, British foreign policy was made therefore in an elitist system, but one that was operated with 'open' values. Unfortunately, this did not in itself ensure that the voices or interests of ordinary citizens were incorporated in actual decisions. It can indeed be argued that such a political system strengthens the power of the centre, through the very process of consensus and legitimation. As a sequel to the debate on pluralism and 'community power', Steven Lukes has argued effectively for a third dimension in our analysis of decision-making, beyond those of either formal decisions, or non-decisions.¹ He suggests that the

1 S. Lukes: Power: A Radical View, (London, Macmillan, 1974). Lukes is developing the debate most associated with Robert Dahl, Peter Bachrach, and Morton Baratz; see Part I of P. Bachrach and M. Baratz: Power and Poverty, (New York, OUP, 1970), pp.3-63.

origins of policy can only be fully understood if seen in terms of the overall values and structures of political society. These are crucial because they determine not only the salience of certain issues at certain times but also which options or debates will be consistently excluded from the arena of legitimate political conflict. It is also important to remember, Lukes insists, that simply because people do not perceive their interest in a subject (say foreign policy) or voice their opinion on it, this does not mean they are not crucially affected by it. The political milieu in which they live may simply have inhibited their understanding of the importance of major questions. Lukes cites Crenson's study of the long-term suppression of the pollution issues in Gary, Indiana, as a case in point, of how 'the existing order of things' develops its own momentum.¹

Some obvious objections to Lukes also affect the argument of this chapter. It is easy to beg the question of 'political culture'. Where does it come from, and whose initiatives are most important in leading to change in basic values? Does consensus imply control of the 'agenda' of politics by an elite or simply a dispersion of power? These questions are left open here, since the basic argument does not depend on answers to them. It is the author's feeling

¹ Matthew A. Crenson: The Un-Politics of Air Pollution: A Study of Non-Decision-Making in the Cities (Baltimore and London, The John Hopkins Press, 1971).

that British political culture is profoundly influenced by the accretions of a historical experience that is heavy with continuity, and that decision-makers are even more deeply influenced by this experience than are the rest of society.¹ But whether this is true tout court, or whether the values vested in tradition amounted to a 'mobilization of bias' because they coincided with the interests of a ruling class, the centrality of political culture in the policy process remains the same. Foreign policy no less than other issue-areas should be seen as determined in part by values prevalent among decision-makers about history, international politics, and the character of domestic society. That conceptions of public opinion have been particularly dependent on these broader images, lends a special meaning to the metaphor of the 'concentric circles' of decision-making. Instead of interpreting public opinion as an outer-most circle, holding the ring within policy choices must fall, it may be more appropriate to see the mass public as washed over by the ripples of government action, their interests defined from the centre through a haze of mediating factors, and possessing few means by which to turn the tide. Chamberlain said: 'I do not trouble over criticisms which do not affect my judgement of what is right',² but who did affect high-level judgements of 'what is right' remains problematical.

1 An argument powerfully displayed with reference to the USA in E. May: 'Lessons of the Past: The Use and Misuse of History in American Foreign Policy', (New York, Oxford University Press, 1973).

2 Chamberlain Papers, NC 18/1/1071-91, Letter to Ida Chamberlain 12 March 1939.

Chapter V: PARTICIPATION AT THREE LEVELS: SOME CONCLUSIONS

This case-study has not thrown up a theory of decision-making for others to argue over or apply to different periods. What it has attempted is a square-on examination of the process by which foreign policy decisions came to be made. Britain's progress towards the Second World War has been increasingly well-documented, but the mass of new material has hardly been used by those working explicitly from a decision-making perspective. It is in the formulation of policies that the forces of world politics, of domestic pressure, of personality, of organisational structure and of logical argument all come together,¹ interact and are transmogrified into the actions (or sometimes inactions) of states. If this complex of human and historical factors is to be made sense of at all, some responsibility has to be accepted for first distinguishing the various levels of causation at work, and then weighing causes against each other. This is a Sisyphean task but one, it is hoped, that the preceding analysis has shown to be worthwhile.

Even within the short span of two years or so, there have been too many questions to raise, let alone answer, about the making of British foreign policy. Certain conclusions of more than narrow application do nonetheless suggest themselves. Of these the most glaring is the inapplicability of explanations of decision-making derived from a framework of power-politics. Few modern writers consciously set out to

1 Expressed diagrammatically in D. Vital: The Making of British Foreign Policy (Endpaper).

argue that the search for and possession of power explains the most important aspects of politics in any area.¹ More common however, is the pervasiveness of specific assumptions that owe their origins ultimately, if unconsciously to the power paradigm. It has been usual in discussions of Neville Chamberlain's responsibility for appeasement and its abandonment to talk of the 'Chamberlain Cabinet' or 'the inner group', with the clear implication that the Prime Minister with perhaps his closest colleagues controlled the Cabinet to the extent of being able to follow their own preferences even in the face of doubt or dissent. Alternatively the Government can be seen as a group of like-minded men pursuing a strategy with solidarity and equal conviction. Either way, the criterion of judgement is that of control over decisions, and the outcome is a generalisation about the locus of power.

The first half of the present study did not find such an approach helpful. Nearer to the complicated truth, it seems, is an explanation that allows for variety in the exercise of influence within Cabinet. While the Prime Minister clearly enjoyed major advantages by virtue of his position, these were not always available, and nor did he always seek to use them. Co-operation between colleagues involved in stressful and multi-faceted decisions was not lightly to be disregarded, as the relative unwillingness of Ministers, for their part, to hold the Prime Minister strictly accountable, also testifies. Close inspection of

1 Both E.H. Carr: The Twenty Years Crisis (London, Macmillan, 1939) and George Modelski: A Theory of Foreign Policy (London, Pall Mall, 1962) take power as their starting-point in different ways, but treat it with sophistication.

discussion in Cabinet, treated as a small group with its own psychological and organisational dynamics, reveals that at times the foreign policy 'executive' provided a powerful, even irresistible, lead, while at others ministers as a whole were able to participate in equally important decisions. Thus simple generalisations about who 'ran' British foreign policy become invalid. The possession of sanctions, whether institutional or behavioural, did not by itself determine the outcome of Cabinet discussions.

The widening of the analysis to include outside critics did not substantially rehabilitate a power-based approach to decision-making. Although the press - taken as an exemplar of an organised group with professional interests in official policy - did command certain resources of use to the Government, it can hardly be seen as a coercive force. The worlds of Whitehall and Fleet Street were so closely inter-connected as to create a relationship that was fundamentally stable and harmonious. Disputes were perpetual and often acrid but rarely coalesced to the extent of breeding a sense of two sides with incompatible interests. On foreign affairs at least, because the contents of newspapers were intimately tied up with inter-state relations and with discussion inside the machinery of government, it is difficult to conceptualise the press as an outside group with influence in proportion to the battalions it could command. More appropriate is an expanded, if looser, view of the decision-making process to include the press within the boundaries of the system. The formulation of foreign policy can be pictured as less the preserve of a few senior ministers and associated officials than a continuing turning-over of ideas among the informed and articulate,

a group that was not synonymous with formal office-holders. Although the latter were clearly on far more than equal terms with commentators, particularly on the taking of diplomatic initiatives (this is where the metaphor of concentric circles is appropriate) opinions were divided far more across the dividing-lines than between them. On the issues of the Soviet alliance in 1939, and the presence of 'guilty men' in the Cabinet after May 1940,¹ differences of view within the Government ran parallel to those in the press. It is, therefore, almost meaningless to talk of either side as a unitary actor pressurising or out-manoeuving the other. Power is difficult to pin down.

The outermost circle of political activity - public opinion - cannot sensibly be interpreted at all in terms of restraints, sanctions and the like, despite the frequent attempts to do so. The views of the mass public on foreign policy, as received in the inner circle, were barely decipherable, often being confused with the channels by which they were conveyed to the centre. Systematic efforts to discover popular feelings were rare, and the assumptions made about them large. Vox populi was mute, even disinterested, on the most major issues of the day. Popular moods were not a tangible constraint on foreign policy in Britain.

1 Leo Amery probably sought Chamberlain's removal, and Dalton was unsympathetic, although thinking Chamberlain less dangerous in the Government than out of it. Chamberlain Papers, NC18/1/1162 letter to Ida Chamberlain 21 June 1940; Dalton Papers, Diary Vol.22 18 June 1940.

The apparent corollary, however, that decision-makers were free to manipulate the people to suit their own, pre-determined, goals, is also wide of the mark. The self-image of those who made British foreign policy in the late 1930's was that of committed democrats, willingly harnessed by public attitudes and in any case acting on the criterion of the needs of the whole population. In particular the grim slaughter of the previous generation was a memory fresh in the mind. The idea of public opinion acted, therefore, as a natural lode-star (and inhibition) for the Chamberlain Administration. It also pervaded the regime of Churchill who in his different way was also convinced that he embodied the will of the people. If, in the final analysis, the vagueness of the concept of public opinion still left considerable scope to the Government for determined leadership, it should not lead us to fall back upon the notion of a power-elite untroubled by the problem of legitimacy.

It follows from the barrenness of a power-based explanation of foreign policy formulation that a decision-making approach can be illuminating. This is not a tautologous statement. The decision-making approach is specifically characterised by an emphasis on reconstructing the way in which decision-makers perceived their problems, and on not confining the enquiry to the workings of and relations between formal institutions. The material from 1938-41 bears out the usefulness of such a perspective, although not without qualification.

First and foremost, although this case has taken institutions as its starting point, it has sought to escape from the bounds of the

subject of public administration, which is still a powerful and at times narrowing influence wherever the practices of British government are studied.¹ The Cabinet, as a topic, responded more to insights drawn loosely from systems theory than to a discussion of the powers of patronage or circulation of documents.² Similarly, it was found that the role of the press was best described in terms of its functions in a decision-making system, than in terms of its legal freedoms and restrictions.

Secondly, the deliberate attempt made in any decision-making analysis to see the world as it was seen at the time does go some way towards correcting the squint imposed by hindsight. The passing of time invariably leads to either or both of two errors in our understanding of history. One is to assume that those responsible for decisions in fact had very little choice at the time; that the policies pursued were essentially determined by forces more powerful than the wills of individual men. This assumption, strangely enough, is in danger of becoming a conventional wisdom in the new historiography of the appeasement years, among writers who would probably shy away from both Marx and Mackinder, and who themselves have stripped away much of the prejudice and misunderstanding accumulated over the last forty years.

1 Public Administration is itself changing, under the impact of organisation theories. Michael J. Hill: The Sociology of Public Administration (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972).

2 The problems of adaptation to uncertainty considered by John Steinbruner in The Cybernetic Theory of Decision are particularly helpful in this regard.

The school of scholarship that has quite validly highlighted the constraints under which the Chamberlain Government were working - from financial pressures, the Dominions, lack of American support in the Far East, and the erosion of naval supremacy - should not lead us to suppose that British foreign policy ran down unmissable tracks. Just as the Munich Conference might easily never have taken place, so the specific response to the outrage of Prague was hardly at the behest of irresistible demands, external or internal. It may be argued, by way of a contrasting example, that governments led by Chamberlain and Stalin were always unlikely to achieve a rapprochement, and other similar instances may be cited, but enough major turning-points in the periods of both peace and war were balanced finely between opposing pressures to support a view that how decisions were made, and by whom, mattered. At the level of personality alone, many developments were contingent on the inspiration of Hitler and Churchill.

A concern to analyse the nature of images and attitudes may also guard against the alternative assumption that while ministers and officials did exercise free choice, and were far from mere agents of history, the decisions they arrived at were nonetheless the only logical or rational steps to take in the circumstances. This particularly applies to British foreign policy after March 1939, when it seemed to have caught up finally with the truth about Hitler and to have accepted the unpleasant necessity of war. Although it is unfashionable to do so, even this view must be looked at critically. Any action is only 'rational' if the values underlying it are accepted. British foreign policy in

this period was based uneasily on a mixture of political and moral objections to Nazi Germany; the criteria of decision were by no means always clear, and therefore by definition not immutable. Chamberlain could have decided to maintain the traditional concern for the security of western Europe, while following the Foreign Office memoranda of late 1938 into a belief that the East was a natural sphere of German influence.¹ This would have led to a posture of combining deterrence with pragmatic indifference that is not unreminiscent of NATO policy towards the Soviet bloc. It might have been an incorrect or even improper policy, but it would not have been either unthinkable or impossible for Britain to have pursued. Equally, one only has to see events in May 1940 from the perspective of Lord Halifax to realise that a strategy of fight-even-unto-death was not self-evidently the only strategy facing the Cabinet at the time. Churchill was proved right in his hunches about British resilience and the future course of the war, but there was an alternative policy (withdraw from the fight at least to mend one's wounds) and another Prime Minister might have accepted it.

Speculation (or counter-factual analysis as it was referred to in Chapter 1) is a dangerous game, but one that has to be chanced if the strength of a historical explanation is to be assessed. It should be noted, for example, that even an acceptance of the values underlying British foreign policy in 1939-40 (in brief a conviction that attempts

1 Donald Lammers: 'From Whitehall to Munich: The Foreign Office and the Future Course of British Policy', Historical Journal XVI:4(1973) pp.831-51.

at hegemony had to be resisted, and an acceptance that Hitlerism was after all an intrinsic threat to international order) does not exclude the possibility of other means having been available to implement the desired goals. Poland need not have been ranked above the USSR in March 1939, Churchill might have been brought into the Cabinet earlier, more thought might have been given to the possibility of French defeat. That these things did not happen is partly due to powerful factors constraining choice; but for the remaining explanation we need to look deeply into the processes of decision-making, beneath the larger forces that every passing year seems to make more inexorable.

These problems bear directly on a further major issue raised at the beginning of this thesis, the nature of a 'democratic foreign policy'. It is probably neither practicable nor desirable to lay down the substantive principles which such a policy should espouse. The description more usually refers to the manner in which decisions are arrived at. Even here there is no easy conclusion for this period. Most striking is the importance of distinguishing between the various levels at which accountability may take place. References to Chamberlain's 'autocracy' or, alternatively, the 'democratic character' of British foreign policy, are considerable over-simplifications even when they contain elements of truth. A more discriminating approach to the constraints that can affect leadership suggests that such terms should only be used with qualification.

At the highest level, the Prime Minister did not ride roughshod over his colleagues. It has always been a paradox that Neville Chamberlain

has been criticised for his imperiousness in Cabinet and his submission to the nation's aversion for war. A clearer picture of Chamberlain's behaviour as head of government would be that of a man imbued with vanity and conviction about foreign policy, but also constrained by an inability to predict events and by the capacity of his ministers, at least when the terms of debate were relatively clear, to contribute positively to the key decisions before the Cabinet. The description could be applied in nearly the same form to Churchill.

At the centre of foreign policy-making, therefore, the exercise of strong leadership on some occasions did not rule out a degree of wider participation on others. Similar complexities attend the second level of analysis, the intersection of the official system with attentive publics, here the press. Some editors, proprietors and journalists did penetrate deeply into the normally secretive procedures of British government. They were often privy to the current concerns of the most senior figures in the machine. What they wrote or did could affect the course of foreign policy even if on many occasions it was irrelevant or disregarded. They were powerful agents in the mobilisation of opinion in Parliament, the Universities and the country. The press enjoyed a limited but real participation in the making of foreign policy.

Yet the press were not pristine representatives of democracy. Habitually close relations with government bred a tendency to understand the problems of decision-makers too well, and a certain lack of resilience in the face of official complaints about 'irresponsibility'

(Cecil King was, as always, an exception). This and other factors affecting the quality of newspaper comment, such as the circulation war and the inevitable preoccupation with short-term, dramatic stories, also led to a surprising lack of variety in discussions of foreign policy, and attitudes that kept closely in step with changes in the official line. It is therefore arguable that the press exercised influence more on their own behalf than on that of wider society, and that they may have determined as much as reflected the character of public debate.

The constraints of democracy acquire a further meaning at the level of mass opinion. In tangible terms ordinary people could do little to affect their fate as determined by foreign policy. Mutinies, of the type that occurred in the French and Russian armies in 1917 are the most drastic of all remedies, while even in peacetime it is far more difficult to organise dissent than to inspire celebrations of the kind seen in London in August 1914. Letters to politicians were occasionally heeded, but as often as not only to support an existing theory. In any case, few people were political activists. Most passively acquiesced in the consequences of distant events and Government decisions.

Despite such limitations, as Chapter IV argued, popular interests (rather than popular opinions) did colour British foreign policy. Perceptions of democratic obligations and restraints - themselves shaped by countless experiences and wider factors - certainly affected the degree of choice which decision-makers felt was open to them. The

twin beliefs that those making foreign policy in the 1930's could no longer ignore the consequences of their actions for the masses, and that popular support was vital for a policy's credibility, were reflected in the content of positions taken, even in the military crises of 1940-1. Two brief examples can serve to make the point. On the one hand the Chamberlain Government never gave serious consideration to a policy of diverting Hitler into conflict with the Soviet Union. On the other British actions towards Germany displayed a distinct ambivalence on the moral question. The ethics of Nazism did not come to the forefront of official thinking until the war was under way. But they had never, on the other hand, been dismissed as wholly inappropriate to the conduct of foreign policy, for internal and external affairs could not be so cleanly separated. Such uneasiness, and the inability to emulate Machiavelli to the extent that the USSR suspected,¹ arose from the democratic ethos that pervaded outlooks in Whitehall. By virtue of being British, and of sharing widely-held views about the evolution of British democracy, neither ministers nor their advisers could escape into a 'value-free' world of international politicking. Participation in the making of foreign policy may have been circumscribed, but the impact of political culture could not be gainsaid.

Running through all the above discussion of power, decision-making and democracy is the single theme of the 'domestic sources of foreign policy'. It is common practice in the 1970's to ascribe important

1 See Stalin's speech of 10 March 1939, reported in DBFP III:4, Seeds-Halifax, 20 March 1939, pp.411-9.

influences to domestic factors without specifying how they operate. The aim of this thesis has been to show in detail that foreign policy is not untouched by many of the considerations that impinge on home affairs. The British decisions to contemplate a war with Germany, and then steadily to solidify the commitment during the 'European' war of 1939-41, were more than the outputs of a handful of men responding to the imperatives of the international system - which is the bald truth. The nature of these responses was shaped by the character of decision-making in the British machine; by a system in which high-level discussion of options was at best erratic and unsystematic, in which outside criticisms were heard but also diluted, and in which the constraints exerted by a democratic political structure were real but open to wide differences of interpretation.

War-time did not dissolve the impact of such factors, although it changed their context in important ways. The War Cabinet was increasingly pruned and finally became the apex of a three party Coalition, which both facilitated and hemmed in Prime Ministerial government. The press were subject to the threat of Emergency Powers and to a shortage of newsprint, but retained their freedoms to a remarkable degree. Their relationship with decision-makers remained fundamentally intact. Finally the expression of mass opinion was even more difficult than it had been between 1935-9. By-elections were meaningless and the Party truce gave the Government a monopoly of initiatives over foreign policy. In other ways, however, public opinion became more crucial to decision-makers, who were highly sensitive to the importance of morale in a war

that was making civilians prime targets and which was increasingly associated with an ideological struggle for democracy. As has often been pointed out, politics changes but does not cease in war-time.

John Bright said in 1878:

'It is a powerful and terrible thing to think how easy it is to stir up a nation to war you will find that wars are always supported by a class of arguments, which, after the war is over, the people find were arguments they should not have listened to'.¹

It will be thought by many that British experience in the 1930's goes to refute this statement. Even if they are right in an immediate sense, Bright's words still have a wider relevance. For any decision as momentous as that to sacrifice life it is indispensable to know whose voices were heard, when, and with what effect. Correct decisions reached by obscure routes do not inspire confidence in their repetition.

1 'The Danger of War with Russia' in Selected Speeches of John Bright, (London, J.H. Dent 1907) p.169.

Appendix: Attendance at the Foreign Policy Committee of the Cabinet

The calculations made in Chapter 2(ii), pp.85-137, are simple in the extreme, but they require setting out for the purposes of checking. Basic data is available in Figures 1 and 2, and all figures are corrected to one decimal place.

(1) Attendance of Ministers:

Average attendance for Period 1 (FP(36)32-42, 14 Nov. 1938 - 11 April 1939 including Anderson, present for one item only at FP(36)33)

$$= 8.1 \text{ Ministers per meeting. } \frac{(89)}{11}$$

Average attendance for Period 2 (FP(36)43-61, 19 April - 25 Aug. 1939, but excluding mtgs. 46, 51-2, 55 which were not concerned with the Soviet issue)

$$= 9.9 \text{ Ministers per meeting. } \frac{(138)}{14}$$

Runciman was absent abroad for the period 27 March - 19 May 1939 inclusive; i.e. 11 mtgs, of which one in the second period was not concerned with the USSR. 5 absences fall in each period. Adding 5 to the total for each period, therefore, alters the averages to 8.5 and 10.2 respectively, a difference of 1.7 rather than 1.8.

Chatfield and Morrison did not join the FPC until 8 Feb. 1939. So as to adjust the figures for the weighting in favour of Period 2 that would otherwise occur we need to add (on the assumption of nearly full attendance for both over 5 missed meetings) say 9 to the total attendances for Period 1.

This leaves an average attendance of 8.9, cf. 9.9 for Period 2.

So the true increase in Ministerial attendance from Period 1 to Period 2 is $9.9 - (8.9 + 0.1 \text{ for Runciman})$

$$= \underline{0.9}$$

This is explained by the arrival of Burgin. (If Burgin's attendances - 11 - are subtracted from the total for Period 2, the average becomes 9.1, or 0.8 lower.)

None of the above figures are expressed as percentages.

(2) Rate of Absenteeism:

Period 1: There were 10 regular attenders at the 11 mtgs. - a total of 110-15 (Chatfield, Morrison and Runciman were not able to be present at 5 mtgs each)

= 95.

During this period there were 10 'occasional absences'; i.e. a rate of 10.5% absenteeism.

Period 2: There were 11 regular attenders at the 14 mtgs. - a total of 154-8 (3 of these mtgs took place before Burgin was appointed, and for 5 of them Runciman was abroad)

= 146.

During this period there were 9 'occasional absences'; i.e. a rate of 6.2% absenteeism.

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