THE BRITISH GUARANTEE TO POLAND, MARCH 31, 1939
A STUDY IN DIPLOMATIC MOTIVATION

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ABSTRACT

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The paper examines the motives underlying the commitment which brought Great Britain into the Second World War. The main sources were the published documents on British and German foreign policy and the memoirs of the diplomats involved. Secondary sources were not generally found to be useful.

British diplomacy between March 15 and April 6, 1939, is argued to have been dominated by the influence of British public opinion, which, after the German absorption of Czechoslovakia on March 15, vigorously protested the policy of concessions to Germany. Public opinion, and not the threat of German expansion, is seen as the motive behind the British moves between March 17 and 22, which explored the possibility of forming a grand alliance including the Soviet Union. Fear of provoking Germany, a second dominant motive, caused this plan to be abandoned after March 22. A new plan--bilateral mutual defense treaties with Poland and Roumania--was hoped to be sufficient to appease the British public without aggravating German fears. Fear of

German reprisal and overconfidence about Russian policy were responsible for British disregard of the Soviet Union.

However, rumors of an imminent German threat to Poland and a resultant inflamation of public opinion caused the British to extend a hasty unilateral guarantee of Polish independence on March 31. Frightened by German protests and threats, the British tried to reduce the scope of the undertaking by means of an inspired editorial of April 1 in The Times. But the demands of an aroused public not only frustrated this attempt, but also forced the government to agree to include protection of Danzig in the guarantee. Having failed at open retreat, the British resorted to secret assurances to the Germans and to continued disregard of the Russians. The latter were alienated by suspicions of British intention and by the dangers of the new British undertaking.

Several alternative theories are discredited; among these are the explanations that the British abandoned appeasement after March 15, that Russian aid was not considered necessary for a united front, that the guarantee was an act of willful deception, that Polish diplomacy was an important factor, and that pro-German and anti-Soviet prejudices were decisive. In conclusion, it is argued that the British attempt to reconcile the opposing policies of firmness and appeasement encouraged contrary expectations on the part of the British public and the German leaders, while at the same time alienating the Russians.

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By

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INTRODUCTION

On the morning of September 3, 1939, the British government delivered to the government of Germany an ultimatum demanding the suspension of a German attack on Poland which had been underway since the morning of September 1. The German government allowed the ultimatum to expire without agreeing to meet the British demand, and at 11:15 a.m. of September 3, Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain announced that the two countries were at war. The declaration of war was made in fulfillment of a bilateral mutual assistance treaty signed by the British and Polish governments on August 25. This treaty, in turn, was an amplification of the temporary mutual assistance agreement which the British had announced on April 6. The initiative for this temporary agreement was British: on March 31 Chamberlain had announced to the House of Commons that Great Britain had unilaterally undertaken to guarantee Poland's independence. The Prime Minister's statement included these words:

> As the House is aware, certain consultations are now proceeding with other Governments. In order to make perfectly clear the position of His Majesty's Government in the meantime before those consultations are concluded, I now have to inform the House that, during that period, in the event of any action which clearly threatened Polish independence, and which the Polish

> Government accordingly considered it vital to resist with their national forces, His Majesty's Government would feel themselves bound at once to lend the Polish Government all support in their power. They have given the Polish Government an assurance to this effect.[1]

This pledge was the first publication of the commitment which was to bring Great Britain and German to war.

It is of some interest to inquire into the motives which induced the British to stake world peace on Polish independence. This is so not only because the guarantee is crucial for an understanding of the origins of the war of 1939-1945, but also because the guarantee in itself is of great interest. It seemed to be a radical departure in British policy, a shift from appeasement to a new firmness in the face of German expansion. It seemed to be the culmination of a two weeks revolution in British attitude which began with the completion of Germany's annexation of Czechoslovakia on March 15. It seemed to be a warning that Germany's next seizure of territory would not be accepted peacefully.

These impressions are still often taken to be the true picture of British policy. On April 3 Chamberlain told the House of Commons that the guarantee was "a portent in British policy so momentous that I think it is safe to say it will have a chapter to itself when the history books come

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[1]Great Britain, 5 Parliamentary Debates (Commons), Vol. 345 (1939), 2415. Cited hereafter as Commons Debates.

to be written."[2] This paper is an attempt to write that chapter. These questions will be answered: What problems faced the British government between March 15 and March 31? What were the possible solutions to these problems? Why was the guarantee to Poland chosen from among the alternatives? What were the consequences and alterations of the guarantee in the first week after its announcement?

When viewed in retrospect and described in printed words, men's actions often assume an inevitability which falsifies the dynamic and indeterminate nature of these actions. Much of the history of the period to be discussed has been obscured by just such thinking, and therefore many of the chief events of the period have been improperly understood. The aim of this paper has been to divest the events and decisions of the prevalent and artificial airs of inevitability, and to understand them in their own context. The emphasis throughout the discussion will be on how a rapidly changing political situation appeared from London, and on the British policy decisions made in response to these appearances. The goal will be to understand these decisions rather than to pass moral judgments upon them. What follows, then, is a study of the formation of British foreign policy during an acute crisis.

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[2]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2482.

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEMS AND A SOLUTION

It is customary to cite two examples which indicate the mood of the British government just before the Germans invaded Prague and established the protectorate over Bohemia and Moravia on March 15. The first of these is a speech given by Sir Samuel Hoare on March 10 at Chelsea, in which the Home Secretary optimistically predicted a "golden age" of prosperity and peace.[1] The second is a cartoon in Punch

> . . . which showed John Bull awakening, while a nightmare figure labelled 'War Scare' escaped through the window. Behind John Bull's head was an almanac with the date March 15th. The caption described him as saying, 'Thank goodness that's over.' . . .[2]

There was good reason for the March 15 coup to shake British complacency: it was Germany's first incorporation of land occupied by non-Germans, and it was a violation of Hitler's promise to Chamberlain at the Munich conference that any future German grievances would be settled by arbitration. It was this very promise, now broken, that had fostered

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[1] The Times (London), March 11, 1939, p. 12.

[2] Sir Anthony Eden, The Reckoning (Boston, 1965), p. 52.

British confidence during the winter following Munich. Accordingly, a sharp British reaction was forthcoming. But not immediately.

Samuel Hoare recalls that "as soon as we heard of the Prague coup, Chamberlain decided to make a swift counter-move. The first step was to give Hitler a solemn warning in a speech at Birmingham on March 17."[3] Similarly Sir John Simon, British Chancellor of the Exchequer, remembers that "as soon as there was clear information of this flagrant act, Chamberlain, in his speech in Birmingham Town Hall on March 17th, denounced the treachery."[4] In fact, sufficient information about the act was available on the day it occurred; and, in fact, the Prime Minister's initial reaction was neither swift nor a warning. In his March 15 speech announcing the German move, Chamberlain told the House of Commons:

> It is natural . . . that I should bitterly regret what has now occurred. But do not let us on that account be deflected from our course. . . .
> . . . . . .
> The aim of this Government is now, as it has always been, to . . . substitute the method of discussion for the method of force in the settlement of differences.[5]

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[3]Viscount Templewood (Samuel Hoare), Nine Troubled Years (London, 1954), p. 345.

[4]Viscount Simon (John Simon), Retrospect (London, 1952), p. 251.

[5]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 440.

To at least one observer Chamberlain's "first reaction was, to all outward appearances, one of extraordinary complacency."[6]

The house broke into heated debate. But in answer to demands that the government protect Czechoslovakia, Simon pointed out that it was impossible to defend a state which no longer existed.[7] The government had been presented a fait accompli and could do no more than protest. Opposition critics then demanded that the government enter into arrangements with other countries so as to present a united front to oppose still another act of German aggression. Simon declined this suggestion with words which are significant in view of subsequent events: "It is essential that we should not enter into extensive, indefinite commitments with the result that the control of our own action, and to a large extent of our own foreign policy, will depend . . . upon a whole lot of foreign countries."[8] The early reaction of The Times differed little from that of the government. The editorials of March 16 and 17 condemned the latest German adventure but regarded it as somewhat inevitable. The March 16 leader echoed Simon's words to the House of Commons of the previous day: the remainder of the Czech state and the

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[6]Leopold Amery, My Political Life, Vol. III (London, 1955), 307-308.

[7]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 546.

[8]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 554.

British obligations to her, which was "always regarded by us as being only of a transitory nature, has now ceased to exist, and his Majesty's Government cannot accordingly hold themselves any longer bound by these obligations."[9] Chamberlain did announce on March 15 that the forthcoming visit to Berlin of a British trade delegation was being postponed. But little else was done by way of protest and nothing by way of positive countermeasure. The immediate official response was one of regret but not resolve.

Yet Chamberlain's tone in his speech at Birmingham on the evening of March 17 was quite different from that in his announcement to the House of Commons two days earlier: "Is this the last attack upon a small state, or is it . . . a step in the direction of an attempt to dominate the world by force?"[10] Earlier in the day Nevile Henderson, the British Ambassador to Germany, had been instructed to deliver a formal protest to the German Foreign Ministry, and then to return to London as a further sign of protest. One factor accounted for the sharp change in official attitude--public opinion. Henderson, writing to Foreign Secretary Halifax on March 15, said of the Prague coup, "What distresses me more than anything else is the handle which it

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[9] The Times (London), March 16, 1939, p. 7.

[10] A. J. Toynbee (ed.), The Eve of War, 1939. ("Survey of International Affairs: The war-time series for 1939-46," Vol. II; London, 1958), 63.

will give to critics of Munich."[11] It did give the critics a handle, and there were many critics. First there had been the March 15 debate in Commons, which Simon described as "an intermittent and sometimes bitter attack upon the Prime Minister."[12] There immediately followed in the British press a violent reaction to the inadequacy of Chamberlain's first response to the events of March 15 and to the whole policy of appeasement. The patience shown by The Times was exceptional.

Pressure came not only from Parliament and the press, but also from within the government:

> Several of the premier's own friends called for a new and strong policy. Earl de la Warr, president of the board of education, said on March 16 that "disillusion is a moderate word to express our feelings. But disillusion is no good." The duke of Devonshire, under-secretary for the dominions, speaking on the same day at Eastbourne, said: "The prime minister is striving manfully, but warm supporter though I am, I am bound to confess that his policy is not bearing fruit."[13]

The pressures of protest were strong enough to endanger Chamberlain's government. Prominent opposition spokesmen, Churchill and Amery, were known to be considering submitting

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[11] Rohan Butler and Sir E. L. Woodward (ed.), Documents on British Foreign Policy 1919-1939, Third Series, Vol. IV (London, 1951), 595. Cited hereafter as British Documents.

[12] Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 545.

[13] T. Desmond Williams, "Negotiations leading to the Anglo-Polish treaty of 31 March 1939," Irish Historical Studies, X (March-September, 1956), 90.

a motion to Commons that the government be broadened so as to be more truly representative; and the March 17 edition of The Star reported that even Lord Halifax favored a new government which would include Churchill and Anthony Eden.[14] Thus, as Chamberlain's official biographer observes, "when he spoke at Birmingham . . . his tone was very different, informed by fuller knowledge, and by strong representation as to opinion in the House, the public, and the Dominions."[15]

Acute foreign observers, French Foreign Minister Georges Bonnet[16] and Russian Ambassador Ivan Maisky[17] also saw public opinion as responsible for the departure of March 17. So did another interested foreigner in London, German Ambassador H. von Dirksen:

> The invasion of Prague set free . . . waves of indignation and anger, as was to be expected. It is true Chamberlain in the Commons and Halifax in the Lords made statements condemning Hitler's action, but indicated no fundamental change in policy towards Germany. Soon, however, the irresistable forces of British public opinion dragged the Government along.[18]

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[14]Alan Campbell-Johnson, Viscount Halifax (New York, 1941), p. 511.

[15]Keith Feiling, The Life of Neville Chamberlain (London, 1946), p. 400.

[16]Georges Bonnet, Défense de la Paix, Vol. II (Geneva, 1948), 164.

[17]Ivan Maisky, Who Helped Hitler?, trans. Andrew Rothstein (London, 1964), p. 101.

[18]Herbert von Dirksen, Moscow, Tokyo, London (Norman, 1952), p. 216.

Realization of the source of the British stiffening could only weaken its effect on Germany. Dirksen reported to his government on March 18 that the Birmingham speech was made to strengthen Chamberlain's own political position and to express annoyance, and that "the speech means that though Chamberlain is keeping to his former aim of the pacification of Europe by peaceful means, he is adopting, for the achievement of this aim, the bolder front proposed by Halifax."[19] Such was the origin of the apparent change of British policy signalled by Chamberlain's March 17 speech. It was an act of appeasement--appeasement of public opinion. Public opinion was to continue to exercise a decisive influence on British policy throughout the three weeks under consideration.

The sudden destruction of Czechoslovakia had shocked British opinion, and another shock was soon to come. On March 16, the Roumanian Minister in London, V. V. Tilea, came to Assistant Under-Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Sir Orme Sargent, with an urgent warning of the breakdown of current German-Roumanian economic negotiations and of imminent German aggression against his country; he asked for British aid and for loans to be used to purchase

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[19]British Foreign Office and United States Department of State, Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945, Series D, Vol. VI (London and Washington, 1956), 24-25. Cited hereafter as German Documents.

armaments.[20] The next day Tilea went to Halifax, repeated his story and requests with increased urgency, and suggested that "if it was possible to construct a solid block of Poland, Roumania, Greece, Turkey [and] Yugoslavia with the support of Great Britain and France, it was to be expected that the situation might be saved."[21] That Tilea's warning later proved to be a hoax and that the British government were fairly certain of this as early as March 19 do not lessen the importance of Tilea's message. For it immediately set into motion processes which the subsequent repudiation of the story could not stop.

The March 18 Times headlined the story of the German-Roumanian negotiations with:

GERMANY AND RUMANIA
DRASTIC DEMANDS
REJECTION BY BUCHAREST.[22]

Between March 17 and 20 the press was filled with stories of impending German moves on Roumania and with demands that strong and immediate measures be taken to prevent them.[23] So soon after the shock of March 15, British opinion was easily shaken again. The government, already under heavy

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[20]British Documents, IV, 284-285.

[21]British Documents, IV, 367.

[22]The Times (London), March 18, 1939, p. 12.

[23]Williams, Irish Historical Studies, X (March-September, 1956), 84-89.

criticism, had to move quickly to preserve itself. The first response was to explore the possibility suggested by Tilea. On the night of March 17 British representatives in Poland, Greece, Turkey, Yugoslavia, and the Soviet Union were told to inquire immediately as to the attitude of these governments in the event Germany were to attack Roumania,[24] while France was told that the British were seeking these responses in order to help determine what their own policy would be, and that the British government wished to work in concert with the French.[25]

Thus began the British attempts to build a united front to block German aggression, or, at least, to satisfy the British public's demand for such an attempt. The government were faced with a double problem: they had to try to anticipate and prevent Hitler's next move, and they had to appease domestic critics. As the aftermath of Prague shows, the second of these problems was the more pressing. Checking Hitler would appease the critics, although perhaps criticism could be silenced without abandoning appeasement of Germany. The destruction of Czechoslovakia and the scare over Roumania were a prologue to the series of events and decisions which culminated in the March 31 guarantee.

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[24]British Documents, IV, 361.

[25]British Documents, IV, 360.

The problem of stopping Hitler and the public pressure to do so were urgent. The possible solutions of this dual problem must now be discussed.

The problems facing the government were obvious, and to many Englishmen the correct solution was equally apparent. Although Tilea's proposal was the instance at which the British inquiries of March 17 were made, it was not the original source of the idea. Tilea had suggested a united front in eastern Europe under French and British sponsorship, but he had not suggested that the Soviet Union be invited to join. However, during the March 15 debate in Commons, there had been many strong demands for a united front including the Western republics and the Soviet Union. Speaker after speaker called for such a combination:

> Mr. Sexton: What is the remedy? A combination of nations who believe in keeping their pledged word. Such a combination is at hand. We have the Western democracies of Europe, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and the great United States of America.[26]

Sir Archibald Sinclair asked the government to "gather to us other nations of like mind and intention, . . . France, Russia, and the United States."[27] With the United States in isolation, Russia was seen by many as the keystone of the anti-German front:

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[26]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 507.

[27]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 457.

> Mr. Sandys: It is to Moscow and to the Scandinavian countries that . . . the Secretary of the Department of Overseas Trade is now going, and his journey to Moscow will, I feel, be something far more than a mere trade mission. The fate of Europe is going to depend on the initiative and leadership of this country in the next few months.[28]

Prejudice and suspicion of the Soviets were pushed aside in the face of danger:

> Commander Bower: I am not prepared to regard Soviet Russia as a freedom-loving nation, but we cannot do without her now. She ought to be brought in. I should like to ask why we have not had staff talks long ago.[29]

And in words which foreshadowed future failure, Mr. Sandys said:

> My own view is that Great Britain ought to be prepared at the present time to enter into . . . a mutual defense system with any country in Europe, provided that that country from a military and geographical standpoint is capable of beind defended. . . .
> . . . . . .
> It would, on the other hand, be difficult to protect a single country which was geographically isolated.[30]

Pressure from the floor of Commons continued to press the government to enter a defensive system which included Russia. Questions about British progress to that end were asked on March 17 and again on March 22.[31] This

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[28]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 518.

[29]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 488.

[30]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 517.

[31]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 786-787, 1252, 1254.

parliamentary pressure was a reflection of public opinion and the press. In answer to the question "Would you like to see Great Britain and Soviet Russia being more friendly to each other?", 84% of the British voters polled in March answered yes.[32] J. L. Garvin who had been one of Chamberlain's warmest supporters, wrote in the March 19 Observer that British "diplomacy needs another basis. One thing is certain, that without regard for prejudices and doubts, England and France should seek a working understanding with Soviet Russia."[33]

Chamberlain could not but be aware of the great desire of the British public for a Soviet alliance. On April 3, with no such alliance yet in sight, the Prime Minister admitted to the House of Commons that "I quite appreciate that the Soviet Union is always in the thoughts of hon. Members opposite, and that they are still a little suspicious as to whether those so-called ideological differences may not be dividing us upon what otherwise it would obviously be in the interests of both to do."[34]

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[32]"British Institute of Public Opinion," The Public Opinion Quarterly, IV (March, 1940), 79.

[33]Quoted in Williams, Irish Historical Studies, X, (March-September, 1956), 81.

[34]Common Debates, Vol. 345, 2485-6.

Official British opinion seemed to realize the need, over and beyond the satisfaction of public demands, of a Russian alliance. Lieutenant Colonel E. R. Sword, the military attaché at Warsaw, told Sir Howard Kennard, the Ambassador to Poland, on March 22 that "the part played by the U.S.S.R. is of prime importance to Poland in any war against Germany."[35] Poland and Roumania were thought necessary partners in the envisaged alliance by virtue of their geographic position and the apparent danger to these countries which Germany posed. Yet reasons of strategy made their adhesion meaningless and their defense impossible without Russian help. Keith Feiling claims that "as the impotence of Poland and Roumania left to themselves became clear, the majority of ministerial opinion swung hard towards the Russian alliance."[36] The British estimate of Polish military strength will be discussed later, but it must now be noted that in the first days after Tilea's warning, Russia was seen as a necessary member of the projected alliance. In an important Anglo-French discussion in London on March 22, Chamberlain and Halifax agreed with Bonnet that it was of the greatest importance that their governments act in concert with Russia.[37]

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[35]British Documents, IV, 480.

[36]Feiling, p. 408.

[37]Bonnet, p. 163.

Thus, between March 17 and about March 22, public opinion, official opinion, and strategic necessity seemed to join in pointing towards a collective arrangement with the Soviet Union. This seemed the obvious solution to the government's double problem. The March 17 démarche seemed to be a first step towards the prescribed solution. Only with an eye to what appeared to be the original intent of the government can successive decisions and the ultimate guarantee to Poland be understood. The days between the 17th and the 31st show first some moves at the consolidation of the popular proposal, then the beginnings of the subordination of this plan to an alternative one, and finally the quick adoption of the second plan to the exclusion of the first. The story of the origins of the unilateral guarantee to Poland, then, becomes the story of how such a guarantee came to be made instead of a Russian-based collective security system. The story of the competition of these alternate proposals is difficult to tell with strict respect to chronology, and this will not be attempted. Rather, the parallel development of these two competing lines of thought will be traced.

CHAPTER II

ANOTHER SOLUTION

Since no attempt will be made to follow the events chronologically, it will be useful at this point to sketch briefly the diplomatic moves which preceded the March 31 announcement.[1] The initial responses to the British soundings of March 17-18 were not encouraging. France alone promised immediate cooperation in the event of an attack on Roumania, while the smaller eastern countries (Poland, Yugoslavia, Greece, and Turkey) doubted the reality of the threat to Roumania and were hesitant to commit themselves. On March 18 Maxim Litvinov, Soviet Commissar for Foreign Affairs, told British Ambassador Sir William Seeds that a six-power conference among representatives of the British, Russian, French, Polish, Roumanian, and Turkish governments would be preferable to the canvassing then in progress. Halifax rejected this proposal on March 19, telling Maisky that no responsible British representative was currently available for such a conference, and that calling a conference which might end in failure was dangerous. In a British

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[1] A convenient factual summary is in Toynbee, pp. 72-101.

counter-proposal of March 20 it was suggested that the British, French, Polish, and Russian governments sign a declaration of intention to consult regarding the means by which a threat to the independence of any European state would be resisted. On March 21-22, Bonnet was in London for talks with Halifax and Chamberlain regarding the coordination of French and British policy.

Meanwhile on March 22, the Soviets informed the British that they were willing to sign the proposed four-power declaration if France and Poland were also willing. But on the same day Poland informed the British that they would not associate themselves with Russia in a public agreement. A Polish counter-proposal was forthcoming on March 24, when Edward Raczynski, the Polish ambassador at London, proposed to Halifax a secret bilateral agreement for mutual assistance. On the night of March 27 the British asked the Polish and Roumanian governments if they were willing to enter into such bilateral agreements. But within the next few days, the apparent imminence of a German attack on Poland caused Chamberlain to get quick French and Polish consent to the unilateral guarantee of Poland, which he announced on March 31.

As shown in the previous chapter, public and official opinion were both calling for an alliance with Russia. Yet between March 17 and 31, the prospects for such an alliance constantly receded. The reasons for this recession

are crucial for an understanding of the genesis of the Polish pledge. Samuel Hoare defends the omission of Russia by claiming that "Russian participation in a mutual aid pact with her neighbours seemed . . . to be not only politically and geographically impossible, but in the face of the immediate Nazi aggression, of little military value."[2] This was not the case. While Russian military strength seems certainly to have been underestimated, the British still recognized the need for Russia in any effective anti-German coalition. In an important memorandum received by Halifax on March 10, Colonel Firebrace, the military attaché at Moscow, concluded that the Red Army had great defensive power, but much less offensive capacity, though it "could probably make an initial advance into Poland." The Russian command was thought to have been severely weakened by the Purges, but the Army itself was known to be loyal to the régime and "being strenuously prepared for war." An accompanying memorandum reveals a low regard for the Russian Air Force.[3] Lieutenant-Colonel Sword, in a report of March 22, presented a similarly mixed estimate of Soviet strength.[4]

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[2]Templewood, p. 345.

[3]British Documents, IV, 194-197.

[4]British Documents, IV, 478.

Yet it cannot be granted to Hoare, and other apologists,[5] that the low estimate of Russian power was enough to cause the British to discount Russia's value as an ally. In the same memorandum just referred to, Sword says

> The assured neutrality of the U.S.S.R. would provide a valuable support to Poland's rear, while transit traffic might prove of great importance should Poland be cut off from all contact with the outside world except via Roumania. . . .
> . . . . . .
> The part played by the U.S.S.R. is of prime importance to Poland in any war against Germany.[6]

Thus it was appreciated that reasons of geography and material made it essential to include Russia, if only as a bolster to Poland, in the projected alliance. Polish help, as envisioned in the Anglo-French conversations of March 21-22, was valued mainly as a means of utilizing the manpower and resources of the Soviet Union; on March 22 Halifax and Chamberlain agreed with Bonnet that it was "absolutely essential to secure Polish colaboration, since without this, Russian help could hardly be effective."[7] Thus, by March 24 at the latest, two important ideas were lessening the urgency of getting Russia into the coalition as a full partner. The first of these was that of getting only

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[5]E.g., Feiling, p. 403.

[6]British Documents, IV, 478-480.

[7]British Documents, IV, 473.

partial cooperation, and making only limited commitments, to Russia. A strict military alliance with Russia faded from view, and by March 27 Halifax could describe the desired Soviet attitude as "benevolent neutrality."[8] The second idea was an increasing emphasis, first for the reason just given and then for another, on the inclusion of Poland. The origin of each of these ideas must now be considered.

To assume, as the British did, that at least the benevolent neutrality of the Soviet Union could be taken for granted reveals a remarkable confidence about Russian policy. This is all the more surprising in view of the fact that Russia gave no outward signs that such complacency was justified. The official Soviet line after Munich was critical of appeasement and its consequences. Maisky warned Overseas Trade Secretary R. S. Hudson and Foreign Undersecretary R. A. Butler on March 9 that appeasement was causing "a growing belief in Russia in isolation."[9] This warning was dramatically repeated by Stalin on the next day in an important speech before the Eighteenth Congress of the All-Union Communist Party, in which, according to Seeds, he emphasized his intention "to prevent the Soviet Union from being dragged into the struggle now in progress between the Fascist States and the so-called democracies."[10] The Times

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[8]British Documents, IV, 517.

[9]British Documents, IV, 207-208.

[10]British Documents, IV, 419.

reported that the "central theme in the speech was the determination of the Soviet Union to maintain peace and live as a good neighbour among the doomed capitalist countries."[11] The German annexation of Bohemia and Moravia further increased the threat of Soviet isolation, and Chamberlain's first reaction to it was viewed with suspicion. In response to Seeds' question of March 18 as to the probable attitude of Russia in the event of a German attack on Roumania, Litvinov asked in turn what the British attitude would be. "Did we [Great Britain] wish the U.S.S.R. to take the engagement while leaving our own hands free?" When Seeds pointed to the Birmingham speech of the previous day, Litvinov was unmoved, likening it to the harder line of The Times, "temporary and for internal consumption."[12]

The Russians were further offended when the British rejected their proposal for a six-power conference, and still further alienated when Britain declined the Soviet acceptance of the English-sponsored four-power declaration. On March 21, Seeds reported that the Soviet press was blaming the events of March 15 on the Western appeasers, who had hoped to direct German expansion eastward towards the Soviet Union.[13] The March 23 Pravda made similar accusations, and

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[11] The Times (London), March 13, 1939, p. 16.

[12] British Documents, IV, 372.

[13] British Documents, IV, 446, 449.

on March 28, by which time Russian adherence had been obviously relegated to secondary consideration, "articles in Izvestia and Pravda complained that British and French policy was reverting to its old line of appeasement, now that the immediate panic over Roumania had subsided."[14]

Yet in spite of the warnings, and in spite of great public pressure for an Anglo-Soviet pact, the British attitude towards the Soviets was cool, and even before the alternative idea of an Anglo-Polish agreement was taking shape, the Soviets were treated with surprising nonchalance. Many explanations for this have been advanced, almost too many. One thing is certain: the British sadly underestimated the range of possibilities open to the Russians. A Nazi-Soviet combination was thought impossible. British complacency on this score is reflected in an important Foreign Office memorandum of March 29: "Despite the lull in the propaganda war between Germany and the Soviet Union, the essential hostility of the two countries was such that the Soviet Government clearly had nothing to lose by publicly subscribing to this [four-power] declaration, which was, indeed, a move on the lines which M. Litvinov had advocated for years."[15] Halifax alone seems to have

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[14]Max Beloff, The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1929-1941, Vol. II (London, 1949), 231.

[15]British Documents, IV, 622. The emphasis has been added.

realized momentarily the dangers of ignoring Russia. During the March 22 meeting of himself, Chamberlain, and Bonnet, the Foreign Secretary doubted the wisdom of declining the Russian offer to sign the four-power statement: "Lord Halifax observed that it would be important if we were now to give the Soviet Government the idea that we were pushing her to one side." Bonnet, in reply, pointed out that it would "be possible to explain the situation" to the Russians, and Halifax' caution was quickly forgotten.[16] When, on March 30, the Turkish Ambassador at London warned of "a German-Soviet combination designed to crush Poland and Roumania," Halifax dismissed the warning, confessing that the idea was "not entirely clear in all its implications."[17]

In addition to overestimating the incompatibility of Nazis and Communists, the British believed the strategic position of the Russians to have been so weakened by recent events as to preclude a German-Russian understanding. That these events might have the opposite effect was not considered. A Foreign Office memorandum of March 29 expresses the belief that "the complacency of the Soviet Government was probably shaken to some extent by the final collapse of Czecho-Slovakia and the annexation of the Memelland [on March 22], though there was no outward sign that this was

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[16]British Documents, IV, 459.

[17]British Documents, IV, 559.

so."[18] For at least two reasons, then, the British government had no fears of anything worse than Russian isolation and neutrality, and neither did the official Soviet line threaten anything worse. As shown above, Soviet neutrality was not far from what was coming to be the British ambition with regard to Russia. On March 28 Seeds reported to London that a recent Russian communiqué presented "a picture of what I would myself wish Anglo-Soviet relations to be, namely friendliness and contacts but no obligations."[19]

Thus, although the importance of Russia for a militarily effective coalition was still appreciated, the British had become overconfident of their ability to ignore Russia as long as they wished and then to bring her in at a time of their own choosing. Halifax on March 27 told Sir Eric Phipps, the British Ambassador at Paris, that "the Soviet Government, while not associated directly with the proposed arrangements [the bilateral treaties with Poland and Roumania], should be kept in touch with developments and invited to undertake to lend their assistance in the most convenient form."[20] Russian neutrality was taken for granted; active collaboration when necessary was expected. What had to be given more urgent priority was securing

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[18]British Documents, IV, 621.

[19]British Documents, IV, 524.

[20]British Documents, IV, 515.

Polish adherence to the peace front, and this, in the last two weeks of March, seemed a much more difficult job.

Poland presented a problem. Whereas the Soviets had for years been asking the West to join them in an anti-German coalition, the Poles had often seemed ready to cooperate with Hitler. The Polish leaders were ideologically sympathetic with Nazism, they had long opposed Russian communism, and they had not hesitated to share in the spoils of Czechoslovakia. As mentioned above, it was Polish Foreign Minister Beck's refusal to be associated openly with the Russians in a public declaration of anti-German intent that ruined Chamberlain's proposed four-power declaration. This Polish veto is still often cited as the major reason for the failure of the four-power declaration and for the ultimate failure to secure Russian adhesion to the peace front.

The influence of the Polish veto has been both overrated and underrated. To hold that the prejudices of the Polish "government of colonels" determined vital British policy decisions is to overrate this influence. Such an explanation seems incredible, although incredibility alone is not enough to disqualify it for consideration. The problem, as A. J. P. Taylor points out in another context, is that of deciding whether British statesmanship of the period was wildly inept, or whether it had motives and goals other than those it proclaimed. If Polish objections actually

caused the British to abandon, or at least to deemphasize, a Russian partnership which the British really wanted, then they were surely inept in pursuing their avowed goal, which was a grand alliance of the great powers. If, on the other hand, the British had in mind another plan, a plan which did not require Russian cooperation, then perhaps the Polish objection was only a convenient excuse for turning away the Russians. To hold this view is to underrate the Polish influence.

The British do seem to have been pursuing a goal other than the grand alliance, yet the Polish veto was not irrelevant to the exclusion of Russia. Neither was it the cause of Soviet exclusion. Rather, Beck's refusal seems to have paralleled and reinforced an already emerging British plan, which was that of bilateral treaties with Poland and Roumania. On March 24 Raczynski almost timidly approached Halifax with the Polish proposal for a secret bilateral pact, "as an exceptional measure in view of the special circumstances."[21] Earlier that day, however, a similar proposal from Lieutenant-Colonel Sword had been forwarded to Halifax from Ambassador Kennard. Sword had suggested that, as an alternative to an Anglo-French-Russian agreement to defend Roumania, Great Britain might consider bolstering up Poland; some form of assistance, "short of definite commitment of

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[21]British Documents, IV, 500.

military support, would help to impede the unrestricted advance of German aggression and expansion and thus gain time for our armament programme, and assist in the maintenance of our prestige."[22] Here was the seed of a new plan.

The plan was a combination of bluff and delaying tactic. The bluff was to make a show of firmness that would at once discourage German ambition and appease an angry British public; if war were not finally averted, at least it would be delayed. Even if this declaration of determination were not backed by a viable military bloc, it might still serve the double purpose of restraining Hitler and silencing criticism of the government. The new plan was a bluff, and the British knew it. They were under no illusions as to their strength. They knew themselves and the French to be unprepared for war, and unable to defend eastern Europe; the eastern front would be undependable even with Russian help and nonexistent without it. British diplomacy had reached a point from which it could neither advance nor retreat. An obvious resumption of appeasement would not have been tolerated by the British public, yet a real departure from appeasement would have involved a risk of war, a risk which could not have been justified by the military situation. The solution which was emerging by the last week of March was a halfway measure: bilateral defense treaties

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[22]British Documents, IV, 480-481.

with Poland, and Roumania, would perhaps deter Hitler as declaration of intent, even though the intent could not have been translated into reality. At the least, war would be delayed, and Poland would not slide into the German camp.[23] If war eventually came, Russia could always be drawn in when necessary.

But why was not Russia earnestly sought at this time? Even if the alliance was only meant as a bluff, Russian partnership would have given the bluff an appearance of reality. Yet in the days between March 17 and 31, the Russians were given two quick rebuffs and then ignored. The answer is that the very effectiveness of Russian collaboration made her partnership undesirable. A powerful combination would have seemed to threaten the Germans with the encirclement of which they were constantly complaining and warning the West. On March 22, for example, Sir George Ogilvie-Forbes, the chargé d'affaires during Henderson's absence from Berlin, warned that the British efforts to set up a united front were being attacked as encirclement and were arousing strong anti-British feeling.[24]

On the next day Bonnet informed Halifax of warnings received from Rome that Hitler considered the Western maneuvers provocative. Halifax fully appreciated the danger,

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[23]British Documents, IV, 505-506.

[24]British Documents, IV, 456.

telling Bonnet that "we should do everything that we could do to avoid exposing ourselves to a charge either of encirclement or of framing a line-up on ideological prejudice."[25] On the same day, Chamberlain made a similar statement in the House of Commons.[26] Keith Feiling believes Chamberlain's fear that "the alliance would be a lining up of opposing blocs" was the greatest objection to Russian participation.[27] The Roumanian Foreign Minister observes in his memoirs that

> Lord Halifax tried . . . scrupulously to avoid anything that might be interpreted as provocation. Though war might be inevitable, it was still necessary to behave as though it could be avoided. It was in this spirit that he considered Poland. He had not pressed it to come to any understanding with the Soviet Union contrary to its inclination.[28]

And in a significant dispatch of March 28 to the British Ambassador at Washington, Halifax repeats his disavowal of encirclement, and further expresses the intention "to make it clear . . . that there is no desire on the part of His Majesty's Government to stand in the way of any reasonable efforts on the part of Germany to expand her export trade."[29] Since the initial stimulus to Britain's search for an

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[25]British Documents, IV, 487-488.

[26]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 1461-1463.

[27]Feiling, p. 407-408.

[28]Grigore Gafencu, Last Days of Europe, trans. E. Fletcher-Allen (New Haven, 1948), p. 117.

[29]British Documents, IV, 527.

alliance system had been German efforts to expand her trade in the direction of Roumania, these were ominous words. They signalled the reemergence of a way of thought that had not yet lost its attraction to the British policymakers--appeasement.

The events of March had not killed appeasement, but the public reaction to these events had driven it underground. The persistence of appeasement will be seen more clearly in the immediate aftermath of the announcement of the pledge to Poland. But now, confining our attention to the development of policy in late March, we can see the significance of the Polish veto. Beck's professed objection to the four-power declaration was based on his fear of provoking Hitler. The British were not distracted from a grand alliance because of the Polish fears, but because they themselves held similar thoughts. The British were concerned not so much with pleasing the Poles as with a desire to prevent rather than hasten a war. Defensive alliances with Poland and Roumania alone would pose little threat to Hitler; but if Russia were included, the danger to Germany might seem real and the corresponding danger of immediate war might be great. To keep the bluff from provoking Hitler, Russia had to be left out.

One possible difficulty with this plan consisted in the demands of the British public for an Anglo-Soviet pact as the specific means of demonstrating British determination.

This problem was easily solved. It was announced that negotiations with Russia were being temporarily suspended because more urgent matters demanded immediate attention. By the last days of March the public seemed satisfied that the government was trying to form an alliance system. The Manchester Guardian of March 29 reported

> The Anglo-Russian discussions have been interrupted not because there has been any hitch . . . but because . . . matters of more immediate urgency have to take precedence. Discussions between London, Paris, and Warsaw are, it is held here, at the moment all-important.[30]

More surprising still, the Russians seemed placated. Seeds reported on March 26 that the Soviet press attacks on appeasement had been toned down recently,[31] and a March 28 Tass communiqué on the Anglo-Soviet trade negotiations was optimistic, concluding that "the personal contact established between the authorized representatives of the British Government and members of the Soviet Government will doubtless assist the consolidation of Soviet-British relations and also international collaboration in the interests of peace."[32]

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[30]Lewis Namier, Diplomatic Prelude, 1938-1939 (London, 1948), p. 105.

[31]British Documents, IV, 510.

[32]Jane Degras (ed.), Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy, Vol. III (London, 1953), 324-325.

Thus by late March the way was made ready for a showy but impotent eastern alliance system, which was to be discussed and perhaps concluded during Beck's visit to London in early April. But the rapidly shifting flow of events was to prevent the British plan from being carried out in quite the way it had been conceived.

CHAPTER III

CRISIS AND CLIMAX

The March 31 guarantee was not the logical conclusion of a British determination to resist Hitler. As has been argued in the preceding chapter, the British leaders were not bent upon resistance; nor did it seem, until the last three or four days of March, that Poland was destined to be Hitler's next target. Samuel Hoare incorrectly remembers that "after the fall of Prague it was clear to everyone that Danzig was the next point of immediate danger."[1] In fact during most of the interim between Prague and the guarantee, Roumania was thought to be in greater danger than Poland. Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott have recently taken the position opposite to Hoare's that "the British offer of a guarantee to Poland was made on the assumption that Poland was in no danger."[2] It will be shown below that this view is also incorrect. Why then did the British government guarantee Poland?

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[1]Templewood, p. 342.

[2]Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, The Appeasers (London, 1963), pp. 235-236.

The main factor governing the British estimate of the Polish situation was the lack of adequate information. Germany and Poland had been discussing their outstanding problems for several months before March, but the British knew little of these talks. Important German-Polish negotiations took place between March 21 and 31, but all the Poles would tell the British was that the Germans were applying no serious pressure to them. On March 22, Beck assured Kennard that the Poles had "no immediate fears for Danzig."[3] Perhaps Beck really had no such fears on March 22, for the crucial conversations between German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop and Jozef Lipski, Polish Ambassador at Berlin, did not occur till March 26-27. After the March 26 meeting, Ribbentrop recorded that "I left Ambassador Lipski in no doubt that in my view the Polish proposals could not be regarded by the Führer as satisfactory; only the definite re-incorporation of Danzig, an extraterritorial link with East Prussia, and a 25 year non-aggression treaty with frontier guarantees, and cooperation in the Slovak question could, in the German view, lead to a final settlement."[4] On the following day, March 27, Ribbentrop warned Lipski that "relations between the two countries were . . . deteriorating sharply."[5]

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[3]British Documents, IV, 464.

[4]German Documents, D, VI, 122.

[5]German Documents, D, VI, 136.

On March 28 Moltke, the German Ambassador at Warsaw, reported to Berlin that "Polish political and military circles are obviously of the opinion that at any moment the Danzig question may become acute and that the danger of a German coup against Danzig hangs overhead."[6]

Yet the Poles continued to hide from the British the rapidly widening rift between themselves and Germany. On March 27 Lubienski, the Polish chef de cabinet, told Kennard that he "did not expect any special tension regarding Danzig in the next few days," and that the "Polish Ambassador in Berlin had seen Herr von Ribbentrop yesterday but had only mentioned Danzig incidentally."[7] On March 28, the Polish Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs assured Kennard that "for the moment there is no indication of a threatening attitude on the part of Germany."[8] On the same day Ogilvie-Forbes reported that Lipski had given him "no indication whatever that Germany was making demands or being truculent."[9] Similar reassurance was given to the British on the 29th and the 30th.[10] Raczynski records in his memoirs that

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[6]German Documents, D, VI, 144.

[7]British Documents, IV, 513-514.

[8]British Documents, IV, 524.

[9]British Documents, IV, 548.

[10]British Documents, IV, 528, 543, and 548.

"I do not know how the British Government learnt that the situation was ripe for such a guarantee. At all events, it was not we who told them."[11]

The Polish motives are an interesting subject for speculation but not relevant to the present discussion, which is concerned with the view from London. This view was largely obscured by Polish evasiveness, and by the Polish failure to inform the British of the progress of the German-Polish negotiations during the last ten days of March.[12] This fact, however, does not justify the conclusion reached by Gilbert and Gott that the British were in fact blind to the dangers of the Polish situation. Such a conclusion overlooks two important considerations. First, the British were aware that they could not trust the optimistic vagueness of official Polish information. On March 29 Halifax asked Kennard, "In view of reasons which we have for lack of confidence in M. Beck, would you think it desirable to make the communication [regarding the bilateral treaty] also to some other personality, such as the President or the Marshall?"[13] On April 2, two days after the guarantee had been made, Kennard complained that he was still unable "to secure a straightforward statement" from Beck "as to what has passed

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[11]Edward Raczynski, In Allied London (London, 1962) p. 12.

[12]Cf. Williams, Irish Historical Studies, X (March-September, 1956), 181.

[13]British Documents, IV, 543.

between Germany and Poland during the past few weeks regarding Danzig." He added,"It would appear . . . that the Polish Ambassador in London has been equally evasive."[14] Thus, the British did not accept official Polish optimism unquestioningly.

A second fact ignored by the Gilbert-Gott explanation is that Polish diplomats were not the only source of British information. Various unofficial reports pointed to Danzig as the next troubled area, although these were unconfirmed and no more trustworthy than current warnings of impending German aggression on a number of European states, including some of the western countries. As late as four days before the guarantee, there was nothing to suggest that Poland was in special danger.

Suddenly, on March 28 and 29, a variety of reports, all unofficial, reached London warning of an imminent German attack on Poland. British newspapers seized and spread the rumors. The March 28 Times carried the story under the headlines:

GERMAN EYES ON POLAND
ALLEGED CORRIDOR INCIDENTS
BERLIN "ASTONISHED."[15]

The March 29 Times headline was still more urgent:

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[14]British Documents, IV, 581-582.

[15]The Times (London), March 28, 1939, p. 14.

BERLIN WARNS POLAND
"GERMANS INSULTED"
A VEILED THREAT.[16]

The source of these rumors is not certain. T. D. Williams hypothesizes that certain members of the British news department and intelligence services, who had for some time opposed appeasement, may have exaggerated the danger of the situation in order to prod the government into action.[17] Whatever their source, the rumors spread.

On the 28th, George Ogilvie-Forbes reported from Berlin the ominous news that the German press had begun to print stories of atrocities against Germans living in Poland.[18] What appears to have been the decisive warning came at about 6 p.m. of March 29 when Ian Colvin, a correspondent of the News Chronicle who had recently returned from Germany, was brought before a secret meeting in the Prime Minister's room at the House of Commons.[19] Colvin related to Halifax, Chamberlain, and a few others stories of German troop movements, economic preparations, and the press campaign against Poland:

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[16] The Times (London), March 29, 1939, p. 16.

[17] Williams, Irish Historical Studies, X (March-September, 1956), 172-173.

[18] British Documents, IV, 525-526.

[19] A first hand account is found in Ian G. Colvin, Vansittart in Office (London, 1965), pp. 298-311.

> In a few words, the intention is present. The Germans believe that the democracies are infirm in their purposes. They are likely to strike.
> . . . . . .
> The Germans, we know, move secretly, swiftly, and, outwardly to all appearances, in unison. They may attack the Poles tomorrow, the next day, the day after, in a week.[20]

For reasons now to be described, these rumors concerning Poland were taken much more seriously by Chamberlain and Halifax than any that had preceded them.

The rumors of sudden danger to Poland contributed substantially to the growing sense of uncertainty and fear which characterized the two weeks following March 15. The breach of the Munich treaty and the story of the threat to Rumania had been serious enough, but, in addition, the government was receiving many secret warnings that worse was yet to come. On March 17, for example, Sir Eric Phipps reported in a top secret letter to Halifax that "Hitler's personal wish . . . is to make war on Great Britain before June or July."[21] And on March 29 the same day as Colvin's warning, the Foreign Office received from the British military attaché in Berlin a memorandum which reviewed the quickly deteriorating situation in eastern Europe and called for a preventive war on Germany within the next three weeks.[22] War was in the air when Colvin's warning was heard.

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[20]Colvin, pp. 306-308.

[21]British Documents, IV, 596.

[22]British Documents, IV, 623-627.

Meanwhile, the Axis powers enjoyed two more public triumphs. On March 22, Hitler quickly annexed Memel, and on the 28th the revolutionary armies in Spain captured Madrid, marking in effect the end of the Civil War. With the new threat to Poland on March 28 and 29, the forces of British public opinion, which had briefly subsided while the government was thought to have been seeking a grand alliance, again erupted with impatience. On March 29 and 31, angry members of the House of Commons demanded to know what was being done to fulfill the promise of an anti-German coalition including Russia.[23] On March 28, thirty-one members of Parliament, including Duff Cooper, Eden, Churchill, and Amery, put down a motion calling for a new cabinet based on more representative lines.[24] On March 31, the Times reported that "a declaration . . . by the executive committee of the International Federation of Trade Unions calls on the Governments of Great Britain, France, Russia, and Poland to form a peace front and, immediately to enter into mutual guarantees for full and unqualified support in the event of further aggression by Germany or Italy."[25]

The Russians, whose suspicions had been only momentarily allayed, again pressed for a demonstration of British

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[23]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2015-2018, 2416-2417.

[24]The Times (London), March 30, 1939, p. 14.

[25]The Times (London), March 31, 1939, p. 11.

sincerity. On March 29, Maisky asked Halifax whether the British contemplated direct military assistance to Poland and Roumania. When Halifax answered that they were, Maisky was encouraged and told him that a promise of such aid "might have far-reaching results" and "would increase enormously the confidence of other countries."[26] Similarly, American opinion was thought to be demanding British firmness; United States Ambassador Kennedy told Halifax on the 28th that British and French failure to support Poland "would serve to alienate American opinion from France and Great Britain."[27]

It seemed likely that another successful German coup would bring down the cabinet. The Chamberlain government had been granted a last reprieve on March 17, but now the whole substance of their excuses was vanishing. A plan--bilateral defense pacts with Poland and Roumania--had been devised to appease the public and delay further German expansion. But now public opinion was once again enraged, and Hitler seemed poised for further conquest, this time at the expense of Poland, the very instrument with which Chamberlain had hoped to avoid both evils. The feeling that something, anything, had to be done to slow the rush of events was overpowering. If Britain ever needed an alliance

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[26]British Documents, IV, 544.

[27]British Documents, IV, 547.

with Russia, it was in these last days of March, but Chamberlain had staked everything on Poland and did not think to change his course. Even if Chamberlain had been willing to incur the dangers of a Russian alliance, he probably would not have done so. Striking a deal with the Soviets would need time, and time was just what the government did not have. A quick one-sided act was needed, and what emerged was the guarantee to Poland.

When Colvin warned the government of the supposed danger over Poland and, further, suggested that the British be firm in order to encourage the German opposition to Hitler, Under-Secretary Sir Alexander Cadogan asked "How would it affect people in Germany if we gave a guarantee to Poland?" Colvin replied, "It would help." Cadogan recorded in his diary the aftermath of Colvin's visit:

> "Halifax who had stayed behind with the P.M. came over later and said that the latter had agreed to the idea of an <u>immediate</u> declaration of support of Poland, to counter a quick <u>Putsch</u> by Hitler." Sir Alexander sat up with Lord Halifax and R. A. Butler till 1 a.m. on March 30th drafting it out. Next day the Cabinet saw the draft declaration and it was approved by the Foreign Policy Committee that afternoon. Telegrams were sent to Warsaw and Bucharest requesting agreement to an immediate declaration. On the morning of March 31st the Cabinet again saw the declaration and the Foreign Policy Committee approved a revised version.[28]

Samuel Hoare's account of the circumstances leading to the guarantee is similar to Colvin's. Hoare stresses the sense

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[28]Colvin, pp. 309-310.

of urgency, the need for a quick and definite action to impress Hitler, the profusion of "rumours and reports of impending coups," and the hastiness of the final decision. Hoare adds, almost as an afterthought, that "as to co-operation with Russia, we were prepared to make further efforts to obtain it, but it was clear that what was needed at once was action of some kind, and a multilateral agreement would, at the best, take time to complete."[29]

William Strang, Foreign Office Counsellor and Head of the Central Department, gives a similar account in his memoirs:

> The declaration about Poland was an improvisation. . . . . Normally, when any grave new step in foreign policy is in contemplation, its implications, political and military, are thoroughly canvassed by Ministers with their civilian and military advisers. In the case of the Polish declaration, the idea seems to have sprung fully grown from the Ministerial mind. It was designed, no doubt, among other things, to meet what was recognized to be an imperative demand by public opinion that Poland should not be allowed to go the same way as Czechoslovakia. And it was formed under the impact of alarming reports about imminent German intentions in regard to Poland. . . .[30]

Foreign observers were aware of the nature of the motives for the guarantee. Roumanian Foreign Minister Gafencu characterizes Britain's post-Prague maneuvers as "delaying

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[29]Templewood, pp. 344-349.

[30]Baron Strang (William Strang), Home and Abroad (London, 1956), p. 161.

tactics, to prevent another surprise such as that which had presented the western powers with a fait accompli."[31] Maisky recalls the "accidental, hasty and near-sighted character" of the decision, and the lack of "time to think out all the possible consequences of the measures adopted."[32] The German impression will be discussed later.

The guarantee, then, was an act of desparation on the part of Chamberlain, into which he was driven by a succession of threatening events and rumors, and by the pressure of public opinion which demanded some definite action by the British government. If this was indeed the case, then the inadequacy of each of the opposing descriptions quoted at the beginning of this chapter is obvious. Hoare's picture of Chamberlain is that of a man whose patience was exhausted on March 15, who saw the next victim of evil and was determined to protect him. Equally misleading is the theory of Gilbert and Gott that Chamberlain saw in the guarantee a safe and convenient means of placating an angry public by pretending to protect a potential victim which he never believed to be in danger.[33] Chamberlain was certainly preoccupied with public opinion, but there is no reason for

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[31]Gafencu, p. 113.

[32]Maisky, p. 115.

[33]Gilbert and Gott, p. 36.

believing that he was sure Poland was in no danger. A fair estimate of the British intelligence is given in an editorial footnote to the British documents: The information on Poland was incomplete and conflicting, and there was still doubt as to whether Poland or Roumania would be the next target, but both were believed to be among Hitler's ultimate goals and the immediate evidence did point to Poland.[34]

Both of these incorrect accounts lend to the British policies of March, 1939, an appearance of internal logic and consistency they never possessed. British diplomacy was not moved by a single, preconceived purpose; it was at the mercy of events and it operated fitfully. From March 15 to 17, it was regretful but complacent; public pressure goaded it unwillingly into action from the 17th to about the 22nd; from the 22nd till about the 28th complacency reappeared in a new guise of firmness; and in the last four days of March the old pressures returned with redoubled force. The result was a haphazard commitment whose consequences were neither examined nor foreseen. Both Hoare and Gilbert-Gott err in seeing Chamberlain as the master of his own policy. Hoare sees the assertion of resolution, while the two historians see a clever and facile politician deceiving the British public. In fact Chamberlain was a stunned and frightened man, frantically trying to buy time in which to devise a

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[34]British Documents, IV, 545n.

reasonable solution to overpowering problems. The guarantee to Poland was not, as these two accounts claim in different ways, the logical result of a consistently followed policy. It was a product of chance.

It is important to note that the improvisation of March 30-31 was different from the pacts with Poland and Roumania which were being planned when the Polish crisis broke out. A bilateral agreement was desired, but the actual guarantee that was given was unilateral and unnegotiated. Presumably the projected agreement would have specified the British military obligation to Poland, if there were to be any such obligation, which is doubtful. The March 31 announcement was sufficiently ambiguous to admit of a wide range of interpretation on this score. This ambiguity is not surprising, for it reflects the circumstances in which the guarantee was born. Just when appeasement was again on the rise, crisis forced a gesture of firmness. The resulting declaration contained elements of both policies. The aftermath was to demonstrate the dangers of ambiguity.

CHAPTER IV

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

It is easy to imagine that any man, including a statesman, has a greater measure of free will than in fact he does. The diplomat's environment is not a vacuum of foreign offices and embassies in which he may weigh possibilities of action while insulated from outside pressures and then choose the course he favors. It has been argued above that the decision to guarantee Poland was not the culmination of any existing British policy, but an interim measure, induced by fear, and taken in order to hold open the possibility of the future realization of an emerging plan. Further restrictions on the freedom of British diplomacy were such that the interim measure was soon to be transmuted so as to hinder the future enactment of the policy it was meant to preserve. Thus, to understand the causes and effects of the British démarche, we cannot stop with its announcement, but instead must follow its evolution for the first week after March 31, by which time the British position had become nearly fixed. The guarantee, like the men who gave it, did not exist in a vacuum; rather, it brought forth waves of reaction from the several interested sources

of power. The ways in which the meaning of the guarantee was changed during the first week of April, and the ways in which it was not changed, illuminate the state of mind of the cabinet and the future course of politics until the outbreak of war.

Before the various reactions to the guarantee are discussed, two points already mentioned must be reemphasized. The first of these is that the guarantee was never regarded by the cabinet as other than temporary. As Halifax told the House of Lords on April 3: "His Majesty's Government . . . decided that no time should be lost in taking action to stabilise the situation, and accordingly, in advance of the conclusion of a more comprehensive understanding, they thought it right to make plain what, in the interim, their position would be."[1] The wording of the guarantee was left vague. The intention to defend Poland was declared, but the circumstances in which assistance would be offered, and the means by which it would be given, were not specified. Chamberlain and Halifax must have supposed they could first declare the principles of their policy and later clarify its details. This may have been a reasonable supposition, but it was to be proved wrong.

The second preliminary point concerns the means by which the British could make good their pledge. As noted

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[1]Great Britain, 5 Parliamentary Debates (Lords), Vol. 112 (1939), 575.

above, the decision for the guarantee was made so quickly that all its consequences were not considered. One obvious fact, which was known but ignored under the pressures of the end of March, was that the British would be unable to defend Poland should they have to do so. When Raczynski on March 24 first suggested that Britain guarantee Poland, it was understood that "this did not mean that there would be an undertaking as between Poland and Great Britain to go to each other's assistance if attacked." Only consultation was required.[2] Halifax admits in his memoirs that "neither the Polish Government nor the Roumanian Government was under any illusion as to the measure of concrete help they might expect from Great Britain in the event of Hitler choosing war."[3] At least as early as March 22 it was clear that the destruction of Czechoslovakia had made Poland indefensible. After March 15 Germany bounded Poland on three sides, and both the Silesian industrial district and Polish access to the Baltic were highly vulnerable. Neither Britain nor France could give Poland significant naval aid, since Germany was expected to dominate the Baltic in any war; further, "the German air force could be relied upon virtually to destroy any Polish city at will."[4] And with good reason

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[2]British Documents, IV, 501.

[3]Viscount Halifax, Fullness of Days (New York, 1957), p. 209.

[4]British Documents, IV, 479; cf. also the later, and still more pessimistic, estimates of E. R. Sword on April 5, in British Documents, V (London, 1952), 38-39.

David Lloyd George said in Commons on April 3, "If war occurred to-morrow, you could not send a single battalion to Poland."[5] Yet if the view taken in this paper is correct, then British awareness of their incapacity to defend Poland was not inconsistent with the decision to guarantee her, for the British hoped that their declaration of firmness would put off indefinitely the need to be firm. Even on the eve of war, writes his biographer, Chamberlain "could not believe that Hitler would begin a major war for Danzig and the Corridor."[6] The British did not expect their bluff to be called; further, the vague wording of the pledge was thought to leave plenty of room for adjustment when it came time to clarify their position.

The sources of reaction to the guarantee which the British considered important were two. One was Germany. The guarantee had been made in a moment of boldness brought on by fear, but immediately after its announcement the cabinet was plagued with contrary fears. Whereas the guarantee had been given from fear of the consequences of inaction, it was followed by a fear that the action taken had been too strong. Appeasement had never been far from the minds of the leaders of the cabinet, and when the Polish crisis had reached a sudden climax in late March, it

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[5]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2507.

[6]Feiling, p. 413.

interrupted an incipient reemergence of that policy. One can imagine the cabinet, after their flash of boldness, soberly asking themselves what they had done and quickly deciding they had done too much. Chief among the causes of the sudden reassessment was the prompt reaction from Germany. In a speech of April 1, the day after the guarantee, Hitler repeated his old warning: encirclement of Germany, which the guarantee was held to represent, would not be tolerated. The British were terrorized by the fear that their policy would backfire, that it would provoke rather than deter Hitler. As a consequence they might find themselves called upon to fulfill a promise which they could not. The German reaction now made the cabinet consider the need to back down from the guarantee, and an attempt to do so was quickly made.

The possibility of retreating from the stance of March 31 was tightly restricted by the second important source of reaction, British opinion. The guarantee was announced in large part to appease domestic critics; it was somewhat too successful. The pledge was received with great enthusiasm; a poll taken in April showed that 83% of the voters approved of the policy of guarantees.[7] Not only did this reception preclude any open attempt at reducing the

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[7]"British Institute of Public Opinion," The Public Opinion Quarterly, IV (March, 1940), 80.

effect of the commitment; it had the opposite effect of arousing the suspicion that the government might fall back to appeasement and of bringing forth demands that the guarantee be strengthened. The vague wording of the guarantee was having an effect opposite to that intended. Under the cross-currents of pressure to maintain the guarantee in appearance while reducing it in fact, the first hesitant experiment at backing down was made on April 1.

One contemporary observer wrote that "the declaration on Poland has given almost universal satisfaction. I say almost because there was a curious and unexplained leader in The Times the morning after which seemed to whittle down its importance."[8] The leader, entitled "A Stand For Ordered Diplomacy," put forward strong reservations as to the wisdom of the guarantee, especially regarding the interpretations of which it was susceptible. The key word, according to The Times' interpretation was not the "integrity" but the "independence" of Poland.[9] That is, the British promise was construed so as to apply only if the sovereignty of Poland were threatened, not merely control of Danzig. Since Danzig, or the Corridor, or both, seemed more likely to be the next German goals than did the whole

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[8]Thomas Jones, A Diary with Letters, 1931-1950 (London, 1954), p. 431.

[9]The Times (London), April 1, 1939, p. 15. Cf. also The Times (London), The History of the Times, Part IV, Vol. II (London, 1952), 962-963.

of Poland, this was an attempt to reduce substantially the scope of the undertaking. It cannot be proven that the editorial was officially inspired. Charges to that effect were made from the floor of Commons[10] and by Polish Ambassador Raczynski.[11] These accusations were, of course, denied by the government, but there is some evidence for accepting them as true. First, there was issued nearly simultaneously an almost identical interpretation of the pledge by the Reuters news agency.[12] Second, Keith Feiling cites a letter written by Chamberlain shortly after the guarantee in which the Prime Minister said: "What we are concerned with . . . is not the boundaries of States, but attacks on their independence."[13] And third, another attempt to reduce the effect of the pledge which can definitely be traced to the government was being made at about the same time. This will be described shortly.

The Times' leader was not only an attempt to tone down the force of the guarantee; it was also a feeler put out to test the acceptability of such a move to the public. The response was immediate and dramatic. Sharp denunciations

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[10]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2543 and 2579.

[11]British Documents, V, 51-52.

[12]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2577-2578.

[13]Feiling, p. 403.

of the editorial came from the House of Commons and the press. Despite some charges of inspiration, the government were not generally held responsible; rather, The Times was regarded as the culprit guilty of trying to undermine the government's policy. The Economist wrote that "even now the usual irresponsible commentators, who have done such infinite harm to British probity and policy in the past, are hard at work reading dishonest meanings into the Government's statements."[14] Winston Churchill called the editorial "sinister," while others likened it "to that which foreshadowed the ruin of Czechoslovakia." The Spectator called it an attempt "deliberately to whittle down the effect of the declaration."[15]

The Times retreated quickly, as gracefully as it could, with an April 4 leader which called the undertaking a "stand against aggression as such, against vicious and retrograde aims of military conquest, and in defence of the independence of sovereign national states, against predatory force."[16] The word "independence" was still stressed, but the general tone was sufficiently stronger to silence criticism. The government had found it necessary on April 3 to

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[14]"Britain Girds Her Loins," The Economist, CXXXV (April 8, 1939), 73-74.

[15]The History of the Times, Part IV, Vol. II, 962-963.

[16]The History of the Times, Part IV, Vol. II, 962 and 962n.

disclaim any responsibility for The Times' views,[17] and the opposition critics were largely satisfied that Chamberlain "at least did give the lie to that mischievous interpretation which was put upon his speech of last Friday in the "Times" newspaper on Saturday."[18] The cabinet must have drawn the obvious lesson that they could not trim their promise publicly. Yet something had to be done, for the guarantee as it stood left Britain in too dangerous a position, or so they thought. Further attempts at backing down had to be less open.

Meanwhile, the scope of the guarantee was being not reduced but enlarged by the powerful forces of public opinion. A good measure of this phenomenon was the official position regarding the defense of Danzig, an issue on which government policy was forced to turn full circle within two weeks. Until early April, no policy was more distant from British consideration than that of underwriting the Polish lease on Danzig. The absorption of that city by Germany was regarded as inevitable, and Sir Howard Kennard, on the day before the guarantee, admitted to the German Ambassador in Warsaw that "the Poles would have to take into account the German character of Danzig and sooner or later draw the

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[17]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2425-2426.

[18]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2562.

conclusions."[19] And as soon as the guarantee was made, the first attempt at lessening its effect, i.e., The Times' leader, was an attempt to assure that the British were not obliged to defend Danzig.

Not only did domestic opinion prevent this; it immediately began to demand that Danzig be specifically included in the guarantee as a demonstration of British good faith. The same speeches in Commons, which on April 3 denounced The Times' leader, also called for a specific insurance of Danzig. "In regard to the Polish Corridor, that lifeline of Poland, I feel that here is an issue on which we must take a very firm stand," said one M.P.[20] Another critic stressed the importance of Danzig and the Corridor for Polish independence and suggested that the Poles ought to be encouraged to be stubborn over their control of these areas.[21] A prevalent myth assigns the inclusion of Danzig in the guarantee to shrewd Polish diplomacy. Although Chamberlain did assure Beck during their London conversations of April 4-6 that Danzig would be protected,[22] there is nothing to indicate that Beck was responsible for getting the British to take this step. The government had

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[19]German Documents, D, VI, 191n.

[20]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2562-2564.

[21]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2490.

[22]Raczynski, p. 342.

already been forced to include Danzig, and Beck's demands were the instance, but not the cause, of the British acquiescence. It was the repeated demands in Parliament and the press, added to the touchiness of the government after the Times debacle, that changed the government's attitude. Here the British position had to remain frozen. In answer to an April 18 question in Commons as to whether the guarantee covered Danzig, Under-Secretary R. A. Butler replied that "the Prime Minister's recent statements in this House will, I trust, have put beyond doubt the nature of the undertaking."[23]

Finding it impossible to retreat openly, and finding, in addition, that the scope of their commitment was being dangerously broadened against their will, the British were obliged to seek quick means of alleviating the danger of their position. Three kinds of approach were made in the week following the guarantee, after it had become evident on April 1 that open retreat was impossible. The first of these has become fairly well-known: this was Chamberlain's repeated warnings to Beck to be cautious and not provoke Hitler into war. Chamberlain's critics have delighted in attacking him on this score, but given the understandable British suspicions of the Poles and the weak British military position, it is difficult to understand why this caution was so reprehensible.

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[23]Commons Debates, Vol. 346, 163.

The second approach has largely escaped attention, and it is mentioned neither in the government-published British documents nor in the memoirs of anyone concerned. This was the frantic effort of the government to minimize the scope of the guarantee in German eyes, and to assure Hitler that the limit of German gain by negotiation had not yet been reached. The importance of a March 31 dispatch to Berlin from the German chargé d'affaires in London justifies lengthy quotation. Kordt, in relating the announcement of the guarantee, stresses that a Foreign Office spokesman

> emphasized that the prerequisite for British assistance is the fulfilment of <u>both</u> conditions indicated by Chamberlain. It is particularly significant that British assistance will become effective only when it is established, first, that German action clearly threatens Polish independence (in the judgement of Britain) and, secondly, that the Polish government "accordingly" considers it vital to counter German action by military resistance.
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> 1) The pledge of assistance on the fulfilment of both conditions operates only for the period up to the conclusion of the negotiations still in progress.
>
> 2) The first part of the statement leaves the settlement of all controversial points, including colonial questions, open to negotiation.
>
> 3) The second part of the statement leaves it doubtful, to say the least, whether military action against Danzig constitutes a <u>casus belli</u> for the British Government.
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> 4) The News Department of the Foreign Office has repeatedly and urgently requested Baron Hahn, diplomatic correspondent of the DNB [German News Agency], to point out to authoritative quarters that Chamberlain's statement in no way represented a preliminary step towards a policy of encirclement.

> The Prime Minister and the British Government attached importance to this fact being established.[24]

Thus the Foreign Office was careful to emphasize to the German government: the temporary and limited nature of British intentions; Chamberlain's preface to the guarantee, which "advocated the adjustment, by way of free negotiation between the parties concerned, of any differences that may arise between them";[25] the lack of British intent to defend Danzig; and, above all, the British disclaimer of encirclement. This British approach was, of course, secret, and was being made at the same time that the official interpretation was being planted in the British press.

The government were thoroughly successful in their attempt to placate German fear. German State Secretary of Foreign Affairs Weizsäcker, in a circular telegram of April 3, concluded that "the prematurely issued statement of the declaration of assistance to Poland was in no way justified by the foreign political situation, but was, rather, caused by the British Government's need to give the world and public opinion at home, which had already become impatient, a first result of the assiduous diplomatic activity begun by the Foreign Office on March 18."[26] It is easy to see how the Germans came to this conclusion.

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[24]German Documents, D, VI, 172-173.

[25]Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2415.

[26]German Documents, D, VI, 185.

Not only did the British placate German fears; these fears never really existed, for the Germans had not taken the guarantee very seriously even before the British apologies began. On March 18 Ambassador Dirksen had written of the early British responses to Prague: "It is not yet clear whether the object of these conversations is the creation of a new, strong coalition against Germany, or only an agreement upon measures in the event of further German attacks on other states, for instance, Rumania or Poland."[27] And on March 28 the German Embassy in London pointed out to Berlin the government's refusal to consider an economic boycott and sanctions as a reprisal for the absorption of Czechoslovakia.[28] Thus even before the guarantee had been made the Germans had considered an arrangement of that sort as a minimum gesture posing no real threat to themselves. And the British apologies and assurances which shortly followed the guarantee served only to increase German confidence as to British intentions. Yet the British press, during the first week of April, every day carried accounts of Hitler's speeches in which British encirclement was violently denounced. Hitler was not worried, but he terrorized the British by making them believe that he was. Chamberlain had started to bluff Hitler by pretending to be firm, but he immediately lost his

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[27]German Documents, D, VI, 39. The emphasis has been added.

[28]German Documents, D, VI, 145.

nerve. Hitler then successfully bluffed Chamberlain by pretending to believe the latter's bluff. The British were no match for Hitler at this game.

The third British move in the direction away from firmness was the final subordination of the value of a Russian alliance. It has previously been argued that Russia had already in the last ten days of March been devaluated as a partner largely from fear of repurcussions in Germany. Halifax' aim had been "to give timely warning to the German Government in terms as little provocative as possible concerning any aggression against Poland,"[29] and inclusion of Russia was feared as provocative. The increased danger felt by the government after the guarantee made it all the more necessary to keep the Russians at a comfortable distance, from which it was still thought they could be recalled if needed.

Again, the Germans encouraged the British fear; and again, it is instructive to compare the private views of the Germans with their public statements. On March 29 Chargé d' Affaires Kordt correctly reported to Berlin that:

> Obviously, the countries consulted wish to avoid anything which could be interpreted as encirclement of Germany. Now Great Britain has adopted this standpoint also. Hence the renunciation of direct Soviet Russian cooperation.[30]

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[29]British Documents, IV, 545. My emphasis.

[30]German Documents, D, VI, 151.

Yet on the next day The Times quoted a German newspaper article as saying: "The Moscow policy of the British Cabinet . . . can be explained only as a manifestation of the determination to sign a pact for the encirclement of the Reich."[31] And, of course, latent in Hitler's constant protests against encirclement was the threat of retaliation for an Anglo-Russian alliance.

Hitler successfully frightened the British and doomed the Russian alliance, which had already become remote. Beck's role in keeping Russia out remained minimal. British fear, not Beck's veto, kept out Russia. Chamberlain admitted to Beck on April 4 that the government "were constantly being attacked in the House of Commons because they did not get on to better terms with Russia." Yet Chamberlain did not once in the April 4-6 conversations press Beck to agree to Russian participation; on the contrary, he even seems to have invited Beck's objections to it.[32] The problem, as Halifax had told Beck earlier in the day, was "how to get a maximum degree of collaboration from Soviet Russia without entailing dangerous consequences."[33] On April 6 Ambassador Seeds wrote Halifax that "our new course . . . would necessarily keep [the] Soviet Union in the background."[34]

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[31] The Times (London), March 30, 1939, p. 14.

[32] British Documents, V, 13-14.

[33] British Documents, V, 7.

[34] British Documents, V, 45.

The British coolness towards the Russians finally became reciprocal. The Russians expressed understandable surprise at the quickness of the guarantee and understandable suspicion as to British motives. The Soviets got the correct impression that they were being left out: Chamberlain showed Maisky the guarantee only two hours before its announcement, not allowing the ambassador enough time to learn his government's view of it.[35] This view soon became known, but only after the guarantee had been announced. On April 1 Litvinov reminded the British that they had killed the chances for the six-power conference and the four-power declaration, and that they were now pursuing a new course of which the Russians knew little: the "Soviet Government had had enough and would henceforward stand apart free of any commitments."[36] On April 4 Izvestia carried an authorized denial of French press reports that Russia had promised to supply Poland with raw materials and to deny them to Germany in the event of war.[37] On the same day Pravda accused Britain and France of encouraging Germany to seize the Ukraine.[38]

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[35]Maisky, pp. 107-108.

[36]British Documents, IV, 574-575.

[37]Degras, III, 328.

[38]Quoted in A. Rossi [Angelo Tasca], The Russo-German Alliance, trans. J. and M. Cullen (Boston, 1951), p. 12.

The April 5 Times reported the Soviet accusations, but tried to minimize their significance: the Russians were "merely repeating what is expounded in 'The Foundations of the International Policy of the Soviet Government,' published in 1933."[39] The newspaper had never dismissed Hitler's warnings so lightly; the attitude of The Times again corresponded very neatly with that of the government. A remarkable April 4 leader, the same editorial in which The Times recanted its frustrated feeler of April 1, gives an admirable summary of what was to become the nearly fixed British position until the outbreak of war. The April 4 leader first dismissed the opposing ideas that the guarantee was either insincere in its pretensions to defend Poland or an attempt at encircling Germany. The first denial was an attempt to appease the public, the second to appease Germany. It then proclaimed the willingness of the government to deal with Russia, "whatever the stage at which the U.S.S.R. may decide to enter the consultations." Such heavy-handed distortion should have been embarrassing. Finally, The Times had a word for the "inconsolable pessimism of Mr. Lloyd George, who now seems to inhabit an odd and remote world of his own."[40] Presumably Lloyd George was singled out because of his words in the House of Commons on the previous day:

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[39] The Times (London), April 5, 1939, p. 13.

[40] The Times (London), April 4, 1939, p. 17.

> I cannot understand why, before committing ourselves to this tremendous enterprise, we did not secure beforehand the adhesion of Russia.
> . . . . . .
> I ask the Government to take immediate steps to secure adhesion of Russia.[41]

Such was the odd and remote world of Mr. Lloyd George.

Whether the Russians were really alienated by what may have seemed a British plot to drive Hitler east hardly matters, for by April 6 the British had gotten themselves into such a precarious and inflexible position as to have nothing of value to offer the Russians in return for an alliance. British freedom of action had become bound to Polish whims; even the decision as to when British assistance would be needed was surrendered to the Poles,[42] whom the Russians distrusted even more than did the British. Assuming, and it is a reasonable assumption, that the Russian aim had been to build a strong anti-German coalition in order to prevent war, it is then clear why the Russians soon began to look elsewhere. All the British could offer Russia after the first week of April was the likely prospect of a war with Germany that was sure to be fought on Russian land and without Western support. The Soviets did not have to look far to find a better offer, if only a temporary one.

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[41] Commons Debates, Vol. 345, 2510.

[42] Cf. Halifax' May 3 dispatch to Kennard, British Documents, V, 402.

The consequences of the British guarantee to Poland were realized within one week of its announcement. Russian aid was lost, and with it the last chance for a grand alliance. Germany was encouraged to believe that the West would continue to grant her demands peacefully. And the British public was allowed to assume that such demands would be met with force. The seeds of war had been planted.

CONCLUSION

British foreign policy under Baldwin and Chamberlain has commonly been called appeasement. By that word is understood the attempt to redress legitimate grievances by common sense, by compromise, by rational negotiation among rational men. Appeasement had no grand design, but rather was a piecemeal and improvised policy which proceeded from the assumption that any problem admits of a peaceful solution agreeable to all interested parties if only they approach it with reason and good will. Appeasement was in the tradition of nineteenth-century liberalism, and in a time of violence and non-rational political theory, it was an anachronism. Yet its goals were admirable, and it cannot be stated that the policy failed. Something failed, but was it appeasement?

Appeasement had been the British government's policy before March 15, 1939, and it continued to be their policy after April 6 of that year. The intervening three weeks constituted a crisis for the policy and for the men who had made it. The wisdom of appeasement was brought into question during the crisis; the alternative to appeasement was considered and rejected, and so appeasement returned in early April. But it did not pass through the crisis unscathed, and when it returned it had changed.

These three weeks were regarded by the British leaders as a crisis of domestic confidence, not one of foreign relations. On March 15 Germany had broken her pledged word. In doing so, thought Chamberlain, she had only taken what she would have gotten anyway. He therefore regarded the absorption with calmness and perhaps a little sorrow. He disapproved of the means the Germans had used, but he was not disturbed by the end they had achieved. The British public, however, was alarmed by both. Not Hitler's actions, but rather the public response to those actions, pushed Chamberlain into motion.

In theory, appeasement was applicable to anyone with a just complaint. In practice, the complaints of Germany had been the most pressing, and Germany had hitherto been the chief beneficiary of appeasement. The policy had on the whole been a popular one until March 15, when a sweeping reaction against appeasement immediately followed the Prague coup. This coup, although it hardly disturbed Chamberlain, was thought by the British public to have demonstrated the bankruptcy of the old policy. Reluctantly and only under great pressure the British leaders made the motions of considering the alternative policy. Perhaps they also reassessed their past course. But while reconsideration was taking place, at least the outward signs of a new course had to be shown, for now the British public, as well as Germany, had to be appeased.

Rumors of a coup against Roumania on March 17 provided an additional spur to the government. Given the military weakness of Britain and France alone, the only foreseeable alternative to appeasement was a Western-Soviet alliance. The possibilities for such an alliance were explored between March 17 and March 22, but it seems that the plan was never really given serious consideration. Within these six days, the Soviets agreed to discuss two variations of such an alliance system, and both times they were quickly turned away with what must be counted as flimsy excuses. Maybe the British had expected that Russia would not be quite so willing to discuss the very type of proposal which she had been making for years. At any rate, the new course was totally dropped from consideration in less than a week, and still another plan was formulated.

The new plan was a compromise. Bilateral mutual assistance treaties were to be extended to Poland and Roumania. It was hoped that this move would be sufficiently firm to silence domestic critics and caution Hitler, yet not so drastic as to menace and provoke the Germans. The fear of provoking Hitler was one of the major reasons why the Russians were to be left out of the alliance, for Soviet adhesion might be interpreted by the Germans as encirclement. The other reason was that the British were confident to the point of complacency about their ability to get Russian help if and when necessary. The new plan was a typical product

of appeasement. It was a compromise, devised to restrain both the German leaders and the British public, and there was in it a hint that concessions might be resumed later if the Germans had further demands.

But the plan was spoiled by the immediate turn of events. An apparent German threat to Poland in late March seemed on the verge of upsetting the still unborn compromise, and in a reckless moment of panic, Chamberlain on March 31 gave the Poles a guarantee. Its ambiguous wording had left little enough real substance in the pledge, but even so Chamberlain was quickly beset by fears that his action might provoke Hitler. A first attempt at reducing the dangers incurred by the pledge was an apparently inspired editorial in the April 1 Times. The British public had approved of the tenor of the guarantee but was still suspicious of the government's sincerity; the Times leader excaberated these suspicions, and the government was obliged at once to disavow the feeler. In the course of retreat the government also had to give public assurances with respect to Polish rights in Danzig, an undertaking they had strenuously sought to avoid. Having failed at public withdrawal, the government then redoubled their simultaneous and secret efforts to assure Germany that no threat to her was intended and that further concessions might be granted if only she would be patient. In fact, the Germans had been less frightened than anyone by the momentary boldness of frightened men, but,

being more clever than the British, they pretended to feel endangered, thus encouraging Chamberlain's confidential apologies and assurances.

Appeasement of Germany was again a basis of British policy by early April, but two important factors had changed. First, the British public, who would no longer tolerate the old policy, were allowed to believe that their government would henceforth be firm with the Germans. And second, the Russians, now more than ever ignored for fear of inciting Hitler to rash action, were irreversibly alienated both by suspicion of British intent and by a realistic appreciation that the British had gotten themselves trapped in a dangerous corner in which they had nothing to offer the Soviets but a disproportionate share of the danger. The government had clung to its old policy, but they did so at a high price.

The only major considerations of the men who made British policy were public opinion and German opinion. The more extreme critics of appeasement have held other types of motivation to be important. Although it cannot be demonstrated conclusively that sympathy for Germany or prejudice against the Soviet Union were not at work here, these factors do not appear to have been in any way decisive. Chamberlain's more moderate critics, among them Mr. A. J. P. Taylor, blame him for being tricked into giving the guarantee by Colonel Beck. This myth has gone unquestioned too

long, and the burden of its proof is on those who spread it, for there seems to be no good evidence in its favor.

Chamberlain's defenders, on the other hand, fall into two camps: those who defend the man and those who defend his original policy. The former group of apologists have formulated the widely-held theory that Chamberlain saw the folly of appeasement on March 15 and then struck out on a new path of firmness. For reasons argued above, this theory too seems untenable. Those who defend the policy of appeasement itself have often maintained that Chamberlain was buying time in which to rearm his country. This apology is a rationalization after the fact, and it does not describe Chamberlain's motives of March, 1939. For Chamberlain had not decided upon firmness; in fact, he had no grand design of any kind, but was merely groping from crisis to crisis, hoping for some sort of solution.

The policy of appeasement cannot be said to have failed, for after March it was no longer followed with consistency. Nor did the policy of firmness fail, because it was never tried. But the attempt to fluctuate between these two policies soon led to disaster. The old policy and the viable alternative were opposites, and their divergence was beyond the limits of what could be bridged successfully by compromise. Either policy might have succeeded; but neither was consistently followed, and the result was war.

The British dilemma of March, 1939 can be reduced to the question of whether the rest of eastern Europe was to be ceded to Germany. The continuation of appeasement would have meant this cession. Once completed, it would have left Germany and Russia face to face. Such a confrontation might have checked Hitler; if it did not, at least it would have assured that Russia would not be neutral in the ensuing war. And perhaps Britain would have been able to remain isolated. There is no evidence that Chamberlain was trying to start a Russo-German war; but his policy, followed to a conclusion, might have had that effect. The logical outcome of appeasement must remain conjecture, for the British public did not tolerate the abandonment of eastern Europe. If, then, eastern Europe were to be defended, Russian help was needed. But Chamberlain tried to give the appearance of firmness without Russian help. In doing so he combined the worst risk of each policy while abandoning the possible advantages of both.

What ought Chamberlain to have done? He ought to have followed one path or the other. He ought to have struck a bargain with the Soviets and then warned Hitler that no further German expansion would be tolerated. Or he ought to have stuck by appeasement openly. His cabinet might then have fallen. If so, the British people would have had a government which more nearly represented their

demands, and Chamberlain's hands would have been clean. If not, he would have been able to follow the policy in which he believed without risking the dangerous public misinterpretation of government policy which brought war in September. Popular diplomacy is a dangerous business.

In March, 1939, Neville Chamberlain was confronted with a situation which called for decisive action. He was unable to take such action, and it was his irresolution during three crucial weeks which led to subsequent tragedy.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Discussion here is confined to those sources which have been most directly useful in the writing of this paper, and the comments refer only to the usefulness of the given source for the present topic.

1. Published official sources

By far the most important source was the Documents on British Foreign Policy, 1919-1939, edited by E. L. Woodward and Rohan Butler, of which the Third Series, Volumes IV and V (London, 1951 and 1952) were relevant. Although this collection's value is limited by the absence of minutes of cabinet meetings and by apparently cautious editing, it is still of great importance in that it provides a detailed picture of the external processes of British diplomacy and supplies frequent suggestions as to underlying motivation. Volume VI of Series D (London and Washington, 1956) of the Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945 contains less material pertinent to the present subject than the British documents, but it seems to be less strictly edited. Thus it was from the German collection that evidence for the secret British attempts to back down from the guarantee was derived. The German documents also provide a good picture of the

German reactions to the British maneuvers throughout the period. The Soviet Documents on Foreign Policy, edited by Jane Degras, are largely restricted to official public statements, and Volume III (London, 1953) was of slight utility here. The various "colored books" were found to contain nothing of importance not found in the British or German collections. The same holds true for later Soviet and American publications. Finally the British Parliamentary Debates (5th Series: Commons, Vol. 345-346; Lords, Vol. 112; 1939) were of great importance for understanding the vital role of opposition, and public, pressure.

2. Newspapers and periodicals

The Times of London was useful because of its apparent semiofficial nature. It also provided a picture of the way in which foreign affairs, as well as British diplomacy, were reported to the public. No magazine was found to be of great use, although there is a single reference to the Economist.

3. Memoirs

These are largely disappointing. Among the most helpful was Ian Colvin's Vansittart in Office (London, 1965), which is based on the author's experiences and on the papers of Vansittart and Cadogan. Chamberlain left no memoirs, and his biographies will be mentioned with the secondary works.

Lord Halifax, Fullness of Days (New York, 1957), and Lord Simon, Retrospect (London, 1952), are nearly devoid of content. Lord Templewood (Samuel Hoare), Nine Troubled Years (London, 1954), is more substantial but totally apologetic, although some truth can occasionally be found among the self-contradictions. Lord Strang, Home and Abroad (London, 1956) is reasonably frank, but he was not close enough to the decision-making process to be able to provide a full picture. Nevile Henderson recorded, and probably knew, nothing about the guarantee. There is a single reference to the papers of an appeaser without office, Thomas Jones, A Diary with Letters, 1931-1950 (London, 1954). Those critics of the government who wrote memoirs, e.g., Churchill, Dalton, and Duff Cooper, had little knowledge of the inner workings of the Chamberlain government during this period; however, there are minor citations to Sir Anthony Eden, The Reckoning (Boston, 1965) and Leopold Amery, My Political Life, Vol. III (London, 1955).

Georges Bonnet's Défense de la Paix (Geneva, 1948), although an honest recollection, was of only incidental use. Ivan Maisky, in Who Helped Hitler? (trans. Andrew Rothstein, London, 1964) gives a good, if sometimes slanted, account of the atmosphere of the period and of Soviet reactions, but his knowledge of British motives is understandably limited; his very ignorance and frustration are themselves indicative

of the state of Anglo-Russian relations. Herbert von Dirksen's Moscow, Tokyo, London (Norman, 1952) accurately recalls the first few days of the crisis and the German reaction throughout. Grigore Gafencu, Last Days of Europe (trans. E. Fletcher-Allen, New Haven, 1948) is impressionistic and perceptive. Colonel Beck tells nothing new. Although Edward Raczynski's In Allied London (London, 1962) deals mainly with the war years, there are some bits of information on the guarantee.

4. Secondary works and articles

Many were called, few were chosen. The earlier "standard" works were written without benefit of the documents. The most satisfactory recent account of British policy is A. J. P. Taylor, The Origins of the Second World War (London, 1961), which is brief and brilliant. Aside from his overestimate of Beck's role, Taylor's flashes of insight are largely confirmed in the present paper. The current notoriety of the book is unfortunate, and, especially on British policy, Taylor should not be ignored. Martin Gilbert and Richard Gott, The Appeasers (London, 1963), is a post-documentary renovation of the older criticism of the Chamberlain government; the book is thoroughly documented, annoyingly tendentious, and often wrong. The Eve of War, 1939 ("Survey of International Affairs: The war-time series for 1939-46," Vol. II; London, 1958) edited by A. J. Toynbee

is factual and pedestrian. Of great value was Keith Feiling's Life of Neville Chamberlain (London, 1946), the authorized biography, based on the premier's papers. Feiling's treatment is both sympathetic and penetrating; it renders Iain Macleod's more recent biography superfluous.

T. Desmond Williams, "Negotiations leading to the Anglo-Polish treaty of 31 March 1939," in Irish Historical Studies, X (March and September, 1956), 59-93 and 156-192, is a curious article which covers some of the same ground as this thesis, but with somewhat different emphasis. Williams gives an excellent account of the revolution in British public opinion, but he greatly exaggerates the passivity of the Germans and the success of Polish duplicity. Public opinion is surveyed in "British Institute of Public Opinion," The Public Opinion Quarterly, IV (March, 1940), 77-82.

Following without comment is a list of secondary works to which reference has been made on minor matters of detail:

Beloff, Max. The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia, 1929-1941. 2 Vols. London, 1947-1949.

Campbell-Johnson, Alan. Viscount Halifax. New York, 1941.

Namier, Lewis. Diplomatic Prelude, 1938-1939. London, 1948.

Rossi, A. [Angelo Tasca]. The Russo-German Alliance. Trans. J. and M. Cullen. Boston, 1951.

The Times (London). The History of the Times, Part IV, Vol. II. London, 1952.

Fuller bibliographies for appeasement as a whole appear in the above works by Taylor, who is very selective, and Gilbert and Gott. A good discussion of the literature and historiography is D. C. Watt, "Appeasement: The Rise of a Revisionist School?" in The Political Quarterly, XXXVI (April-June, 1965), 191-213.