

European Security, 1919–39

‘DANGEROUSLY ANGRY’ AND ‘DANGEROUSLY AFRAID’

Harold Nicolson established an enviable reputation as a historian and analyst of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference.¹ His conclusions concerning the Paris settlement’s repercussions for inter-war European security provide valuable insights into his liberal realism. A study of Nicolson’s international thought between 1919 and 1939 reveals a change from an idealist (though never a utopian) outlook on international relations in 1919 to a more measured degree of idealism with realist overtones during the mid-1920s. His late 1920s and 1930s European security thinking, especially in relation to Italy and Germany, was characterized by a gradual and ultimately full synthesis of realist and idealist approaches to the international affairs issues of the day.

A number of First World War victors—Italy among them—were unhappy with the Peace Conference outcome. One Italian Ambassador to Britain, Count Grandi, argued in 1935 that the peace settlement had burdened Europe with two unrealistic conceptions of international relations: an idealist ‘apocalyptic ideology’ disseminated by President Woodrow Wilson of the United States, and a realist ‘reactionary spirit’ expounded by France’s Prime Minister, Georges Clemenceau. ‘One of these tendencies seeks to immobilize Europe in a network of theoretical formulae,’ Grandi concluded, ‘the other to force it into an iron frame based upon past events’.² As a result, the Conference had failed due to the inability or unwillingness of the peacemakers to find a coherent ‘middle path’ between French realism and American idealism.³

The ‘Versaillais’ had much to answer for.⁴ One of their number, John Maynard Keynes, a senior British Treasury representative at the Conference, expressed his

¹ H. Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919* (London: Constable, 1933); 2nd edn. (London: Constable, 1945); new edn. (London: Methuen, 1964).

² D. Grandi, ‘Italy’, in J. Cambon et al., *The Foreign Policy of the Powers* (New York: Harper and Brothers for the Council on Foreign Relations, 1935), 84.

³ Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919* (1964), 321.

⁴ H. Nicolson, Review of J. F. Dulles, *War, Peace and Change* (1939), *Daily Telegraph*, 16 June 1939, 8.

objections to the peace settlement in *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (1919). Keynes argued that the obsession in Paris with sovereignty and frontiers, and the punitive reparations imposed on Germany, had been disastrous errors of policy. A sounder course would have been to create an economically prosperous Germany as the bulwark of a stable Europe.⁵ Keynes's focus, given his background as a Cambridge University economics don, was emphatically economic. Nicolson's, considering his experience in diplomacy, and in Paris, was primarily political. The historian, J. L. Hammond, recognized this, describing *Peacemaking 1919* as a 'counterpart' to Keynes's book.⁶

In an eloquent rejoinder to Keynes, *The Carthaginian Peace* (1946), Étienne Mantoux contended that he had exaggerated the negative economic effects of the Treaty of Versailles, and that the important (and largely neglected) outcomes were political. Chief among them was the division of central and south-eastern Europe. This had resulted in a strong, centralized Germany surrounded by several Small Powers reliant for their independence on distant Great Powers. No true Continental balance of power thus emerged.⁷

There had been concerted attempts at the Conference, however, to forestall the problems of sovereignty, nationality, and borders, especially in relation to Eastern Europe. The belief that Eastern European security was tied inextricably to that of Western Europe had been advanced in Paris by the members of 'New Europe', who sought to create a European order based on revived liberal foreign policy principles.⁸ Founded in 1916 by the scholar, R. W. Seton-Watson and the Czech nationalist, Thomas Masaryk, the group's well-placed members like Nicolson ensured the inclusion in the final settlement of proposals for establishing new Eastern European nation-states, in an attempt to ensure a more stable balance of power across Western and Eastern Europe.⁹ New Europe's idea of a fair settlement rested on moderate treatment of Germany, and a balanced implementation of political and economic forms of redress in an effort to maintain European peace.

Nicolson shared Keynes's contempt for many aspects of the peace settlement. He regarded the reparation and indemnity clauses of the Treaty as 'immoral and senseless'.¹⁰ Nicolson and Keynes were clearly more than 'peripheral

⁵ J. M. Keynes, *The Economic Consequences of the Peace* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 51, 211.

⁶ J. L. Hammond, Review of H. Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919* (1933), *New Statesman and Nation*, 17 June 1933, 792.

⁷ É. Mantoux, *The Carthaginian Peace, or, The Economic Consequences of Mr. Keynes* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), 187.

⁸ E. Goldstein, 'Great Britain: The Home Front', in M. F. Boemeke, G. D. Feldman, and E. Glaser (eds.), *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment After 75 Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Washington, DC: The German Historical Institute, 1998), 150.

⁹ Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, 33.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 359.

participants' at the Conference whose strictures on it count for little.¹¹ Their judgements on proceedings flowed from the experience of two not uninfluential delegates with different spheres of interest. In Keynes's view, the ills of the settlement derived from the preoccupation of the Allied leaders with 'politics, strategy, ethnicity, punishment and the balance of power' at the expense of the economic exigencies of 'food, coal, and transportation'.¹²

Keynes underrated geopolitics and overvalued economics, leading Nicolson to describe his categorization of a "Carthaginian" versus a "Wilsonian" Peace as 'irrelevant'.¹³ He argued instead that the Conference had failed owing to a deep-rooted combination of political and economic factors compounded by confusion over its aim and purpose. Hence the gravest faults of the Treaties of Peace was their 'sanctimonious pharisaism', which would have such far-reaching implications for inter-war European security.¹⁴ 'It was the endeavour to reconcile the hopes of the many with the doubts of the few', Nicolson insisted, 'that brought such seeming falsity to foreign policy in the twenty years between 1919 and 1939'.¹⁵

For Nicolson, the student of Aristotelian political prudence and Thucydidean historical observation, the only attempts to maintain peace worth pursuing were those based on a realistic understanding of human nature, and an acknowledgement of the limitations of politics and diplomacy. International relations approaches which misconceived or denied the nature of human beings and the evidence of history, generally resulted in the extreme realism and utopian idealism that had rendered so much of the 1919 settlement and inter-war European foreign relations false and, ultimately, disastrous.

Only four of President Wilson's twenty-three Conditions of Peace (fourteen Points, four Principles, and five Particulars) were actually incorporated into the Treaties of Peace.¹⁶ Nicolson claimed that these had left a deplorable legacy:

Our covenants of Peace were not openly arrived at: seldom has such secrecy been maintained in any diplomatic gathering. The Freedom of the seas was not secured. So far from Free Trade being established in Europe, a set of tariff-walls were erected, higher and more numerous than any known before. National armaments were not reduced. The German Colonies were distributed among the victors in a manner which was neither free, nor open-minded, nor impartial. The wishes, to say nothing of the

¹¹ W. R. Keylor, 'Versailles and International Diplomacy', in M. F. Boemeke, G. D. Feldman, and E. Glaser (eds.), *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment After 75 Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Washington, DC: The German Historical Institute, 1998), 489.

¹² M. G. Fry, 'British Revisionism', in M. F. Boemeke, G. D. Feldman, and E. Glaser (eds.), *The Treaty of Versailles: A Reassessment After 75 Years* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Washington, DC: The German Historical Institute, 1998), 589 and n.

¹³ Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, 84.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁵ H. Nicolson, *The Evolution of Diplomatic Method* (The Chichele Lectures, November 1953) (London: Constable, 1954), 88.

¹⁶ Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, 44.

interests, of the populations were (as in the Saar, Shantung and Syria) flagrantly disregarded. Russia was not welcomed into the Society of Nations, nor was she accorded unhampered freedom to develop her own institutions. The frontiers of Italy were not adjusted along the lines of nationality. The Turkish portions of the Ottoman Empire were not assured a secure sovereignty. The territories of Poland include many people who are indisputably not Polish. The League of Nations has not, in practice, been able to assure political independence to Great and Small Nations alike. Provinces and peoples were, in fact, treated as pawns and chattels in a game. The territorial settlements, in almost every case, were based on mere adjustments and compromises between the claims of rival States. Elements of discord and antagonism were in fact perpetuated. Even the old system of Secret Treaties was not entirely and universally destroyed.¹⁷

Although a severe critic of the peace settlement—one of many who had arrived as ‘fervent apprentices’ to Wilsonism and departed as ‘renegades’¹⁸—Nicolson did not share Keynes’s view that economic prescriptions would prove more important than political ones in creating a pacific Germany and forging European political stability. Over time he even came to believe that—their faults notwithstanding—the Treaty of Versailles, its attendant treaties, and the Covenant of the League of Nations could have played an important role in securing European peace. It was the vagueness and half-heartedness with which they were conceived and employed that made them of limited (and finally of no) value in preventing another world war.¹⁹ Indeed, ‘the real tragedy of the Paris Peace Settlement was that it was never carried out’.²⁰

In 1938, Harold Nicolson claimed that if the Covenant could be utilized properly in dealing with aggressive nation-states, another world war might be averted. He thought, too, that German concerns about Versailles could be addressed through negotiation, and Treaty provisions adjusted amicably to the altered conditions of peace. Such a course, if followed from a position of strength, might check or curtail the excesses of the Italian and German dictators.²¹ He may have been proven right, had the Great Powers not shirked the main inter-war question of how to enforce collective security.²²

From this conviction—formed by the early 1940s—Nicolson never wavered. It represented a fusion of the belief of practical idealists and pragmatic internationalists like Sir Alfred Zimmern and Leonard Woolf that the League of Nations could play a positive role in maintaining world peace, and Nicolson’s view that the League could do so only if fortified by the joint

¹⁷ Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, 43.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁹ H. Nicolson, ‘The Future of the League: IV. Back to First Principles’, *Spectator*, 5 June 1936, 1028–9; ‘Marginal Comment’, *Spectator*, 23 October 1942, 382.

²⁰ H. Nicolson, ‘Marginal Comment’, *Spectator*, 14 June 1946, 606.

²¹ H. Nicolson, ‘Balance of Power Up-to-Date’ (Discussion with Sir Alfred Zimmern), *Listener*, 16 March 1938, 571.

²² M. MacMillan, *Peacemakers: The Paris Conference of 1919 and Its Attempt to End War* (London: John Murray, 2001), 499–500.

resolve of nation-states. It also represented a departure from approaches to European security dominated by the conception of the balance of power. Realism as engaged in by individual nation-states had not prevented the Second World War; no international organization devoid of power could have done so. The only means of achieving this was to create a collective determination on the part of the world's pacific nation-states to deter any aggressor through the machinery of a strong League of Nations. Idealism alone was not enough; neither was classical realism. International relations needed a new lingua franca as a foundation for peace and international cooperation between nation-states.

The young idealist of 1919, intellectually reared in Aristotelian and Thucydidean ideas at Balliol, had never before been required to test their mettle on a scale demanded by the Paris Conference. He divined early in proceedings the significance of the realist–idealist divergence, and its important potential consequences for the task of peacemaking. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Nicolson increasingly came to embrace Aristotelian realism (as interpreted by Jowett). It formed the basis of his liberal realism—a practical, evolutionary solution to the problems of European instability arising from aggressive ideologies of the right.

Foreign Office advice to successive Cabinets during the 1920s was distinctly realist in character. It embodied principles and policies based squarely on national interest; these were aimed at securing a global balance of power to ensure British security. The hallmarks of Albion's policy were 'immutable interests and mutable friendships'.²³ This was not the unambiguous course it seemed. Henry Kissinger has noted a confused duality about British foreign policy throughout the period. Britain, having forsaken her 300-year-old pursuit of equilibrium, fluctuated between a superficial implementation of balance of power principles directed at France and a growing devotion to the principle of collective security, which it refused to enforce.²⁴

Nicolson worked in Whitehall between 1920 and 1925 where, as a member of the Foreign Office's Central Department (the brainchild of Sir Eyre Crowe), he was involved closely in formulating Britain's European policy.²⁵ Crowe and his successor as Permanent Under-Secretary of State, Sir William Tyrrell, shared the reluctance of post-war Prime Ministers (and the Foreign Secretaries, Lord Curzon and Sir Austen Chamberlain) to accord the League

²³ B. McKercher, 'Old Diplomacy and New: The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1919–1939', in M. Dockrill and B. McKercher (eds.), *Diplomacy and World Power: Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 107–8.

²⁴ H. Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 266.

²⁵ E. Maisel, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1919–1926* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1994), 57–60, 79, 133–8, 162–72; S. Crowe and E. Corp, *Our Ablest Public Servant: Sir Eyre Crowe 1864–1925* (Braunton: Merlin Books, 1993), 400, 406.

of Nations a central place in their foreign policy thinking. With the exception of Ramsay MacDonald, Labour Prime Minister (and Foreign Secretary) from January to October 1924, they followed a more independent course. Despite his reservations about the peace settlement, Nicolson envisaged a political role for the League in world affairs. In 1922, he proposed that a League force be deployed to ensure the free passage of authorized vessels through the Straits (the Dardanelles, the Bosphorus, and the Black Sea) so as to prevent their use as a safe haven for enemy shipping. This had occurred during the First World War at great cost to the British.²⁶ Nicolson was one of the few Foreign Office officials of the 1920s to recognize the value of the League of Nations in implementing British foreign policy.²⁷

Those directing Britain's foreign relations between the mid-1920s and early 1930s embarked on a path of "pactomania".²⁸ In January 1923, after Germany defaulted on her reparations payments, France and Belgium occupied her industrial nerve-centre, the Ruhr Valley. Britain's prolonged attempts to deal with the threat that this represented to European security (and to British interests) took two forms—the 'Draft Treaty of Mutual Assistance' (1923–24) and the 'Geneva Protocol' (1924–25).

In February 1924, Ramsay MacDonald requested Foreign Office advice on Britain's European policy, especially in relation to France. Nicolson's forthright response displayed an uncharacteristic wariness towards that country. France, he argued, was intent on permanently controlling the Rhineland (under Allied occupation since the peace settlement) in order to dominate Europe. The French constituted, therefore, a possible menace to Britain.²⁹ MacDonald's joint attempt (with France's Prime Minister, Édouard Herriot) to strengthen European security resulted in the abortive 'Draft Treaty'. It came to grief in July 1924, due to its close linkages with the League of Nations, public perceptions that foreign policy commitments resulted too readily in war, and concerns about the place of the British Commonwealth and Empire in such an arrangement.

The seven-article 'Geneva Protocol', also a MacDonald initiative, was designed to address the deficiencies of the unratified 'Draft Treaty'. It proved more popular on the Continent than in Britain where its insistence on the compulsory referral of political disputes to the League or to arbitral bodies (Article 3) was seen, especially within the Foreign Office, as a severe potential

²⁶ H. Nicolson, 'The Freedom of the Straits', in *Documents on British Foreign Policy: 1919–39*, ser. I, vol. 18, Appendix I, 15 November 1922 (London: HMSO, 1972), 982.

²⁷ J. Barros, *Office Without Power: Secretary-General Sir Eric Drummond 1919–1933* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 386.

²⁸ J.-B. Duroselle, 'Changes in Diplomacy Since Versailles', in B. Porter (ed.), *The Aberystwyth Papers: International Politics 1919–1969* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 109.

²⁹ J. R. Ferris, *The Evolution of British Strategic Policy, 1919–26* (Basingstoke: Macmillan in association with King's College, London, 1989), 142–3.

restriction on the conduct of British foreign policy. On 23 January 1925, a Committee of Imperial Defence sub-committee recommended against the adoption of the Protocol, and on 2 March it was rejected by the British Conservative Cabinet (MacDonald's Labour administration had been defeated the previous October). In place of the Protocol Chamberlain considered several proposals. They included a British–French–Belgian agreement and what finally emerged—a four-power pact that included Germany.

Nicolson's contribution to the final outcome was significant. In a minute on disarmament and security (9 September 1924), he had advocated the establishment of arbitration machinery as a basis for a system of European public law. Certain of the British distaste for alliances, he argued that Britons might agree to defend this new system (with penalties for violation such as financial and economic blockade, as well as naval, though not military, force). Such a *modus operandi*, he stated, might provide an effective alternative to prevailing governmental and public unwillingness to embrace the League of Nations as a vehicle for ensuring European security.³⁰ Should the leading Western European democracies reject such an opportunity for collaboration (despite encouraging indications from the German Foreign Minister, Gustav Stresemann, in January 1925 that Germany would be willing to enter into mutual non-aggression undertakings with the Allied Powers),³¹ the best course for Britain was to re-establish herself as the arbiter of European affairs by again becoming the maestro of the balance of power.

The British Government indicated a preparedness to sign a Non-Aggression Pact in relation to Germany's western border. However, it insisted that security on Germany's eastern border must be pursued through the League of Nations Covenant, a course that would require Germany to join the League of Nations as a permanent Council member. Nicolson's reliance on Sir Eyre Crowe's seminal 1907 memorandum on Britain's relations with France and Germany, in which Crowe had restated the principle of the balance of power and re-emphasized its importance to Britain's survival, is one of the two main elements of his thinking on inter-war European security. As he later wrote, 'the whole basis of our international theory is contained in the famous Memorandum written...by that acute realist, Sir Eyre Crowe'.³² The Memorandum had sanctified the balance of power as almost 'a law of nature'.³³ The other leitmotif of his 1920s and 1930s thinking is the possibility of League solutions to foreign relations crises.

³⁰ Nicolson diary, 9 September 1924, Balliol College.

³¹ Maisel, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy*, 167–8.

³² H. Nicolson, 'Marginal Comment', *Spectator*, 23 October 1942, 382.

³³ E. Crowe, 'Memorandum on the Present State of British Relations with France and Germany', in *British Documents on the Origins of the War: 1898–1914*, vol. 3, Appendix A, 1 January 1907 (London: HMSO, 1928), 403.

Chamberlain shared Nicolson's views on Europe, which were still held by Crowe, but not by most members of the Cabinet. The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Winston Churchill, believed that Britain's interests would be better served if she remained aloof from European, especially French, concerns.³⁴ Nicolson thought that, in order to achieve an effective European security policy, Britain must further clarify her position in world affairs. Should British foreign relations, for example, have a Downing Street (and, presumably, a European) emphasis, a Dominion focus, or should they be an uneasy fusion of both?³⁵

At this time (late January 1925), Nicolson produced a report on Anglo-French relations. His observations were dispiriting. Britain could do little to remove French concerns about Germany, most of which were firmly and realistically grounded in the enduring factors of geography and population.³⁶ French fears of Germany were 'the root cause of the present insecurity of Europe. They constitute for every Frenchman an increasing nervous ideal, a persistent obsession... The French dread of Germany is hereditary and inevitable, nor would we wish to see it entirely removed. Within limits, it serves as a corrective to the enterprising vanity of the French character which, if unchecked, would undoubtedly bring our two countries into conflict'.³⁷

On 22 January 1925, Chamberlain requested the opinions of his officials on possible future European security initiatives. Nicolson responded by preparing under Crowe's direction a brilliant and vivid analysis (20 February 1925) refining his earlier views and setting the whole question in a wider context. His description of the state of Europe was a graphic one. In a document which so impressed the Foreign Secretary that he circulated it to King George V, the Cabinet, and the Dominion governments, Nicolson reflected: 'All our late enemies continue full of resentment at what they have lost; all our late Allies are fearful of losing what they have won. One-half of Europe is dangerously angry; the other half is dangerously afraid'. As a result:

The friction between these inflamed emotions is incessant, and acts as some septic irritant, poisoning the wounds which are yet unhealed. Fear begets provocation, armaments, secret alliances, ill-treatment of minorities; these in their turn beget a

³⁴ McKercher, 'Old Diplomacy and New', 97.

³⁵ Nicolson diary, 22 January 1925, Balliol College.

³⁶ R. S. Grayson, *Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe: British Foreign Policy, 1924–29* (London, Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1997), 38.

³⁷ F.O.371/11065/W2035/9/98, 23 January 1925, quoted in E. Goldstein, 'The Evolution of British Diplomatic Strategy for the Locarno Pact, 1924–1925', in M. Dockrill and B. McKercher (eds.), *Diplomacy and World Power: Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 120 and *n*.

greater hatred and stimulate a desire for revenge, whereby fear is intensified, and its consequences are enhanced. The vicious circle is thus established.³⁸

In his classic memorandum Nicolson also argued that Russia, though a cause of uncertainty, was presently detached from European events. She should not, therefore, be considered a significant factor in British security thinking. Germany, however, by virtue of her industrial potential, would in all likelihood re-emerge as a great military power and seek redress for the most obnoxious outcomes of the Treaty of Versailles, thus alarming France. Nicolson doubted the present value of the League of Nations in resolving serious interstate disputes, while not entirely dismissing it. He stressed that ‘splendid isolation’ was no longer a practicable policy. The United States may be able to remain ‘powerful and aloof’, but such a course would spell for Britain only ‘danger, vulnerability and impotence’. Any British attempts to achieve stability by returning to the Concert of Europe would depend on Britain’s success in reassuring France of her commitment to French security. ‘The road is too dark for any altruism or digression; it is our own security which must remain the sole consideration’. The soundest course for Britain was a new British Commonwealth and Empire–French entente, and concrete recognition of the fact that the essential interests of imperial defence were linked closely with European security.³⁹

Nicolson’s realist prescriptions appealed to Chamberlain and Crowe, but their eventual expression in British foreign policy differed considerably from Nicolson’s expectations. In this memorandum the Aristotelian and Thucydidean classicist remained to the fore. The transition to liberal realism was of later date.

THE SPIRIT OF LOCARNO

The denouement of this intense Foreign Office activity was the Locarno Pact (initialled on 16 October 1925 and ratified on 1 December 1925). David Dutton asserts that the Locarno idea originated with Stresemann and the German Government; nonetheless, he concedes that Sir Austen Chamberlain worked towards its realization with ‘the devotion of a natural parent’.⁴⁰ Though strongly European in thrust (as Nicolson had advocated) the Pact—in line with Chamberlain’s preferred policy—ignored imperial defence

³⁸ H. Nicolson, ‘British Policy in Relation to the European Situation’, in *Documents on British Foreign Policy: 1919–39*, ser. I, vol. 27, 20 February 1925 (London: HMSO, 1986), 312.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 311–18.

⁴⁰ D. Dutton, *Austen Chamberlain: Gentleman in Politics* (Bolton: Ross Anderson, 1985), 246, 249–50.

factors entirely, and included Britain, Germany, France, Belgium, Italy, Poland, and Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain's 'early support for an Anglo-French pact, was much less important to him than is thought, and he was able to adapt his position towards Germany since he advocated an Anglo-French agreement as a strategy, rather than a principle'.⁴¹

The centrepiece of the seven Locarno Treaties was the 'Treaty of Mutual Guarantee'. It assured the inviolability of the German–Belgian and the German–French frontiers as determined by the Treaty of Versailles. Britain and Italy undertook to go to war should France attack Germany and vice versa. The chief consequences of the Pact were Germany's admission to the League of Nations with a seat on its Council (September 1926), and the eventual evacuation (June 1930) of Allied occupation forces from the Rhineland ('demilitarization'). Germany's invasion of the Rhineland in March 1936 destroyed the Pact.

Though he considered the Locarno Pact 'a remarkable diplomatic achievement',⁴² Nicolson had reservations about the 'hysterical jubilation' and 'orgiac gush' that surrounded its signing.⁴³ Germany was again an accepted Great Power, and, as Britain's Ambassador to Germany, Lord D'Abernon put it in a letter to the King, Locarno portended 'the pacification of Europe' on 'the basis of mutual security'. The German people could now pursue 'the policy of conciliation'.⁴⁴ For some years this occurred. By mid-1932, the Allies had withdrawn from the Rhineland and achieved at least an interim settlement of the reparations question (the latter under the terms of the Dawes Plan of August 1924 and the Young Plan of June 1929). Disarmament and German financial arrangements remained a source of mutual concern, but not great anxiety.

A semblance of reassurance had also been supplied by the August 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact (or Pact of Paris) in which sixty-two nation-states agreed to disavow war as a means of pursuing their international relations objectives. Nevertheless, as Nicolson reflected in his inimitable way, 'The heavenly alchemy of the Locarno spirit, the triumphant splendour of those autumn days, did not prove of long endurance. Almost immediately the vanity of nations came to mar that glorious dawn'.⁴⁵ Locarno's legacy of stability was soon under threat from the Great Depression and the Nazi Party led by Adolf Hitler, German Chancellor from 20 January 1933.

David Dutton has argued that, by including in its provisions a specific guarantee protecting the French–German border, Locarno's framers divided Europe into spheres of primary and secondary importance. This implied that Britain would not defend the Central and Eastern European nation-states created by the Treaty of Versailles. By so limiting her commitments Britain

⁴¹ Grayson, *Austen Chamberlain and the Commitment to Europe*, 66–7.

⁴² H. Nicolson, *King George the Fifth: His Life and Reign* (London: Constable, 1952), 408.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 408, 409.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 409.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 410.

allowed Germany to move unhindered towards the revision of the Treaty in Central and Eastern Europe. Yet he concludes that, even in the days of the *Pax Britannica*, the British had exercised little influence in the region. Consequently, it was unrealistic to expect Britain to assume a leadership role in that part of Europe at a time when her power had been depleted by a large-scale conflict.⁴⁶ There were still ‘New Europeans’ in the Foreign Office during the 1920s (such as Nicolson and Sir James Headlam-Morley), advising Chamberlain to conclude an Eastern European Locarno. The Foreign Secretary dismissed the suggestion on the ground that Eastern and Central Europe were not essential to the European balance of power.⁴⁷

In October 1925, Harold Nicolson left London for Tehran where he served until his return to Europe in October 1927 as Counsellor in Berlin. As a senior diplomat Nicolson was well placed to observe German life. His private and official reflections on Germany and the Germans fluctuated. Of the latter, he wrote that ‘a curious uncertainty and diffidence and inferiority complex’ oppresses them.⁴⁸ He was encouraged by the new Chancellor, Hermann Müller’s affirmation of support for the Locarno Pact (3 July 1928), and his constructive attitude towards the issue of disarmament. Nicolson noted cautiously that Germany seemed at last to have a ‘durable, positive and efficient’ government, one which might complete the task of rebuilding the nation ‘with such intelligence as the German body politic is able to provide’.⁴⁹

Yet he stressed that as the country had not yet recovered her national self-confidence, German leaders would require many inducements before making diplomatic concessions.⁵⁰ He believed that German restlessness would again result in European turmoil. On 7 August 1929, Nicolson wrote to Orme Sargent in the Foreign Office:

I...do not wish you to suppose... that the new Germany is psychologically different from the old. There is, it is true, a strong current against militarism. But this current, which is largely due to the fact that militarism was not successful, is a current which flows in the same old river of German obstinacy and determination. It would take but a slight turn of the tide to set the current swinging in the opposite direction, and carrying with it all the flotsam and jetsam of the very third-rate Social-Democratic politicians. I do not intend to imply for one second that there is any immediate danger or that we need fear anything for, let us say, seven years. And, after all, as things move to-day, seven years is a long period of time.⁵¹

⁴⁶ Dutton, *Austen Chamberlain*, 250–3.

⁴⁷ Goldstein, ‘The Evolution of British Diplomatic Strategy for the Locarno Pact, 1924–1925’, 125, 134–5. ⁴⁸ Nicolson diary, 8 November 1927, Balliol College.

⁴⁹ H. Nicolson, ‘Herr Müller’s Policy Declaration’, in *Documents on British Foreign Policy: 1919–39*, ser. IA, vol. 5, 4 July 1928 (London: HMSO, 1973), 160, 161.

⁵⁰ H. Nicolson, ‘Germany and Concessions’, in *Documents on British Foreign Policy: 1919–39*, ser. IA, vol. 5, 20 July 1928 (London: HMSO, 1973), 191–2.

⁵¹ H. Nicolson, ‘Germany and the Rhineland’, in *Documents on British Foreign Policy: 1919–39*, ser. IA, vol. 6, 7 August 1929 (London: HMSO, 1975), 489–90.

Nicolson distrusted prophecy, but on this occasion his prediction was to prove remarkably accurate.

Having withdrawn their military forces from Germany, the First World War victors were largely powerless to moderate the claims of an increasingly resentful and restive country, whose leaders and people felt they had ‘a moral obligation’ to destroy the Treaty of Versailles.⁵² Nicolson was particularly concerned about German plans for the demilitarized zones when Allied occupation forces were withdrawn. He feared that after their departure the ‘whole ingenuity of the Reichswehrministerium’ would be applied to establishing secret defence systems aimed at protecting the Ruhr Valley and the Rhineland in defiance of the demilitarization clauses of the Treaty of Versailles.⁵³ Nicolson knew also that the widespread German belief that Germany had ‘fulfilled in every particle’ the Treaty’s disarmament and demilitarization provisions, was mistaken.⁵⁴ In order to counter a dissatisfied Germany Britain needed a more independent and less Francophile foreign policy based on an understanding with the United States and a reconstituted European balance of power.⁵⁵ His only consolation was ‘the really remarkable achievement of having disarmed Germany for ten years and... the hope that in the future the pacific spirit in Germany and some future measures of general disarmament may prevent her constituting a menace to her western neighbour’.⁵⁶ This was scant comfort. Not since leaving Paris in 1919 had Nicolson so despaired of European affairs.

The Thucydidean injunction, ‘when dealing with an enemy it is not only his actions but his intentions that have to be watched, since if one does not act first, one will suffer first’, was not lost on Nicolson.⁵⁷ He was especially troubled by the vagueness and narrowness of Britain’s European policy, her imprecise diplomacy, and the absence of a clear strategy to contain or combat German ambitions. Also disturbing was the fact that classical warnings about maintaining obvious sufficient strength for deterring a potential aggressor, while not provoking an attack on oneself, were absent from British foreign policy-making.⁵⁸

⁵² *Ibid.*, 489.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 488–9.

⁵⁴ H. Nicolson, ‘The Demilitarization of the Rhineland’, in *Documents on British Foreign Policy: 1919–39*, ser. IA, vol. 6, 23 August 1929 (London: HMSO, 1975), 582.

⁵⁵ Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart, *The Diaries of Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart 1915–1938*, vol. 1 (ed.), K. Young (London: Macmillan, 1973), 83.

⁵⁶ Nicolson, ‘The Demilitarization of the Rhineland’, 581.

⁵⁷ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972), VI. 38, 435.

⁵⁸ Aristotle, ‘Politics’, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2 (ed.), J. Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), II. 7, 2010–11.

HITLER AND THE *FUROR TEUTONICUS*

The 1930s were a watershed for Continental Europe, for Britain, and for Harold Nicolson. 'During that fateful decade humanity looked to London for the words and action that spelled war or peace. There still lay the casting vote'.⁵⁹ Throughout 1930 and 1931, Nicolson remained anxious about the attitude of German public opinion towards the Versailles and Locarno Treaties. He also began to doubt the capacity of British parliamentary institutions to confront the economic crisis arising from the October 1929 New York stock market crash, and worried that this may lead to British irresolution in dealing with Germany.⁶⁰ He believed that 'there is a centrifugal tendency developing a rapid flight to the extremes . . . affairs are rapidly pushing the left towards communism and the right towards fascism . . . Social democracy is as dead as Toryism'.⁶¹

With his hopes of an Anglo-American alliance and a newly minted European balance of power fading—in the light of America's isolationism and a Continental reluctance to reshape Locarno—Nicolson considered briefly the idea of greater unity of the British Commonwealth and Empire—'Let us become an organic Empire and an organic State'.⁶² However, he concluded that collective security through the League of Nations, ill-defined though this manifestation of the liberal approach to Europe's security might be, represented the soundest present method of ensuring European stability. By such means Britain and the Continent's democracies could exert coordinated power against an aggressor. The classical elements necessary for the collective employment of justifiable force against real or threatened aggression were present, despite the tepid commitment of some democracies to this end. Nicolson considered this an uncertainty worth shouldering.

Although he abhorred the Nazi philosophy, Nicolson did not regard it as a crude expression of nationalism unrelated to German history, or as an aberration of political and international theory. He saw Nazism as an extension—a 'ruthless vulgarisation'—of the centuries-old Pan-German idea identified by Crowe in his 1907 memorandum.⁶³ 'The vague and undefined schemes of Teutonic expansion,' observed Crowe, 'are but the expression of the deeply rooted feeling that Germany has . . . established for herself the right to assert the primacy of German national ideals'.⁶⁴ Of one thing, Crowe was certain: 'For

⁵⁹ J. H. Huizinga, *Confessions of a European in England* (London: Heinemann, 1958), 109.

⁶⁰ H. Nicolson, *People and Things: Wireless Talks* (London: Constable, 1931), 93–7.

⁶¹ Nicolson diary, 12 September 1931, Balliol College.

⁶² Nicolson, *People and Things*, 148.

⁶³ H. Nicolson, 'People and Things', *Spectator*, 17 November 1939, 682.

⁶⁴ Crowe, 'Memorandum', 406.

purposes of foreign policy the modern German Empire may be regarded as the heir or descendant of Prussia'. Through 'systematic territorial aggrandizement', chiefly, the defeat of France in the Franco-German (or Franco-Prussian) War (July 1870 to May 1871), the new Germany had absorbed the spirit of Prussia and thus entered the councils of the Great Powers.⁶⁵

Nicolson's early acceptance of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* (*My Struggle*) as a serious statement of its author's domestic and international political ambitions was rare for the time. On 24 January 1932, during a visit to Berlin, he described 'Hitlerism' as 'a doctrine of despair' that had been a catastrophe for Germany.⁶⁶ A month later, on 23 February, in a lecture at Chatham House entitled 'The Political Situation in Germany', Nicolson became one of the first to sound a public warning in Britain about the danger Hitler posed to European security.⁶⁷ He kept abreast of developments in Germany by visiting the (from March 1933) Third Reich, through an extensive series of personal contacts there, and by reading all he could on the country. In April 1939, he reckoned that since 1934 he had read several hundred books on the subject.⁶⁸ The first analysis of Nazism to make a real impression on him was Geoffrey Moss's novel, *I Face the Stars*,⁶⁹ 'a political study of real significance', which depicted the Nazi ascendancy as 'a poignant tragedy'.⁷⁰

Robert Dell's *Germany Unmasked*⁷¹ impressed Nicolson even more—'the most formidable and important indictment of Hitlerism that has yet been published' and 'the most lucid and intelligent work... written in English upon modern Germany'.⁷² Nicolson agreed with Dell's assertions that 'Hitlerism is... divorced from ethics, reason and intelligence',⁷³ and that force may prove the only means of checking Hitler. However, he argued that an adjustment of the balance of power so as to forestall German attacks on other nations was preferable to Dell's proposed solution of immediate intervention in the Reich to prevent its self-destruction. The problem of Germany, Nicolson believed, would not be solved by inflexible recourse to traditional forms of containment on the part of the European democracies (though, as the Dell review indicates, Nicolson held out some hope that balance of power

⁶⁵ Crowe, 'Memorandum', 403, 404.

⁶⁶ H. Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–1939* (ed.), N. Nicolson (London: Collins, 1966), 108.

⁶⁷ A. J. Crozier, 'Chatham House and Appeasement', in A. Bosco and C. Navari (eds.), *Chatham House and British Foreign Policy 1919–1945* (London, New York: Lothian Foundation Press, 1994), 239–40; Nicolson diary, 23 February 1932, Balliol College.

⁶⁸ H. Nicolson, Review of E. Mann, *School for Barbarians* (1939), E. Hambloch, *Germany Rampant* (1939), and D. Spearman, *Modern Dictatorship* (1939), *Daily Telegraph*, 14 April 1939, 19.

⁶⁹ G. Moss, *I Face the Stars* (London: Hutchinson, 1933).

⁷⁰ H. Nicolson, Review of G. Moss, *I Face the Stars* (1933), *Daily Telegraph*, 20 October 1933, 6.

⁷¹ R. Dell, *Germany Unmasked* (London: Martin Hopkinson, 1934).

⁷² H. Nicolson, Review of R. Dell, *Germany Unmasked* (1934), *Daily Telegraph*, 6 July 1934, 7.

⁷³ Dell, *Germany Unmasked*, 21.

principles might restrain her). Still less did the solution lie in an idealist determination to correct the injustices of the Treaty of Versailles by making open-ended concessions to Germany devoid of guarantees. Appeasement in this instance would be even less successful, since it traditionally assumed some comity of aim and purpose between international relations protagonists.

As the decade unravelled, Nicolson became increasingly pessimistic about Germany, which had withdrawn from the World Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations in October 1933. He came to believe that only a combination of firmness and conciliation would prove successful in diplomatic interchange with the leaders of the Third Reich. Nicolson's faith in idealism as a basis for international relations had begun to evaporate at the Paris Peace Conference. Yet, as he now realized, even enlightened realism, evidenced by Locarno, had proven inadequate in meeting the demands of European security. He was convinced that a new approach combining concession and force was necessary for the purposes of addressing German grievances and maintaining European peace. This could best be arrived at by utilizing the League of Nations Covenant. Clearly, 'nothing will content German opinion but "victory";' he wrote on 20 December 1933:

They will treat the Treaty of Versailles as an artichoke, pulling it to pieces leaf by leaf. The bad parts of that Treaty have already revised themselves. What remains is not unjust and its disturbance would lead to disturbance all round. But let us re-examine the Treaties, repair what can be repaired, and then cement them by an open defensive alliance.⁷⁴

The continuing difficulty, though, was that Germany regarded the Treaty of Versailles as a dead letter instead of a basis for negotiation directed at improving European relations.⁷⁵

Events within Germany in mid-1934 confirmed Nicolson in his conviction that resolute British foreign policy and diplomacy was the only means of dealing with the Nazis. Since 1930, he had been a member of the Anglo-German Association, one of several bodies hopeful of creating common ground between the two countries. The criminality of Hitler's regime was revealed fully by the 'Night of the Long Knives' (30 June 1934), the dictator's successful attempt to dispose violently of his political rivals and opponents. This event intensified existing differences of opinion about the Nazis within the Association and rent it asunder. An Anglo-German Fellowship was established in its place, but outspoken critics of 'Hitlerism' such as Nicolson and the historian, G. P. Gooch, refused to join it. The Association was dissolved on 9 December 1935.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 157–8.

⁷⁵ H. Nicolson, Letter to Lady Carnock, 6 February 1934, Sissinghurst Castle.

⁷⁶ Nicolson diary, 17, 19 February 1930, 31 May, 9 July 1934, 9 December 1935, Balliol College; G. P. Gooch, *Under Six Reigns* (London: Longmans, Green, 1958), 289–90.

When explaining the Nazi hold on Germany and its disastrous consequences for the Germans themselves, Europe, and Britain, Nicolson tried to be as objective as he could. His views closely mirrored those expressed in Crowe's 1907 memorandum.⁷⁷ Nicolson reflected in 1949 that the tragedy of modern Germany was that from the end of the First Reich (1806), the ideal of liberty had become fused with the task of liberation. After 1862, when Otto von Bismarck became Prime Minister of Prussia, the ideal of unity was imposed in terms of 'blood and iron' and not in terms of voluntary fusion. Whereas the British had achieved the organic State through the gradual development of liberty and union, the 'dislocated and vulnerable' Germans had done so only by successive acts of force. It was to argue from false premises to criticize the Germans as if they had enjoyed Britain's opportunities. German policy was determined by special conditions that had uniquely affected the German national character. To judge Germany fairly required knowledge of German history, knowledge too often the subject of British indifference.⁷⁸ Nicolson's close attention to Germany and his striving for fairness in dealing with her leaders and people was almost certainly related to the importance he ascribed to the individual characteristics of nation-states as an element in international relations study.

In May 1940, Harold Nicolson observed that greater Allied support for the Weimar Republic might have prevented the conditions which made the Nazi revolution possible.⁷⁹ Yet he later insisted that, once Hitler was Chancellor, 'the congenital German trust in State authority as the guardian of law' led the majority of Germans to become passive hostages to State direction; this cemented Nazism's hold on the country.⁸⁰ Nicolson concluded, too, that the effects of the early 1930s economic crisis had destabilized Locarno and created a fertile environment for German social and political unrest.⁸¹ He continued to defend the League of Nations on the ground that the Western democracies, in failing to employ the Covenant with clarity and determination, had ignored the best available means of rebuffing the German and Italian dictators. 'The Covenant remains one of the wisest documents ever contrived by the mind of civilised man. It was not the Covenant that failed; it was the democracies of the world who failed to understand its purpose, its implications or its necessity,' Nicolson wrote in 1942. He went on to state ruefully, 'The road which led us astray from that great Charter is marked today by

⁷⁷ Crowe, 'Memorandum', 403–4.

⁷⁸ H. Nicolson, Review of G. P. Gooch, *Studies in German History* (1948), *Observer*, 3 April 1949, 3.

⁷⁹ H. Nicolson, 'War Aims and Peace Aims', *News-Letter: The National Labour Fortnightly*, May 1940, 9–10.

⁸⁰ H. Nicolson, Review of F. von Papen, *Memoirs* (1952), *Observer*, 13 July 1952, 7.

⁸¹ Nicolson, *King George the Fifth*, 408–9.

many Cenotaphs—Corfu, Manchukuo, Abyssinia, Spain. It is not necessary today to contrive a better Covenant; it is necessary only to consider the means by which the old Covenant can be enforced'.⁸²

Nicolson's liberal realist conviction that the German threat and the Italian menace could be dealt with through collective security—the 1930s hallmark of his liberal realism and the classically grounded 'middle course'⁸³—was to be tested repeatedly after 1935. He did not resile from the classical conceptions of political life gained at Balliol and since reinforced by his sustained reading of ancient philosophy and history. Nicolson's developing liberal realism represented a means of confronting the European security threat posed by expansionist fascism during the 1930s. Although the true magnitude of this menace had not emerged by 1935, Nicolson's attempt to create a fresh approach to the crises of European security would soon assume a desperate immediacy.

A RESURGENT ITALY

Between 1935 and 1939, Harold Nicolson's liberal realism assumed a more mature form and began to influence British parliamentary and public thinking on international affairs. Several serious foreign relations crises confronted British governments during these years. The maintenance of the balance of power remained the *raison d'être* of British foreign policy between 1919 and 1939, though the stability bequeathed by Locarno was fractured by Hitler's assumption of power and the Japanese, Italian, and German aggression of the 1930s.⁸⁴

By late 1935, Nicolson's liberal realism was exemplified in the belief that European security could be best secured through 'the middle course'. This involved a system of 'collective guarantees' similar to the Locarno Pact whereby the 'pacifist' nation-states (the Western democracies)—under the auspices of the League of Nations—would contain the territorial ambitions of the 'militarist' ones (Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy).⁸⁵ This conviction received a jolt when Italy invaded Abyssinia on 3 October 1935. The invasion was almost universally condemned, League of Nations members voting for

⁸² H. Nicolson, 'Marginal Comment', *Spectator*, 23 October 1942, 382.

⁸³ H. Nicolson, 'Modern Diplomacy and British Public Opinion', *International Affairs*, 14 (1935), 608.

⁸⁴ B. J. C. McKercher, 'Shield of Memory: Memoirs of the British Foreign Policy-Making Élite, 1919–39', in G. Egerton (ed.), *Political Memoir: Essays on the Politics of Memory* (London: Frank Cass, 1994), 204.

⁸⁵ Nicolson, 'Modern Diplomacy and British Public Opinion', 608.

economic sanctions against Italy (a measure proposed at Geneva by Britain's Minister for League of Nations Affairs, Anthony Eden). However, the invasion continued, prompting the British Foreign Secretary, Sir Samuel Hoare, and France's Foreign Minister, Pierre Laval, to formulate a plan in Paris in early December partitioning Abyssinia and allowing Italy partial sovereignty over it. The Hoare–Laval Pact was approved by the British Cabinet on 9 December. When its contents became public an outcry ensued and on 18 December Hoare resigned. In these circumstances, and on this issue, Nicolson delivered his maiden speech in the House of Commons.

Initially, Nicolson reacted to the Pact with 'outrage';⁸⁶ he privately termed it 'really disgraceful'.⁸⁷ Yet he soon came to see its terms (though not the manner of their devising) as 'none so bad'.⁸⁸ His approach to the Abyssinian question represented a perplexing attempt to justify a flagrant violation of international conduct. It illustrates that, while his liberal realism was obviously in an evolutionary state and he had a high regard for collective security through the League of Nations Covenant and Locarno-style guarantees, Nicolson had not yet resolved the intellectual tensions between his realist and idealist outlooks. He told the House of Commons that the British Government's main objective should not be to preserve Abyssinia's integrity, and that as a plan of partition it represented 'a very brilliant essay in vivisection'.⁸⁹

Nicolson also described Hoare–Laval as 'a highly ingenious and practically workable compromise' which allowed Abyssinia a degree of independence, limited the gains and restrained the ambitions of the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, and ensured that the League of Nations retained some authority in international affairs.⁹⁰ He did criticize it, though, on the ground that 'peace under the aegis of the League' was preferable to the Hoare–Laval form of secret conference diplomacy whereby politicians presented a solution to the League as a *fait accompli*.⁹¹ Nicolson came to regret his misplaced optimism over League of Nations economic sanctions as a solution to the Abyssinian crisis. He later also insisted that, while force should have been employed to drive the Italians from Abyssinia, the episode had accentuated more deep-seated problems surrounding the League's capacity to deal with such crises.

His scepticism concerning the British public's understanding of foreign affairs led Nicolson to reflect privately in 1935 that 'our public opinion thinks

⁸⁶ H. Nicolson, 'Lord Percy of Newcastle', *Durham University Journal*, new ser., 20/3 (1959), 103.

⁸⁷ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 232.

⁸⁸ Nicolson diary, 16 December 1935, Balliol College.

⁸⁹ H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 19 December 1935, 2078–9.

⁹⁰ H. Nicolson, 'A Case of Conscience', *News-Letter: The National Labour Fortnightly*, 21 December 1935, 104.

⁹¹ H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 19 December 1935, 2080–1.

strategically in terms of 1895'.⁹² Although agreeably surprised by the early public opposition to the Hoare–Laval proposals—‘a most sensational demonstration of *la volonté générale*’⁹³—he doubted that the British had thought seriously about the question. The majority of Britons preferred to place their trust in easily digested formulas such as ‘the lullaby of “collective security”’,⁹⁴ while ignoring the demanding foreign policy and military commitments it entailed. The British people and their leaders had come to regard the League as ‘an insurance requiring no premium’.⁹⁵

June 1936 saw Nicolson’s mea culpa over Abyssinia. His clumsy attempt to reconcile himself to Italy’s aggression in realist terms had not been a success. Nicolson’s idealist faith in the Covenant as a vehicle for resolving the Italo-Abyssinian dispute had also proven illusory. ‘The League, in this Abyssinian problem, has failed completely,’ he declared. ‘Its constitution has proved to be both inoperative and old-fashioned; and the famous “League spirit” has shown itself but a volatile vapour compared to the concentrated essence of Mussolini’s determination’.⁹⁶ Italian Fascist foreign policy between 1922 and 1945 represented Italy’s last attempt to become a leading naval power and to assume a primary regional role in Euro-Mediterranean affairs.⁹⁷

The Abyssinian issue had demonstrated ‘the inefficacy of the rule of law in coping with determined violence’.⁹⁸ Nicolson defended the Government’s decision to abandon its ineffective economic sanctions against Italy and supported the (now Foreign Secretary) Anthony Eden’s determination to strengthen the League by restoring to it the plenitude of its powers. He advocated the reconstruction of the League ‘in terms of actuality and force’, with each nation-state’s contribution taking three forms: the certain (self-defence), the probable (specific areas and theatres of operation), and the possible (no warfare, but economic and financial assistance). Harold Nicolson did not spare himself over the Hoare–Laval Pact. ‘We League people have been shown finally and absolutely by our ineptitude in this Abyssinian question that economic sanctions are not enough. We know... that aggressive violence can only be restrained by force’.⁹⁹

⁹² Nicolson diary, 14 September 1935, Balliol College.

⁹³ H. Nicolson, ‘Little Man, What Now?’, *News-Letter: The National Labour Fortnightly*, 4 January 1936, 125.

⁹⁴ H. Nicolson, ‘People and Things’, *Spectator*, 3 February 1939, 175.

⁹⁵ M. Wight, *Power Politics* (London, New York: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1946), 55.

⁹⁶ Nicolson, ‘The Future of the League’, 1028.

⁹⁷ M. Rimaneli, *Italy Between Europe and the Mediterranean: Diplomacy and Naval Strategy from Unification to NATO, 1800s–2000* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997), 623; R. Mallett, *The Italian Navy and Fascist Expansionism 1935–1940* (London: Frank Cass, 1998). The author is grateful to Professor Vernon Bogdanor for referring him to Mallett’s excellent book.

⁹⁸ H. Nicolson, ‘The Accent on *Collective Security*’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 24 June 1936, 2.

⁹⁹ H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 23 June 1936, 1666–7.

'COLLECTIVE DEFENCE' AND THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS

Italy loomed larger in Nicolson's foreign policy thinking at this time than Germany. In 1935, in defiance of the Treaty of Versailles, the Reich had begun to rearm, conscription was introduced, and a military staff college established. Nicolson considered 'far-sighted' Eden's plan to avoid large-scale conflict by making concessions to Germany provided the Germans signed a disarmament treaty and rejoined the League of Nations.¹⁰⁰ Harold Nicolson insisted that British policy in dealing with the German and Italian dictators must be forthright and unequivocal—either one of disarmament (on certain conditions) or rearmament (which he favoured)—but in no circumstances a combination of the two.¹⁰¹ Unless Britain rearmed, her foreign policy constituted a liability for collective security and not an asset.¹⁰² On 27 February 1936, Nicolson addressed the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee on Anglo-German relations. 'My general line is Germany is an aggressive Power and wants war,' he wrote in his diary. 'We must first arm so as to speak with authority. We must then face her with an alternative between einkreisung [isolation] and the League plus disarmament. In other words back to the old idea of...disarmament by force'.¹⁰³

In violation of the Treaty of Versailles, the Covenant, and Locarno, Germany reoccupied the demilitarized zone of the Rhineland on 7 March 1936. This threat to France alone should have led to an immediate offensive response from the chief Locarno signatories, Britain and France. No such response followed. Nicolson described the parliamentary and public reaction in his diary entries for early March. 'General mood of the House is one of fear. Anything to keep out of war,' he wrote. 'The country will not stand for anything that makes for war'.¹⁰⁴ The most vocal parliamentary advocate of firm action was Winston Churchill, whose attitude Nicolson shared. Yet there was another serious difficulty. Nicolson regarded Hitler as a 'limited little revivalist', and the Reichswehr and the German General Staff as 'realists' in matters political and diplomatic. 'We can cope with realists,' he observed, 'against revivalists we cannot use the implements either of force or reason'.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 243. Germany had been a member from 1926 to 1933.

¹⁰¹ H. Nicolson, 'Letter to the Editor: Policy and Armaments', *New Statesman and Nation*, 15 February 1936, 223.

¹⁰² H. Nicolson, 'Letter to the Editor: Arms and Policy', *New Statesman and Nation*, 22 February 1936, 260.

¹⁰³ Nicolson diary, 27 February 1936, Balliol College.

¹⁰⁴ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 248.

¹⁰⁵ H. Nicolson, Review of K. Heiden, *Hitler* (1936), *Daily Telegraph*, 13 March 1936, 9.

Addressing the Foreign Affairs Committee on 17 March 1936, Nicolson called for a renewed British commitment to Locarno, especially to France.¹⁰⁶ L. S. Amery described Nicolson's utterance as 'an able and forcible speech reminding the meeting of the extent of our Locarno obligation'.¹⁰⁷ At a special Chatham House forum on 18 March, Nicolson appealed to his audience to consider Britain's treaty obligations as well as 'the real moral issue' at stake—the 'cumulative and enormous' British responsibility for her Locarno Pact guarantee to Germany in the event of a French invasion. This understanding had allowed Germany to rearm and mobilize. The British should, therefore, issue an immediate assurance to the French that Britain would defend France were she attacked. An international force must also be sent to the Rhineland to render the German presence less provocative.

Fearing war, and, after Abyssinia, increasingly dubious about the League, Nicolson stopped short of advocating the League-led expulsion of the German occupiers by force. Nevertheless, he emphasized the necessity of finding 'a middle way, a way between war and dishonour'.¹⁰⁸ Nicolson concluded that 'we have got to deal with realities, and the whole tragedy of post-War Europe is that we have dealt so much in terms of theories and unrealities, and so little in terms of what we are prepared to do'.¹⁰⁹ In Parliament on 26 March he called for the framing of an Anglo-French agreement (rather than a formal alliance) guaranteeing British assistance to France should Germany directly threaten her.¹¹⁰

With the British Government's response to the Rhineland invasion one of inaction, Nicolson turned his attention to another aspect of the German problem—the possibility of settling German claims regarding her former colonies. Many had been mandated to the victorious Powers in 1919. In a statement to the House of Commons on 27 April 1936, the Prime Minister, Stanley Baldwin, indicated that the Government was not considering any return of the 'Mandated Territories'.¹¹¹ On 22 July, 118 MPs (among them the former Foreign Secretary and Conservative elder statesman, Sir Austen Chamberlain, Winston Churchill, L. S. Amery, and Nicolson) signed a petition opposing any transfer of the Mandates to Germany.¹¹² Nicolson's approach to the German colonial issue was straightforward. 'Obviously, if it is a question between complete defeat and the surrender of the German colonies,' he wrote in his diary on 15 November 1937, 'there can be no question whatsoever. But if we

¹⁰⁶ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 252.

¹⁰⁷ L. S. Amery, *The Empire at Bay: The Leo Amery Diaries 1929–1945* (eds.), J. Barnes and D. Nicholson (London: Hutchinson, 1988), 411.

¹⁰⁸ H. Nicolson, 'Germany and the Rhineland', in *Germany and the Rhineland* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1936), 4, 9–12.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁰ H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 26 March 1936, 1471–2.

¹¹¹ S. Baldwin, *Hansard*, 27 April 1936, 552–4.

¹¹² M. Gilbert and R. Gott, *The Appeasers* (London: Phoenix Press, 2000), 90 and *n.*, 97.

are in fact able to defend ourselves, I see no reason why we should make concessions without receiving something in return'.¹¹³

Nicolson did not believe that returning Germany's one-time colonial possessions was the real issue for the Nazi regime; indeed, 'what the Germans really want is *power*. All other desiderata on their part are merely symbols of that major objective. They desire the colonies, not in order to repair their weaknesses, but in order to demonstrate their strength'.¹¹⁴ By early 1938, he was convinced that the German colonial question was a 'side-show'. It would be more fruitful to concentrate on a determined revision of the Treaties of Peace. This should be undertaken, not on the basis of old nationalities or frontiers, but in terms of economic planning and European cooperation on an ambitious new scale. Nicolson was adamant that 'to restore the colonies in return for German "friendship" would be to exchange a substance for a shadow'.¹¹⁵

L. S. Amery's *The German Colonial Claim* (1939) set out at length the convictions of international relations analysts like Nicolson that 'colonial retrocession' was unacceptable, on the grounds of moral responsibility for the native populations concerned, and of the safety and existence of the British Commonwealth and Empire.¹¹⁶ He considered Amery's book to be 'masterly and effective',¹¹⁷ and a Chatham House study group on the colonial question (chaired by Nicolson) recommended in mid-1939 that the European Powers should demonstrate to other Powers an intention to administer their colonies in the general interest of colonial peoples rather than exercise monopoly rights.¹¹⁸

For Nicolson, Nazi Germany represented a special threat to the Small Powers of Europe. Therefore, Britain's centuries-old duty to protect these nation-states from the depredations of any single Power or coalition still held—*parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*.¹¹⁹ He continued to value 'that Quixotic element which has always distinguished our diplomacy & preserved the integrity of little States'.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, Nicolson was well aware that in this sphere as with Abyssinia, public opinion could be a great handicap. Before Czechoslovakia's future had become an issue, Nicolson wrote to his wife on 28 April 1936 that 'in practice it would be quite impossible

¹¹³ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 312.

¹¹⁴ H. Nicolson, 'Germany and the Colonies', *Fortnightly*, December 1937, 646.

¹¹⁵ H. Nicolson, 'The Colonial Problem', *International Affairs*, 17/1 (1938), 40–1.

¹¹⁶ L. S. Amery, *The German Colonial Claim* (London: W. and R. Chambers, 1939), 175.

¹¹⁷ H. Nicolson, Review of L. S. Amery, *The German Colonial Claim* (1939), *Daily Telegraph*, 12 May 1939, 8.

¹¹⁸ Royal Institute of International Affairs, *The Colonial Problem* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), 270–1.

¹¹⁹ Nicolson, 'The Colonial Problem', 33.
¹²⁰ Lady Violet Bonham Carter, *Lantern Slides: The Diaries and Letters of Violet Bonham Carter 1904–1914* (eds.), M. Bonham Carter and M. Pottle (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1996), 305–6. The words are Lady Violet's.

for us to get the British people to fight Germany for the sake of the Czechs'.¹²¹ The most pressing problem for the custodians of British foreign policy, Nicolson told Sir Alfred Zimmern on 30 April 1936, was that the Government could define its action precisely only if it was certain that the electorate would agree to such action. As Britons were unwilling to commit themselves to any exact course, their country's external relations would continue to remain inconclusive.¹²²

Only five days after the Rhineland invasion, Nicolson concluded that Anglo-French weakness in the face of this aggression spelt 'the final end of the League'.¹²³ He did not doubt that the League had failed because 'the Covenant was born of a marriage between two different and even conflicting states of mind...the nineteenth-century tradition of national sovereignties based upon power...[and]...the Wilsonian theory of a commonwealth of nations based upon consent. The impact of these two divergent states of mind resulted in an unhappy compromise'.

As part of this compact, 'The upholders of the nineteenth-century tradition were appeased by being accorded political, and eventually economic, frontiers collectively guaranteed. The Wilsonians were able to introduce their democratic conceptions of "equality" and "universality"'. The outcome was unfortunate:

The doctrine of State sovereignty enabled its supporters to use the League as a machinery for perpetuating the territorial and other servitudes of the peace settlement. Egalitarianism...became for the faithful a stumbling-block and for the heretics an absurd fiction. Whereas universality, in that it made each member of the League a guarantor of every other member, imposed upon democracies a degree of responsibility which, when it came to the point, they would often be unwilling to assume.¹²⁴

By the mid-1930s, this disastrous confusion of purpose and method was paralyzing the League.

Neither realist power politics nor practical idealism could resolve this dilemma. Instead, 'a defensive League of Nations with limited commitments' must be created in place of 'an offensive League of Nations which has failed'.¹²⁵ This failure arose, as Walter Lippmann explained, from a Great Power misconception that, while endowing the post-war collective security system with an equality of rights in all other spheres, they could retain for themselves 'ultimate power' in dealing with international disputes. Aggressive nation-states like Italy, Germany, and Japan did not aspire to 'limited wars',

¹²¹ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 259.

¹²² H. Nicolson, Letter to Sir Alfred Zimmern, 30 April 1936, Zimmern Papers, Ms 39, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

¹²³ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 250.

¹²⁴ Nicolson, 'The Future of the League', 1028.

¹²⁵ Nicolson diary, 15 June 1936, Balliol College.

which collective security was designed to prevent, but to ‘national supremacy’, something beyond the powers of the Versailles settlement to thwart.¹²⁶

On 18 June 1936, Nicolson reflected privately that ‘all extreme League idealism at this moment is midsummer madness . . . the League must be reconstituted on a basis of facts’.¹²⁷ Regrettably, the terms ‘“The League”’ and ‘“Collective Security”’ suggested to the British people ‘not a galling responsibility for the defense of other League members, but some form of blessed isolationism’,¹²⁸ rather than a body and a conception concerned with ensuring international order through a preponderance of power.

At a Chatham House ‘Discussion Group’ (7 July) on policy towards Germany and Italy, Nicolson asserted that any future aggression must be met ‘in terms of contributions to League of Nations force’.¹²⁹ He also attended meetings of the New Commonwealth Society. At one such gathering, on 14 July 1936, its President, Winston Churchill, emphasized that while all political parties were united in their support for the rule of law and a desire for peaceful change, New Commonwealth members believed in the marshalling (under League auspices) of physical force against the aggressor. ‘The League we wish to build will be a League based on realities and not on shams,’ Nicolson recorded in his diary. ‘The contributions of force to be made by each member against aggression must not only be carefully calculated, but must be publicly known. Only when such a preponderance of physical force is on the side of law shall we be able to restrain the aggressor’.¹³⁰

Should the League of Nations not regain sufficient peacemaking authority, Nicolson stated in September 1936, Britain would have no choice but to revert to strategies based on the balance of power, traditional diplomacy, and armed alliances.¹³¹ In preventing this and restoring the League’s capacity to create and enforce peace, Nicolson advocated less emphasis on general concessions and a more concrete approach to conciliation in exchange for clear guarantees. This could be achieved if Chatham House and similar organizations engendered a more informed understanding of the issues involved, and if an independent committee of international experts was appointed to adjudicate on the justness of the Treaty of Versailles. The League must also be rebuilt in terms of strength. Nicolson again condemned the doctrine of universality as a vague ideal, describing it as the theory most responsible for destroying the

¹²⁶ W. Lippmann, *An Inquiry into the Principles of the Good Society*, 2nd edn. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1943), 150–2.

¹²⁷ Nicolson diary, 18 June 1936, Balliol College.

¹²⁸ Nicolson, ‘The Accent on *Collective Security*’, 1.

¹²⁹ Nicolson diary, 7 July 1936, Balliol College.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 14 July 1936.

¹³¹ H. Nicolson, ‘British Policy in Relation to the League’, in *The Future of the League of Nations* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1936), 131.

League's authority. 'It has inflated the currency of contract until the pound note of League contract is not worth twenty shillings, but it is worth about eight pence. We have got to restore the currency of contract'.¹³² Henceforth, the emphasis must be on well-defined commitments and certainty, not on broad principles and universality.

'Collective security'—a tarnished though not wholly discredited doctrine—had to give way to 'collective defence', namely, a strengthened form of collective security through the League of Nations Covenant. It was an expression also used by Angell and others to sharpen the sinews of foreign affairs and defence discussion at this time.¹³³ In outlining a possible model for the latter Nicolson employed a commercial analogy. Britain, for example, could offer four types of commitment: *debenture shares* (conscription), *preference shares* (trained professional assistance in terms of force, or by sending quotas of the navy, the air force, and the army to assist beleaguered nation-states), *ordinary shares* (financial and economic assistance), and *deferred shares* (goodwill, benevolence). The best means of countering aggressive regimes was to forge 'a group, a preponderance of power, on the side of authority and order which would deter any such aggressor from threatening the peace of the world'.¹³⁴

As part of his effort to strengthen the League's activities in Britain Nicolson joined the League of Nations Union. He was elected to its Executive Committee in October 1936¹³⁵ and re-elected in June 1937.¹³⁶ The chief force behind the Union was Lord Cecil of Chelwood, its President between 1923 and 1945. Among its chief initiatives (conducted by a National Declaration Committee) was the 'National Peace Ballot' of 1934–35, undertaken in order to determine Britons' support for the League of Nations. The organization was dogged by internecine struggle, in which Nicolson participated with gusto. He noted after one meeting that 'there are real political cleavages in the Union between right, left and centre'.¹³⁷ His main efforts as a member were directed at minimizing the influence on Union activities of an associated body, the Communist-inspired International Peace Campaign.¹³⁸

The Campaign's parent—the *Rassemblement Universel pour la Paix*—which included pacifist groups, but also a few prominent individuals such as M. K. Gandhi and the French man of letters, Romain Rolland, had been formed in France in September 1935 for the purpose of promoting League of Nations interests. Its English counterpart, whose members included Sir Norman Angell, was

¹³² Nicolson, 'British Policy in Relation to the League', 134–8.

¹³³ M. Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists: The British Peace Movement and International Relations, 1854–1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 369.

¹³⁴ Nicolson, 'British Policy in Relation to the League', 139–40.

¹³⁵ Nicolson diary, 22 October 1936, Balliol College.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10 June 1937.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29 October 1936.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 17 November 1936, 1 February 1938.

established as a separate entity in November 1936 after nine months of wrangling within the Union about alleged Campaign duplication of Union functions. *The Times* dismissed the Campaign contemptuously as one of ‘a miscellany of organizations among which the Communistic are remarkable for their presence’.¹³⁹ According to Martin Ceadel, the Rassemblement was ‘sufficiently tarred with the Moscow brush to be anathematized by Britain’s trade unions, Roman Catholics, and Conservatives’.¹⁴⁰ Nicolson was determined to ensure that the League of Nations Union did not suffer by being a Campaign affiliate, or by becoming too closely identified with this pro-Communist propaganda group. Internal dissension led its leaders to dissolve the International Peace Campaign in September 1940; the League of Nations Union endured until 1945.

Harold Nicolson’s thinking on a reconstituted League of Nations was influenced greatly by the Spanish Civil War, which broke out on 18 July 1936 and lasted for three years. Italy and Germany supported General Franco, France and Russia the incumbent government. Only Britain observed the official Great Power policy of non-intervention. The conflict has been called ‘the most important event between the wars for socialists, liberals, intellectuals, and perhaps even the workers’.¹⁴¹ Nicolson cared little for either side’s beliefs and methods; however, he was not slow to see the war’s wider implications for European security. He regarded the administration in Madrid as ‘a mere Kerensky Government at the mercy of an armed proletariat’, but reflected on 8 August 1936 that ‘Franco and his Moors are no better’. The conflict accentuated the division of Europe between left and right, and he was certain that ‘the pro-German and anti-Russian tendencies of the Tories will be fortified and increased’.¹⁴² This would undoubtedly make it easier for those within the British Government eager to pacify Germany to increase their efforts in that direction. The events in Spain had also further demonstrated the League’s inability to deal with interstate disputes.¹⁴³

In the absence of anything better, Nicolson remained convinced that peace could best be preserved, not by a powerful coalition of democratic nation-states confronting an intending aggressor—a course he considered provocative, divisive, and unwieldy—but by sharing resources through a stronger League system.¹⁴⁴ Britain’s soundest possible contribution to European security and ‘a world order’ was ‘certainty’, or clarity in her foreign policy. Nicolson recommended that she proclaim a form of Monroe Doctrine, whereby she

¹³⁹ *The Times*, 16 December 1936, 15.

¹⁴⁰ Ceadel, *Semi-Detached Idealists*, 350.

¹⁴¹ N. Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers: Conservative Opposition to Appeasement in the 1930s* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), 115.

¹⁴² Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 270.

¹⁴³ H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 3 November 1936, 20.

¹⁴⁴ H. Nicolson, ‘Limited or Unlimited Obligations? What Ought British Foreign Policy To Be?’ (Discussion with Sir Edward Grigg and Sir Norman Angell), *Listener*, 9 December 1936, 1072.

would declare her preparedness to fight to defend the British Commonwealth and Empire as well as the zone in Europe essential to protect London and British industrial cities against aerial bombardment. Such a policy could serve as a starting point for instituting a federation of large and small nation-states pledged to the principles of the Covenant.¹⁴⁵ While his prescriptions for British foreign policy at this time envisaged limited liabilities, Nicolson made it clear that much wider or even unlimited liabilities might soon confront Britain. In order to prevent another war it would be necessary to ‘create force immeasurable on the side of democracy’ (10 June 1937)¹⁴⁶ through the League of Nations (30 June 1937).¹⁴⁷

On 15 November 1937, Nicolson reflected on the difficulty of reaching sound conclusions about ‘foreign politics’ without accurate knowledge of Britain’s ‘real defensive power’.¹⁴⁸ His dilemma was soon eased by an invitation to join an international policy body known as the All Souls Foreign Affairs Group, or ‘Salter’s Soviet’. It met on nine occasions between 18 December 1937 and 15 May 1938, and was the brainchild of Sir Arthur Salter, a Fellow of All Souls and Gladstone Professor of Political Theory and Institutions at Oxford University.

Members (there were twenty-one regular attendees) included the Labour politician, Clifford Allen (Lord Allen of Hurtwood), Sir Norman Angell and Lionel Curtis, the historians, H. A. L. Fisher and Arnold Toynbee, a future Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan, the classicist and co-founder of the League of Nations Union, Gilbert Murray, the international relations scholar, E. L. Woodward, the military historian, Basil Liddell Hart, and the historian-poet, A. L. Rowse. Under the guidance of its convenors, Salter and Nicolson, this galaxy of intellectual talent and public achievement gathered to discuss and analyse foreign affairs. Nicolson attended on 18–19 December 1937, 15–16 January, 6 and 26 February, 16 and 31 March, and 15 May 1938.

At its first meeting (18 and 19 December 1937), the Group identified Germany as the main threat to European security. Lionel Curtis acknowledged Nicolson’s crucial role in convincing the thirteen members present of the aggressive nature of German ambitions, and in persuading them to reject the policies of pacifying Germany or playing for time. The outcome was a document entitled ‘A General Settlement’. It was based on the premise that Britain’s policy towards Germany should be one of ‘firmness followed by conciliation’.¹⁴⁹ The ‘General Settlement’ stipulated that in return for

¹⁴⁵ Nicolson, ‘Limited or Unlimited Obligations?’, 1107.

¹⁴⁶ Nicolson diary, 10 June 1937, Balliol College.

¹⁴⁷ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 303.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 312.

¹⁴⁹ S. Aster, ‘“Salter’s Soviet”: Another View of All Souls and Appeasement’, in M. G. Fry (ed.), *Power, Personalities and Policies: Essays in Honour of Donald Cameron Watt* (London: Frank Cass, 1992), 147–9.

Anschluss (Austria's union with Germany), conditional 'cantonal status' for the Sudeten Germans, a recognition of the German right to possess colonies, and the retention of existing German economic interests in Eastern Europe, the British would require a German undertaking not to attack other nation-states, the Reich's agreement to limit its armaments production (her position in Central Europe would be one of 'preponderance but not supremacy'), and a German commitment not to support Italy's territorial ambitions in the Mediterranean and Africa.¹⁵⁰ The record of the meeting was provided to Eden, who agreed with the Group's analysis.

When it met on 15–16 January 1938, Nicolson advocated containing Germany by means of collective action through the League of Nations. This raised the ire of Lionel Curtis, who regarded it as a certain path to war. By the 6 February 1938 meeting, Lord Allen had become the Group's chief proponent of peace through Anglo-German friendship. Some of Allen's proposed safeguards notwithstanding, this was not a course Nicolson favoured.¹⁵¹ On 8 March 1938, several members of the Group (including Lord Allen, Lionel Curtis, Gilbert Murray, Sir Arthur Salter, and Nicolson) met at Chatham House to discuss a draft paper prepared by Arnold Toynbee on the possible consequences for Britain if she abandoned the League. In Sidney Aster's judgement, 'Nicolson as usual cut to the heart of the matter by stating that the real issue was "between the traditions of our policy (namely to oppose the strong and to protect the weak) and an experiment in a new policy of trying to conciliate the strong"'.¹⁵² Despite his forthright public confidence, Nicolson was privately pessimistic; he wrote to his wife on 9 March, 'We are suddenly faced by a collapse of our authority, our Empire and our independence... Nobody who is well-informed believes that there is any chance of negotiations with Germany leading to anything at all'.¹⁵³

On 11 July 1936, Hitler had signed a non-aggression pact with Austria. Predictably, opinion on how to counter German aggression became increasingly divided after Germany's military annexation of Austria on 12 March. Nicolson was abroad on 24 April, when the Group resolved that in future 'the primary effort of British policy should be directed not to resistance to aggression, but to appeasement and the finding of a *modus vivendi* with the aggressor states'.¹⁵⁴ Liddell Hart, Murray, Toynbee, and Nicolson—and perhaps others more circumspect in expressing their opinions—were opposed absolutely to this policy (enunciated in large part by Allen).

After attending what would be the Group's last meeting (15 May 1938), Nicolson wrote in his diary: 'There is really a split between the realists and

¹⁵⁰ 'Conference on Foreign Policy' (All Souls College), 18–19 December 1937, in Harold Nicolson diary (typescript), Balliol College, 1937.

¹⁵¹ Aster, "'Salter's Soviet'", 151–3.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 156.

¹⁵³ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 330.

¹⁵⁴ Aster, "'Salter's Soviet'", 162.

the moralists. Gilbert Murray and I do not approve of expedients. Allen says that peace should be bought at any price or almost any price'.¹⁵⁵ On 17 May, Allen explained his position more fully in a letter to Toynbee. It represented an approach which neither Nicolson the liberal realist nor Toynbee the practical idealist could accept. 'I am prepared to back international law by force and to uphold it, but unless the force is overwhelming I think one then has to choose between two evils—the evil of a catastrophe in trying to uphold law, and the evil of allowing temporary casualties in morality,' Allen wrote. 'It is for that reason that I am willing to take risks with morality during the transitional period in the hope—perhaps a vain one—that events will play into our hands'.¹⁵⁶ As Sidney Aster has pointed out, 'Salter's Soviet' never produced 'an agreed public statement on foreign affairs'. So contentious were the subjects with which it had to deal, that the attempt by Lord Allen (and others) to achieve a comprehensive formula of "peace at any price" among members finally dissolved any remaining unity of outlook.¹⁵⁷

Nicolson exercised his greatest influence as an MP in the field of foreign affairs during 1938 and 1939. As John Connell wrote, 'The dishonour, the repeated humiliations and disasters which beset Britain in those two years were the worst in the whole of her diplomatic history'.¹⁵⁸ As its Vice-Chairman, Nicolson addressed the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee on 17 February 1938. He called for rearmament and warned strongly against concessions to Germany¹⁵⁹ (and Italy), earning praise and gratitude from Eden for his 'robust' stance.¹⁶⁰ 'Germany is out for *Weltmacht*,' Nicolson told his wife on the same day, 'and will carry that through with grim determination'.¹⁶¹ A problem closer to home soon demanded his attention—Eden's resignation as Foreign Secretary on 20 February.

Both Anthony Eden and the Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, wished to remove Italy from Germany's orbit, but they differed markedly on how to do so. The former, in the light of Italy's conduct over Abyssinia, insisted on some demonstration of good faith before negotiations could begin; the latter dismissed the need for this, leading Eden to resign. Nicolson supported Eden, on the ground that Britain's foreign policy should be conducted on 'a basis of principle' and not 'a basis of expediency'. The essential problem was 'whether a country which has continuously, consistently, deliberately and without apology, violated every engagement into which she has ever entered

¹⁵⁵ Nicolson diary, 15 May 1938, Balliol College.

¹⁵⁶ M. Gilbert, *Plough My Own Furrow: The Story of Lord Allen of Hurtwood* (London: Longmans, 1965), 401.

¹⁵⁷ Aster, "Salter's Soviet", 168.

¹⁵⁸ J. Connell, *The 'Office': A Study of British Foreign Policy and Its Makers 1919–1951* (London: Allan Wingate, 1958), 274.

¹⁵⁹ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 323.

¹⁶⁰ 1st Earl of Avon, *The Eden Memoirs: Facing the Dictators* (London: Cassell, 1962), 579.

¹⁶¹ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 322.

can be taken back into the fold with a smile; or whether it is better to make a few concrete conditions before negotiations are resumed'.¹⁶²

Undoubtedly, Nicolson declared, 'The late Foreign Secretary struggled hard to preserve the rule of law and order, the theory of the League of Nations, the belief in the sanctity of treaties, and the confidence of the world—which we may lose by this action'. Never before had Britain 'definitely defended wrong with cool and planned deliberation as we are doing now. I regret that those great principles of our policy, those charters of that authority which we have for so many centuries exercised in the world should now lie tattered at our feet, should be called scraps of paper or matters of detail. Above all, I regret that we should see: "their sire, Butchered to make a Roman holiday"'.¹⁶³

Nicolson reflected on 25 February that the British Government's action represented a reversion to pre-war power politics and bargaining, that from now on Britain would be forced to purchase Italian and German friendship by making sacrifices, that such friendship would prove practically worthless in international relations terms, and that in doing so the British would lose the confidence of France (though French policy was similar to Britain's), the USSR, the USA, and Europe's Small Powers.¹⁶⁴ His predictions were realized.

Chamberlain's anti-Russian and anti-American attitudes were a great limitation in creating a united front against Germany and Italy. 'The soul of that ironmonger,' Nicolson observed on 7 March 1938, 'is not one which will save England'.¹⁶⁵ He believed also that the time had come for Britain and France to make 'an overwhelming and incontestable affirmation of strength' to remind Italy that the British would fight to defend their vital interests near Spain, notably, Gibraltar, and to retain control of the Straits and the Mediterranean.¹⁶⁶

On 16 March 1938, Nicolson explained his approach to countering the dictators' territorial ambitions. Sound foreign policy was based on a nation-state identifying itself in a given situation with those nation-states who shared its strategic interests. In realist vein, he asserted that, while it was easy to speak in terms of 'vague idealism' and to talk optimistically about 'collective security', the terrible nature of modern warfare dictated that no nation-state (especially no democratic one) would wage war unless its key interests were threatened. The real issue was not 'the question of an ideal foreign policy, but the question whether in the world as it now is such an ideal foreign policy is at all practicable'.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶² H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 21 February 1938, 99.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 104; H. Nicolson, Letter to M. Saddleir, 23 February 1938, Constable and Company Collection, Temple University Library, Philadelphia.

¹⁶⁴ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 325–6.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 329.

¹⁶⁶ H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 16 March 1938, 524.

¹⁶⁷ H. Nicolson, 'Balance of Power Up-to-Date' (Discussion with Sir Alfred Zimmern), *Listener*, 16 March 1938, 570–1.

Nicolson called on the Western European democracies and the United States to negotiate a new international balance of power designed to strengthen the League of Nations. The large and small democratic nation-states could then act in concert to redress reasonable (and reject unreasonable) German grievances arising from the 1919 settlement. They could also stand ready to resist aggression. In this way, ‘Our moral conviction and our physical force would be harmonised instead of clashing as they do today’.¹⁶⁸ The fusion of realist and idealist approaches to securing peace had resulted in liberal realism—an approach which sought to reconcile force and conciliation in international relations.

‘THE FOREIGN OFFICE MIND’

At this time Nicolson began to emerge as one of the most forceful critics of British foreign policy. He resented the Parliament’s supine attitude to Eden’s resignation—‘a step back away from light and progress’¹⁶⁹—and he was soon numbered with Winston Churchill and L. S. Amery among what the Chamberlainite MP, Henry Channon, called ‘The Insurgents’.¹⁷⁰ His constituents gave Nicolson strong support, his party (National Labour) very little. He resigned as Vice-Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee (along with its two other office-bearers) over the Eden issue at the Committee’s 24 February 1938 meeting; however, he was persuaded to withdraw his resignation in response to many requests, principally Churchill’s and Amery’s.¹⁷¹ Nevertheless, on 7 April Nicolson agreed to the Committee’s request to quit as Vice-Chairman; his continuing criticism of the Government had become unacceptable to other Committee members sympathetic to Chamberlain’s policy.

By March 1938, Nicolson began to believe that Germany did not desire a general war, only to obtain territory and influence—preferably by threats of violence rather than by violence itself. This policy would succeed for a limited time before the democracies (which still held the balance of power) countered her. Whereas the weaknesses of the democratic nation-states were often apparent, those (economic, financial, and strategic) of Germany and Italy were frequently hidden (even from themselves). Therefore, Nicolson concluded on 23 March, while the League of Nations was being reconstituted (through stronger democratic Great Power collaboration) British policy towards the dictators should be one of firm conciliation.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁸ Nicolson, ‘Balance of Power Up-to-Date’, 571.

¹⁶⁹ Nicolson diary, 22 February 1938, Balliol College.

¹⁷⁰ Sir Henry Channon, *Chips: The Diaries of Sir Henry Channon* (ed.), R. Rhodes James (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1967), 153.

¹⁷¹ Amery, *The Empire at Bay*, 458.

¹⁷² H. Nicolson, ‘Muddling Through the Muddle’, *Christian Science Monitor*, 23 March 1938, 1–2, 12.

Earlier that month an American critic had unwittingly identified an important element of Nicolson's liberal realism—the principled implementation of foreign policy objectives in order to avoid conflict for as long as possible:

The question of the mind of Britain, that awesome and mercurial vexation, is very present with us today . . . Mere self-interest cannot simply explain it . . . What it all has something to do with is just this: The English play the waiting game the longest, the best, and win most often . . . They have an experienced technique for elastic decisions which may end in eventual war and dismemberment, but not until every humanly conceivable policy or possibility has been consciously employed and exploited.¹⁷³

Under the terms of the Anglo-Italian Agreement (16 April 1938), Britain formally recognized Italy's subjugation of Abyssinia and agreed to turn a blind eye to Mussolini's Spanish ambitions. In mid-May, at the request of his old friend, Sir Robert Vansittart, the Head of the Foreign Office, Nicolson arranged for the representative of the Sudeten Germans, Konrad Henlein, to meet a number of Conservative and Labour Party MPs during his brief and secret London visit to gauge opinion concerning British Sudetenland policy. The message conveyed to Henlein, a Hitler lackey, at Vansittart's request, was that any German insistence on integrating the Sudetenland into Germany by force would result in war.¹⁷⁴

With the rapid movement of events between the *Anschluss* in mid-March and the Czechoslovakian crisis of September 1938, Nicolson's views on the European situation (like those of most politicians and international relations authorities) varied considerably. On 13 May, he observed that 'the prevention of war depends to-day not upon any illusions regarding collective security, but upon the policy of the Five Great Powers'. Yet he was quick to stress 'the relation which "realism" can and should bear to "idealism"' because 'the errors of the past have been due to an indolent neglect of our ancient principles of policy as of those moral values which alone can fortify our unity or inspire our determination'.¹⁷⁵ By 6 June, he was convinced that Chamberlain's policy of appeasing Hitler would achieve only 'temporary peace at the price of ultimate defeat'.¹⁷⁶

In a BBC broadcast on 15 August, Nicolson stated that, with the demise of the Holy Alliance, the Concert of Europe, and 'the habit of international honesty', the League of Nations represented one of the few remaining repositories of 'the idea of international principles as opposed to the idea of purely national expediency'. It was a greatly weakened, though not a lost cause. It

¹⁷³ L. Kirstein, Review of H. Nicolson, *Helen's Tower* (1937), *Nation*, 5 March 1938, 277.

¹⁷⁴ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 340–1, 340n; 'Letter to the Editor: "Diplomatic Twilight"', *The Times*, 5 June 1953, 7.

¹⁷⁵ H. Nicolson, Review of R. W. Seton-Watson, *Britain and the Dictators* (1938), *Daily Telegraph*, 13 May 1938, 6.

¹⁷⁶ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 345.

was also one that public opinion in all democratic nation-states should embrace in preventing a recrudescence of power and brute force as the only arbiters of international conduct.¹⁷⁷

Hitler's territorial ambitions in Eastern Europe (and beyond) depended on the conquest of Czechoslovakia. To realize them, he used as a pretext the 3.5 million Sudeten Germans living under Czech rule on Czechoslovakia's northern, southern, and western frontiers. When Hitler and Chamberlain met for the first time at Berchtesgaden on 15 September, Hitler insisted on the return of the Sudeten territories, despite the fact that (as Nicolson had pointed out in a BBC broadcast on 1 August 1938), they had never belonged to Germany.¹⁷⁸ Nicolson was certain from the beginning that the German leaders had no desire to settle the matter justly.¹⁷⁹

Chamberlain hoped to arrive quickly at a diplomatic rapprochement with Germany. It is clear that at this time the Prime Minister's unofficial foreign policy advisers and information apparatchiks were successful in restricting criticism of Government policy. One of their main targets was Nicolson, who had little choice but to agree to the broadcast on 5 September of a censored version of his radio talk criticizing Chamberlain's initiatives over Czechoslovakia.¹⁸⁰ Nicolson saw the Sudeten German issue as symptomatic of a greater conflict between two contrasting theories. One was based on the belief that interstate disputes could be settled by mutual agreement, and the other on the conviction that they could be resolved only on a basis of power.¹⁸¹ 'The struggle, which was watched by all the world, centred upon the issue whether violence, and the threat of violence, were in fact the decisive factors in international affairs... The problem ceased to be a Czech, or even a European, problem; it became a world problem'.¹⁸²

As an element of his wider foreign policy, Chamberlain set about resolving the Sudeten question. An Anglo-French plan was devised whereby, irrespective of the wishes of the population, all parts of Czechoslovakia in which more than half of the inhabitants were German would be ceded to the Reich. Hitler rejected this plan when presented with it by Chamberlain at Godesberg on 22 September, demanding instead acquiescence in complete German occupation of the Sudetenland by 1 October. Chamberlain reluctantly advised the British Cabinet and the Czechs to accept this proposal. There was Cabinet opposition, however (from the First Lord of the Admiralty, Alfred Duff Cooper), and from the French.

¹⁷⁷ H. Nicolson, 'The Past Week', *Listener*, 18 August 1938, 336.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 4 August 1938, 242.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 1 September 1938, 445–6.

¹⁸⁰ R. Cockett, *Twilight of Truth: Chamberlain, Appeasement and the Manipulation of the Press* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989), 112, 193–5.

¹⁸¹ H. Nicolson, 'The Past Week', *Listener*, 8 September 1938, 483.

¹⁸² H. Nicolson, 'After Munich', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 124 (1938), 518.

Neville Chamberlain notified Hitler that Britain would support France should the latter decide, in defiance of these proposals, and in accordance with her Treaty commitments to Czechoslovakia, to go to war to assist the Czechs. On 27 September, the French army and the British fleet were partly mobilized, and on the following day 1.5 million Czech soldiers assembled along the German frontier. News of a proposed conference (ostensibly an Italian proposal but actually one of German devising) aimed at avoiding war arrived as Chamberlain was addressing Parliament on 28 September. Hysteria gripped the House of Commons when Chamberlain told MPs of his intention to attend the meeting. At the conference, which took place in Munich, Chamberlain, Hitler, Mussolini, and France's Prime Minister, Édouard Daladier (Czechoslovakia was not asked to send an emissary) agreed on 30 September to almost all of Hitler's Godesberg demands. This signalled the partition of Czechoslovakia. Chamberlain returned to London brandishing a sheet of paper signed by Hitler and himself which contained, he said, Britain and Germany's pledges never to go to war with one another. From an upstairs window at No. 10 Downing Street he proclaimed to cheering crowds that this constituted 'peace with honour' and 'peace for our time'.

The MP, Walter Elliot, found Nicolson to be 'Abyssinian in his anger and shame' over Godesberg,¹⁸³ a transaction which convinced him that war had been postponed but almost certainly not averted.¹⁸⁴ After Munich he regarded it as inevitable. Nicolson argued strongly outside and inside Parliament against the Munich Agreement. At a luncheon in Manchester he claimed that the Prime Minister's 'surrender' had secured peace, not for a generation, but for six months.¹⁸⁵ Inside the Commons Nicolson described the 'Munich capitulation' as 'one of the most disastrous episodes' in British history.¹⁸⁶ Chamberlain's misreading of the German national character, and his ignorance of the principles and traditions of British foreign policy, had allowed Hitler to achieve all of his aims: the annexation of the Sudetenland, the destruction of Czechoslovakia, and German hegemony in Europe.¹⁸⁷ In his finest ever parliamentary speech—Anthony Eden called it 'a very courageous and brilliant performance'¹⁸⁸—Nicolson proclaimed resoundingly:

I know that in these days of realism those of us who try to keep our election pledges are told that we are disloyal to the party . . . I know that those of us who try to be consistent are accused of having 'one-track' minds, I know that in these days of realism principles are considered as rather eccentric and ideals are identified with hysteria.

¹⁸³ C. Coote, *A Companion of Honour: The Story of Walter Elliot* (London: Collins, 1965), 168.

¹⁸⁴ H. Nicolson, 'The Past Week', *Listener*, 22 September 1938, 595.

¹⁸⁵ *The Times*, 3 October 1938, 19.

¹⁸⁶ H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 5 October 1938, 431.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 428–31, 433.

¹⁸⁸ A. Eden, Letter to H. Nicolson, 5 October 1938, Harold Nicolson Papers, C0913, Princeton University Library, Princeton, New Jersey.

I know that those of us who believe in the traditions of our policy, who believe in the precepts which we have inherited from our ancestors, who believe that one great function of this country is to maintain moral standards in Europe, to maintain a settled pattern of international relations, not to make friends with people whose conduct is demonstrably evil, not to go out of our way to make friends with them but to set up some sort of standard by which the smaller Powers can test what is good in international conduct and what is not—I know that those who hold such beliefs are accused of possessing the Foreign Office mind. I thank God that I possess the Foreign Office mind.¹⁸⁹

Nicolson never moved an inch from these sentiments. He was convinced that the ‘meaningless and dishonourable’ Munich Agreement constituted a shift in the balance of power to Britain’s detriment.¹⁹⁰ The pre-First World War balance achieved by the Triple Entente (between France, Russia, and the British), and the post-war balance represented by the League of Nations, had both been abandoned.¹⁹¹ Munich also represented, he told Walter Lippmann, ‘a vast strategical surrender’.¹⁹² Nicolson observed on the last day of 1938: ‘It has been a bad year. Chamberlain has destroyed the Balance of Power’.¹⁹³ Without doubt, ‘Munich disturbed not only the physical but also the moral balance of the world . . . it was the power of Great Britain which for so many generations maintained this useful moral balance’.¹⁹⁴

Sidney Aster has observed that, of the older members of ‘Salter’s Soviet’ and their younger brethren at All Souls College, Oxford, such as A. L. Rowse (and, it can be said, the MPs and international relations authorities of the 1930s), ‘few can lay claim to being consistently either an appeaser or a resister . . . failure to agree on where to take a stand was the central issue at the heart of appeasement’.¹⁹⁵ The tendency of international relations scholars and historians to categorize the dramatis personae of this great tragedy as being primarily for or against appeasement has been compelling. Nicolson has not escaped this process.¹⁹⁶ Yet David Carlton described him perceptively as ‘a so-called anti-appeaser’,¹⁹⁷ presumably because he spelt

¹⁸⁹ H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 5 October 1938, 433–4.

¹⁹⁰ H. Nicolson, ‘Alfred Duff Cooper, first Viscount Norwich (1890–1954)’, in E. T. Williams and H. M. Palmer (eds.), *The Dictionary of National Biography: 1951–1960* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 249.

¹⁹¹ Nicolson, ‘After Munich’, 521.

¹⁹² W. Lippmann, *Public Philosopher: Selected Letters of Walter Lippmann* (ed.), J. M. Blum (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1985), 375n.

¹⁹³ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 384.

¹⁹⁴ H. Nicolson, ‘People and Things’, *Spectator*, 3 March 1939, 347.

¹⁹⁵ Aster, ‘“Salter’s Soviet”’, 169.

¹⁹⁶ T. G. Otte, ‘Harold Nicolson (1886–1968)’, in J. Ramsden (ed.), *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century British Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 472. Nicolson’s views of appeasement were more complex than those of ‘a constant and bitter opponent’ of the policy.

¹⁹⁷ D. Carlton, *Anthony Eden: A Biography* (London: Allen Lane, 1981), 81.

out the dangers of conciliating Hitler and the perils of not doing so. Close examination of Nicolson's writings and speeches reveals the limits he placed on the practice of appeasement. An underlying consistency characterized his position on appeasement, though, as with the execution of most (if not all) policy, new circumstances necessitated pragmatic responses to the dictators.

The year between Munich and Britain's declaration of war on Germany following the latter's invasion of Poland (3 September 1939) saw a final unravelling of appeasement as pursued by Neville Chamberlain, and the discrediting of what had for centuries been considered a sound approach to British foreign policy and diplomacy. As an MP, Nicolson was involved closely in these events through his membership of the 'Eden Group'. Though a member of the December Club of mainly Conservative Party MPs opposed to British foreign policy towards the German, Italian, and Spanish dictators,¹⁹⁸ Nicolson had never been 'one of the Winston brigade'.¹⁹⁹ Nevertheless, he did not disguise his admiration for Churchill, writing in June 1938 of 'the prescience of Mr Churchill... the blind optimism of his critics... the blend of realism and idealism which renders [his] present theory so far above the jangles and tangles of party controversy'.²⁰⁰ Nicolson also participated in the activities of the group, Focus for the Defence of Freedom and Peace ('Focus', or 'The Focus'), formed in 1935 to coordinate opposition to Nazi Germany, of which Churchill soon became the impresario.²⁰¹

The Munich Agreement was the chief factor behind the formation in early November 1938 of the 'Eden Group', an informal assembly of some twenty to thirty MPs (mainly Conservatives), who met weekly to discuss Chamberlain's foreign policy. It also published the *Whitehall News Letter*. Dismissed by the Conservative Party Whips as "'Glamour Boys'"²⁰² the Edenites presented no serious challenge to Chamberlain. Nigel Nicolson's description of the Group as a 'ginger' rather than an 'opposition' group best sums it up.²⁰³ The dilemma of Eden Group members was well described by A. J. P. Taylor. 'The uncompromising opponents of Munich were the eminently respectable, men who loathed Dissent and who had spent their lives in or near the sanctity of the Foreign Office... men who knew their way to the

¹⁹⁸ M. Egremont, *Under Two Flags: The Life of Major-General Sir Edward Spears* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), 134–5, 139.

¹⁹⁹ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 328.

²⁰⁰ H. Nicolson, Review of W. Churchill, *Arms and the Covenant* (1938), *Daily Telegraph*, 24 June 1938, 8.

²⁰¹ E. Spier, *Focus: A Footnote to the History of the Thirties* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1963); Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 328; Nicolson diary, 1 March, 6 April 1938, 27 July 1939, Balliol College.

²⁰² D. Dutton, *Anthony Eden: A Life and Reputation* (London: Arnold, 1997), 129.

²⁰³ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 377.

Athenaeum,’ Taylor observed, ‘not to the derelict premises of the 1917 Club [the defunct headquarters of British foreign relations utopianism]’.²⁰⁴

Nicolson, like many Edenites, was an ardent though politically not very effective critic of an entrenched Conservative administration still dominated by Chamberlain. Nevertheless, Group members fortified themselves constantly with the hope that ‘we may keep the Whips on the jump by sniping at the Government’.²⁰⁵ Their efforts were not assisted by Eden’s less than vigorous opposition to Chamberlain. By 18 July 1939, a demoralized Nicolson was writing: ‘Anthony does not wish to defy the Tory Party and is in fact missing every boat with exquisite elegance. We drift and drift and pass the rudder into other hands’.²⁰⁶ The Group faded out after Eden returned to office as War Minister in Churchill’s first Ministry in May 1940.

An understanding of Nicolson’s liberal realism—over Abyssinia, the Rhineland, Spain, and Czechoslovakia—rests in large part on an appreciation of the policy of appeasement as pursued before and after Munich. Neville Thompson has referred to appeasement’s few parliamentary critics and to their ineffectiveness.²⁰⁷ Prior to Munich, in Paul Kennedy’s view, there existed only seven recognizable Conservative (or Conservative Party-aligned) critics, who constituted ‘a small, unco-ordinated and in part unorthodox cluster... often divided among themselves’.²⁰⁸ Only three prominent MPs consistently questioned and criticized Chamberlain’s policies in the House of Commons well before the Munich Agreement: Churchill, Amery, and Nicolson.²⁰⁹

By late 1938, although a member of the ‘Eden Group’, Nicolson never hesitated to express his more independent views on European security policy. He rejected Sir Robert Vansittart’s request to ignore his differences with Chamberlain and serve under him in a proposed ‘Government of Reconstruction’,²¹⁰ largely out of personal loyalty to ‘Van’, who had been removed by Eden (with Chamberlain’s blessing) as Permanent Under-Secretary at the Foreign Office to the sinecure of Chief Diplomatic Adviser to the Government in January 1938.

However, Nicolson was attracted to Vansittart’s policy of a global strategy based on alliance diplomacy, one aimed at halting German territorial ambitions and preserving the British Commonwealth and Empire through a renewed balance of power and alliances with France and the USSR under the

²⁰⁴ A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent over Foreign Policy 1792–1939* (The Ford Lectures, 1956) (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1957), 197.

²⁰⁵ Nicolson diary, 27 June 1939, Balliol College.

²⁰⁶ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 406.

²⁰⁷ Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers*, 3.

²⁰⁸ P. Kennedy, *The Realities Behind Diplomacy: Background Influences on British External Policy, 1865–1980* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981), 286–7.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 296.

²¹⁰ N. Rose, *Vansittart: Study of a Diplomat* (London: Heinemann, 1978), 232.

umbrella of the League of Nations.²¹¹ In November 1938, Nicolson still hoped that a world congress could be convened of those nation-states determined to resist the dictators, one at which policies other than Chamberlain's might be aired and discussed.²¹² He was certain, though, that Chamberlain had left Britain dangerously (perhaps even fatally) vulnerable, and that it was essential to increase armaments production and to place the country on a war basis as soon as possible.²¹³

The word 'appeasement' appeared rarely in Nicolson's pronouncements on British foreign policy until after the Munich Agreement because, like most MPs and international relations experts, he regarded it as a proven tool of British policy. Only when Chamberlain began to distort its moral and practical basis did Nicolson coin the word more frequently, and contrast its original with what he considered its increasingly debased meaning. In January 1939, he defined it as 'the policy of conciliating Germany and Italy by concessions irrespective of their moral justification'.²¹⁴ His thinking increasingly reflected a Thucydidean injunction: 'When one makes concessions to one's enemies, one regrets it afterwards, and the fewer concessions one makes the safer one is likely to be'.²¹⁵ Nicolson's attitude to the time-honoured policy of appeasement as executed by British governments before 1938 has been well summarized by Martin Gilbert. '“Munich” was a policy, dictated by fear and weakness . . . Appeasement was quite different; it was a policy of constant concessions based on common sense and strength . . . The norm of international affairs remains the assumption that agreement is possible. For as long as this assumption holds good, appeasement is a necessary policy, combining expediency with morality'.²¹⁶

Appeasement, with its origins in the nineteenth century, represented 'the policy of pragmatic compromise' in British foreign relations.²¹⁷ Until late 1938, it was regarded as 'the most noble term in the diplomatic vocabulary'.²¹⁸ After Munich, appeasement came to be seen as 'a craven surrender to threats rather than the wise and rational application of moral principles'.²¹⁹ With realist and idealist support for the policy diminishing inside and outside Parliament after Munich, its days were numbered. Chamberlain's honourable intentions notwithstanding, he must shoulder 'the responsibility for deceiving

²¹¹ M. L. Roi, *Alternative to Appeasement: Sir Robert Vansittart and Alliance Diplomacy, 1934–1937* (Westport, CT, London: Praeger, 1997), 172–7.

²¹² Nicolson, 'After Munich', 523.

²¹³ Nicolson diary, 15 December 1938, Balliol College.

²¹⁴ H. Nicolson, 'What France Means to England', *Foreign Affairs*, 17 (1939), 359.

²¹⁵ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I, 34, 56.

²¹⁶ M. Gilbert, *The Roots of Appeasement* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 187.

²¹⁷ P. Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870–1945: Eight Studies* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1983), 25.

²¹⁸ Thompson, *The Anti-Appeasers*, 27.

²¹⁹ Kennedy, *Strategy and Diplomacy 1870–1945*, 28–9.

and misleading the majority of those in whose name he exercised power' and 'for imposing sacrifices on the publics of countries who had looked to Britain as a model and a protector'. This, in D. Cameron Watt's view, represented appeasement's 'immorality'.²²⁰

By mid-1939, appeasement was in its death throes. Chamberlain belatedly pursued alliance diplomacy (an Anglo-French military commitment in the event of war),²²¹ offered guarantees to Eastern Europe's nation-states, and promised stronger support for collective security. Nicolson followed events in 1939 uneasily, his reaction typifying the confusion created among MPs by Chamberlain's policy. He saw the British-French initiative (6 February) as marking 'not the end of appeasement, but the realization that appeasement is a means and not an end'.²²² To his wife, however, he indicated on 7 February that it represented the end of appeasement.²²³ He struggled with the question of whether or not Chamberlain, in negotiations with the dictators, and as the representative of Europe's democracies, constituted 'a tremendous diplomatic asset'. Certainly, the Prime Minister's willingness to negotiate made it difficult for the German (and Italian) regimes to portray him as 'the big black wolf of British belligerency'.²²⁴ Nicolson seemed to miss the obvious point that, even if the majority of Germans and Italians regarded Chamberlain as a man of peace, they were ruled by men to whom this was irrelevant.²²⁵

Nicolson described Italy's military annexation of Albania (7 April 1939) as 'a deliberate smash and grab raid on the German model'; it represented 'the last nail in the coffin of appeasement'.²²⁶ Although he approved of Chamberlain's assurances to Greece and Romania following the invasion,²²⁷ Nicolson confided to his diary, 'I cannot but feel that there is something amateurish about the whole thing. We are increasing our liabilities by leaps and bounds without taking similar action to increase our assets. I am becoming convinced that he [Chamberlain] is a very stupid man'.²²⁸ Eleven days later Nicolson was convinced that 'Chamberlain Must Go. He is too shifty and furtive for any confidence to be inspired'.²²⁹

By 9 May 1939, he was certain that Conservative Party opinion was almost solidly anti-appeasement.²³⁰ One month on he was prepared to accept 'vague

²²⁰ D. Cameron Watt, 'Chamberlain's Ambassadors', in M. Dockrill and B. McKercher (eds.), *Diplomacy and World Power: Studies in British Foreign Policy, 1890–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 169.

²²¹ N. Chamberlain, *Hansard*, 6 February 1939, 623.

²²² Nicolson diary, Balliol College, 6 February 1939.

²²³ Nicolson, *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 390–1.

²²⁴ H. Nicolson, 'People and Things', *Spectator*, 17 February 1939, 260.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 24 March 1939, 482, 7 April 1939, 590; *Hansard*, 3 April 1939, 2524–5.

²²⁶ Nicolson diary, 7 April 1939, Balliol College.

²²⁷ N. Chamberlain, *Hansard*, 13 April 1939, 5–15.

²²⁸ Nicolson diary, 13 April 1939, Balliol College.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 9 May 1939.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 24 April 1939.

appeasement', but only if accompanied by 'strong and rapid armament'.²³¹ By 16 June, Nicolson was relieved that at last the Government seemed to be pursuing a 'dual policy of resistance and conciliation'.²³² On 22 May, Germany and Italy concluded a 'Pact of Steel'. It was now pointless, Nicolson wrote on 30 June, to attempt to persuade Germany that Britain had no intention of encircling or further appeasing her since, to the Germans, the nation-states aiming at 'renewal'—the *Mächte der Erneuerung* (Germany, Italy, and Japan)—were destined to triumph over the democracies—the *Mächte der Beharrung*—who wished only to retain their existing territory. Therefore, war was inevitable, because 'the Nazi system is a hoop which topples over if it stops'.²³³

Adolf Hitler's diplomatic pressure on Poland to return Danzig (the German Hanseatic port made a Free City by the Treaty of Versailles) to Germany began in earnest in January 1939. Chamberlain's reluctance to engage Russia as an ally made Russian connivance in Hitler's real aim—the conquest of Poland—more and more likely. Hitler occupied Prague on 15 March and the Czechoslovak State was dissolved—an indisputable violation of the dictator's diplomatic pledges which led to a marked change in British public opinion regarding appeasement. This prompted the *Manchester Guardian* in a report entitled 'The Gift of Prophecy' to reflect on Nicolson's far-sightedness in describing the defence guarantee given to Czechoslovakia at the time of Munich as 'the most farcical piece of diplomatic hypocrisy that has ever been perpetrated'.²³⁴ On 31 March, the British Government undertook to assist Poland should she come under German attack. The path of appeasement, described by Chamberlain himself as long and bristling with obstacles, was at an end.²³⁵

Hitler denounced Germany's Treaty of Non-Aggression with Poland (signed in January 1934) and the Anglo-German Naval Treaty (concluded in June 1935) on 28 April. In early July, Nicolson asserted that the rights of the Danzigers were about to be exploited by Hitler as a pretext for destroying Polish independence, thus opening the way for a German invasion of Romania and the Ukraine. The overland route to India would then be secured, and a significant portion of the British Empire encircled. Although 'from the hedgerows still come some chirps of appeasement',²³⁶ it was now clear that the British Government and people had reached a crossroads. 'The essential divergence seems to be between those who fear that the full and immediate

²³¹ Nicolson diary, 8 June 1939, Balliol College

²³² H. Nicolson, 'People and Things', *Spectator*, 16 June 1939, 1035.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 30 June 1939, 1126.

²³⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 15 March 1939, 10; H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 5 October 1938, 430.

²³⁵ N. Chamberlain, *Hansard*, 3 October 1938, 48.

²³⁶ H. Nicolson, 'People and Things', *Spectator*, 7 July 1939, 13.

organisation of our physical, moral and diplomatic power may serve as a *provocation*; and those who hope that it will act as a *deterrent*'. Nicolson argued that in practice there was no longer any halfway house between appeasement and resistance; from now on it would be necessary either to appease with the maximum of concession or to resist with the maximum of force. No satisfactory compromise was possible. Therefore, 'we should now cease drawing elegant arabesques around the alternations and combinations of appeasement and resistance'.²³⁷

Chamberlain's change of policy was too little, too late. Nicolson insisted that the democracies had no choice but to convince the Axis Powers by a sustained show of military strength and diplomatic resolve that they were determined on resistance, while indicating in a 'Manifesto of Peace' their preparedness to meet all reasonable demands.²³⁸ He also called for the inclusion in the Cabinet of prominent Chamberlain critics such as Churchill and Eden as a sign of increased British resolution, and for the transfer of the conduct of foreign affairs from the Prime Minister to the Foreign Secretary and his expert advisers.²³⁹

Nicolson's conclusions were reinforced by three convictions. It was now impossible to temper Hitler's ambitions by appealing to the saner counsels of the German General Staff, since the dictator had assumed sole command of Germany's armed forces on 4 June 1937. As Hitler's victories since then had rendered him unassailable, no opportunity remained to persuade the German people to desert their Führer. For these reasons attempts to detach Italy or Spain from the Axis by diplomatic methods would prove unsuccessful. 'When people are anxious to die dangerously,' he wrote, 'there is small propaganda value in the carpet-slippers of democratic ease'.²⁴⁰ On 31 July, Nicolson told the House of Commons that, with appeasement 'dead', there was no longer any place for 'this ridiculous duality between appeasers and resisters'. In future, the British Government must exercise 'the maximum of resistance first, and thereafter the maximum of conciliation'.²⁴¹ The statement represented a succinct statement of his liberal realist approach to the European international relations crisis.

In the *Spectator* on 4 August, Nicolson outlined how such a policy could be realized:

The only hope of maintaining peace lies in our being able to convince Herr Hitler that a German victory is *not* a physical possibility, but that a general peace, honourable to

²³⁷ H. Nicolson, 'Is War Inevitable?', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 126/749 (1939), 5, 8.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 8–9; *Diaries and Letters: 1930–39*, 405.

²³⁹ H. Nicolson, 'People and Things', *Spectator*, 7 July 1939, 13.

²⁴⁰ Nicolson, 'Is War Inevitable?', 9.

²⁴¹ H. Nicolson, *Hansard*, 31 July 1939, 2083–4.

Germany, *can* be made a physical possibility. We must deprive him simultaneously of ambition and despair. The danger of appeasement was that it endeavoured to purchase momentary alleviation by successive sacrifices; the value of the peace front is that it first creates a collective force demonstrably superior to the strength of the Axis and then offers the Axis the prospect of a durable and general settlement. In one hand we hold the sword; in the other the olive branch.²⁴²

Yet it was too early for the democracies to proclaim their terms of peace. Any such pronouncement must follow and not precede a firm agreement with the USSR. It should aim, too, at fortifying the conscience of the anti-fascist world, and not at satisfying the aspirations of Germany and Italy. The Reich must also restore Czech liberties and disarm. On 23 August, the USSR and Germany signed a non-aggression pact.

Hitler's invasion of Poland on 1 September 1939 resulted in British and French declarations of war on Germany two days later. Certainly, 'we are not making war unreasonably, but only as the result of exceptional provocation' by those with a desire 'to spread their dominion far and wide'. With them 'we must simply fight it out to the last'.²⁴³ Nicolson regarded the war as a conflict of principles and arms between the torchbearers for Western values, and the Hitlerian system, which he considered the most evil form of human governance since that of Genghis Khan.²⁴⁴ A struggle had been joined for the evolution and destiny of the human race.²⁴⁵ The 'fundamental principle' behind the war centred on Hitler's conviction that force was all-important in international relations, and the democratic belief that law was so necessary in international affairs that all efforts must be made to defend it.²⁴⁶ Nicolson was uncharacteristically caustic about the erstwhile advocates of appeasement—'the untutored Munichois'²⁴⁷—and, as the conflict progressed, 'the isolationists...the shiver-sisters of Mayfair and the wobble-boys of Whitehall...the Peace Pledge Union, the Christian Pacifists...the friends of Herr von Ribbentrop [Germany's Foreign Minister and former Ambassador to Britain]...and the *disjecta membra* of former pro-Nazi organizations'.²⁴⁸

As a member of Lord Salisbury's Watching Committee on Chamberlain's performance as Prime Minister in April and May 1940—its members sought greater Executive accountability to the backbench at this perilous

²⁴² H. Nicolson, *Marginal Comment January 6–August 4 1939* (London: Constable, 1939), 199.

²⁴³ Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, I. 38, 59, IV. 92, 320.

²⁴⁴ H. Nicolson, 'Then and Now: September 1939...August 1914', *Listener*, 14 September 1939, 507.

²⁴⁵ H. Nicolson, 'Causes and Purposes', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 126 (1939), 390.

²⁴⁶ H. Nicolson, 'Hitler's Own War', *Current Affairs*, 4 July 1942, 3.

²⁴⁷ Nicolson, *Marginal Comment January 6–August 4 1939*, 198.

²⁴⁸ H. Nicolson, 'People and Things', *Spectator*, 8 March 1940, 327.

time²⁴⁹—Nicolson finally despaired of the Prime Minister.²⁵⁰ After the Second World War, he described Chamberlain's pursuit of appeasement as a story with 'all the pity and terror of a Greek tragedy' in which two contrasting forms of hubris had confronted each other—'the megalomania of Hitler and Chamberlain's masterful sense of mission'.²⁵¹

In 1952, Nicolson summed up the Hitlerian phenomenon with exquisite elegance:

The little man in the soiled and ill-fitting aquascutum becomes the ruler of Europe, the *Sieg Heils* pulsate gratingly as a steam-saw in vast auditoriums, potentates and premiers are dragged as captives to Obersalzberg, and in the palaces of fallen dynasties the Austrian wastrel dictates the destinies of half the world. Yet in all the splendour of his triumph, in all his harsh gloating over the subjugation of his enemies, he remains astonishingly insignificant and inappropriate. The tragedy follows the classic form: his egomania degenerates into *hubris*; the jealousy of Olympus is aroused; and in the last act the Furies flit and jibber like vampires among the smoking ruins. Yet as we ponder upon the *desis* and *lisis* of this frightful tragedy we are left, not with the purifying effects of pity and terror, but with a sad sense that here was no heroic figure defying the Fates, no symbol of magnificent madness or error, but someone small and barren, generating superhuman force by the very intensity of his envy and rancour.²⁵²

Nicolson's liberal realist conviction that during the 1930s the Western democracies could have preserved peace through the machinery of the League of Nations never deserted him. As late as April 1940, he reflected that resort to the League, rather than attempts at European integration such as Pan-Europa or Federal Union, remained the best means of containing the conflict.²⁵³ Nicolson believed that contrasting British and French conceptions of the organization's purpose were chiefly responsible for the League's failure; 'whereas we regarded the League as a valuable ideal which might become dangerous' by drawing Britain into Continental quarrels, 'the French regarded it as an instrument which might prove useful'. Between 1919 and 1939, 'they took the League too narrowly and we took it too vaguely. If their conception had been less precise and ours more realistic the League might have survived'. By making the League 'an instrument of policy, the French destroyed its moral efficiency'; in seeing it as 'a desirable but rather imaginative theory we destroyed its practical effect'.²⁵⁴

²⁴⁹ G. Stewart, *Burying Caesar: Churchill, Chamberlain and the Battle for the Tory Party* (London: Phoenix, 2000), 407–8.

²⁵⁰ Egremont, *Under Two Flags*, 153–4.

²⁵¹ H. Nicolson, Review of K. Feiling, *The Life of Neville Chamberlain* (1946), *Daily Telegraph*, 13 December 1946, 6.

²⁵² H. Nicolson, 'Marginal Comment', *Spectator*, 7 November 1952, 595.

²⁵³ Nicolson diary, 1 April 1940, Balliol College.

²⁵⁴ Nicolson, 'What France Means to England', 358–9.

The idealist of 1919, and the realist of the late 1920s and early 1930s, acknowledged the failure of realism and practical idealism to resolve inter-war foreign policy crises. At length, however, he developed a philosophy of international relations aimed at preventing a second European war. The reconstituted League of Nations and ‘collective defence’ advocated by Nicolson as successors to collective security failed to engage the interest of statesmen or foreign policy-makers in Britain, on the Continent, or throughout the British Commonwealth and Empire. Nor did the United States acknowledge the potential of a League so reformed for preventing war. The fact that the British political and civil service elite never embraced these approaches to foreign policy and diplomacy is not to the discredit of liberal realism.

Similarly, it does not detract from Nicolson’s eloquent anti-appeasement record and endeavours to reconcile realism and League of Nations idealism. ‘Collective defence’, if reinforced by the political and diplomatic determination of the Great Powers (including the United States and the USSR)—a liberal realist approach—could arguably have countered the ambitions of the Italian and German dictators. Interestingly, in April 1941, Nicolson recorded in his diary the following conversation with the Russian Ambassador to Britain. ‘Maisky says that Russia only desired peace and that when we obviously did not want to help her she came to a pact [August 1939] with the enemy. He indicated that this pact was not unalterable’.²⁵⁵ Two months later, Germany invaded the USSR.

²⁵⁵ Nicolson diary, 24 April 1941, Balliol College.