

BRITISH FOREIGN POLICY AND BRITISH PUBLIC OPINION

THE MASTER OF BALLIOL

PERHAPS the most disturbing thing about British Foreign Policy at the present time is the fact that public opinion in England is profoundly divided on the subject. Mr. Eden's resignation brought matters to a head, and revealed an ambiguity in the country's attitude towards foreign policy which had existed for some time. It has been the strength of England in the past to have had a foreign policy, the broad principles of which were known to the world and understood by the country, a foreign policy on which all parties were substantially agreed. No doubt as government succeeded government, the emphasis would vary, but the policy remained continuous. That gave England great strength in the councils of the world. After the war, we thought we had a new foreign policy—that of collective security through the League of Nations—on which the country could then unite. And for some time, while no great strain was put upon the League of Nations, the idea succeeded. Even in those days public opinion was more enthusiastic about the League than was the government. The Foreign Office was realist, as it is the business of a Foreign Office to be, but not idealist enough. Public opinion was idealist, but not realist enough. A nation cannot have an effective foreign policy unless it makes up its mind what in the last resort it is prepared to defend, even if it has to fight in order to do so. The country as a whole evaded that issue, because it persuaded itself that the mere existence of the League of Nations would make it unnecessary that it should ever have to fight for anything. We never made clear to ourselves or to others whether, if the issue could no longer be evaded, we were prepared to fight in defence of the principles we were now professing—namely League principles of international law; or to fight for a narrower circle of British interests in the old sense of that term; or were no longer prepared to fight in defence of anything or anyone.

But this was not the only confusion in the mind of the country. Post-war disillusionment with the terms of the Treaty of Versailles was increased, as the allies under the fatal influence of Poincaré persisted in a vain policy of keeping Germany down, refused the *Anschluss* of Germany with Austria, would do noth-

ing to meet Germany's just demands about disarmament. A distinguished German said to me in 1924 that he thought German opinion would give the allies ten years after the Treaty of Versailles to see if they were serious about the League of Nations and disarmament. Then, if the allies should still fail them, he prophesied that there would be a great reaction in Germany against the Republican government. How tragically that prophecy was fulfilled, need not be emphasized. The allies have yielded to Hitler's blackmail more than they were willing to yield to Republican Germany's reason. The Conservative party has a bad conscience—as it might well have—in regard to its treatment of Germany after the war, which hampers it in resisting Germany's illegitimate demands, or in resisting in the name of League principles Germany's obvious aggression.

This general disillusionment in regard to the high hopes which inspired our belief in the League of Nations had a further result. It produced in this country, as it has clearly produced in America, a sham pacifism which repudiated altogether the principles of 1914 and the principles of the League, and taught that in no circumstances can resistance to aggression either be justifiable or be of any avail. It was a *sham* pacifism, because most of those infected by it cared not for peace for itself, but for a peace for themselves, and preached that we must desist from giving any help to the victims of aggression if the aggressor might retort with a threat of war. The effect of that kind of sham pacifism seems evident to an outside observer in America's attitude to Japanese aggression in China. Such pacifism plays directly into the hands of the aggressors, who are delighted to get their immediate way on the cheap, and to be made free to start on further aggressions.

The fatal result upon public opinion of the spread of this sham pacifism was that it divided the idealist forces. When in the most critical years the country had in Sir John Simon a Foreign Minister who was a master of indecision, whose policy was inspired not by a love of peace but by fear of war, he "got away with it" by appealing to the necessity of our keeping out of war at all costs. The Italian aggression in Abyssinia seemed to offer the British people at last an opportunity of standing by the principles of the League. The Peace Ballot of 1934 had shown how decidedly public preference inclined to those principles, even though public opinion was less decidedly behind supporting those principles by military measures if necessary. Sir Samuel Hoare's great speech at Geneva in September, 1935,

had the enthusiastic support of the country. It looked as though at last England was going to lead Europe in defence of League principles. The Hoare-Laval proposal to buy off Mussolini, by offering him more than he had yet conquered, roused a storm of indignant protest from the British public, the last indignant uprising of public opinion. But the policy of Sanctions broke down hopelessly before the Government's use of "Sanctions mean War" as a deterrent to enthusiasm. The ambiguous warning, which really meant "If you persist in Sanctions, Italy may make war on you", was used as if it meant "If you persist in Sanctions, you are making war on Italy". To refuse to sell Italy petrol by means of which the Italians could spray the unfortunate Abyssinians with gas was taken by sham pacifists to be morally wrong, because the Italians might thereupon add to their present crimes by making war on us. Moral topsy-turveydom could hardly go further, but the number of well-meaning people who took this line in the sacred name of peace was astonishing. The result was that the policy of Sanctions was a failure. Mussolini triumphed, and the League was more discredited than ever. As Mr. Gaythorne-Hardy says in his new edition of "A Short History of International Affairs 1920-1938", "The policy adopted in the Abyssinian crisis fell hopelessly between two stools and met with complete disaster. There was something to be said for a "European" attitude, which refused to intervene at all and frankly explained why. There was much to be said for a resolve to save Abyssinia—and the League—at all costs. There was little enough to be said for the imposition of innocuous Sanctions, which the aggressor, though none the less irritated, could modify at his pleasure by the threat of war." When Mr. Eden succeeded Sir Samuel Hoare as Foreign Secretary, the hopes of the supporters of the League revived again. While he held office, they felt that he was doing his best, with quite inadequate support from the rest of the Cabinet. The success of Nyon showed the success of standing up to the dictators. But to the dismay of supporters of the League, the next time when there was occasion for standing up to Italy, Mr. Chamberlain intervened forcibly on the side of surrender. The blackmailing policy of the dictators triumphed again, and the League was more discredited than ever:

"By superior energies, more strict
Affiance in each other: faith more firm
In their unhallowed principles: the bad
Have fairly earned a victory o'er the weak,
The vacillating, inconsistent good."

I have dwelt at this length on what happened before Mr. Eden's resignation, as it is important to recognize the part played by the ambiguity and vacillation of British foreign policy and of British public opinion in bringing us to the pass we are now in. Had there been no League of Nations at all, and had our government been pursuing a policy of supporting British interests—the greatest of which is peace—and working as well as it could through a Concert of Europe, we should never have come to this. We should have been pursuing a policy which the Foreign Office understood and believed in, and should have suited our armaments to our policy. Had we on the other hand whole-heartedly pursued a League policy, recognized that like all policies worth pursuing it has its dangers and its risks, faced up to them and taken a lead, we should have treated Germany differently and almost certainly prevented the rise of Hitler, and might well have established the new system in Europe. We were too well-intentioned to make a success of the first policy, and not well enough intentioned to make a success of the second.

Mr. Gaythorne-Hardy, writing in early August 1938, sums up the position by saying, "The crucial difficulty lies in the fact that we have now reached a condition to which the term 'international anarchy', unfairly applied to the pre-war world, is fairly applicable." "There is no suitable material for a 'Concert of Europe'... With all its imperfections, there did exist (in the pre-war world) a basis for a system of a sort. Contrast those conditions with those of to-day, and it will be apparent that the difficulty of rebuilding a satisfactory Concert system on the pre-war model is at least as great as that of reconstructing a working League of Nations. The great trouble at present is that there is *no* European system available: we have reached real 'international anarchy with no clear way out'." He goes on, "The suddenness with which we have been confronted with the existing critical situation is largely due to a dangerous tendency to make-believe and 'wishful thinking'." For this he blames League propagandists of all parties—"who bear a heavy responsibility for having concentrated on white-washing over the defects in the League of Nations, when the real task was to indicate the lack of that international cement necessary before the fabric could be trusted." I blame rather the sham pacifism which excused us from acting on the principles to which we had committed ourselves. But I agree with his concluding words:—"Looking back through the story re-

corded in this volume, one is haunted by a fear that it has all been summarized in a few grim sentences, by an ancient Hebrew prophet:

Because they have seduced my people, saying, peace; and there was no peace: and one built up a wall, and, lo, others daubed it with untempered mortar. . . . the wall is no more, neither they that daubed it, to wit, the prophets of Israel which prophesy concerning Jerusalem, and which see visions of peace for her, and there is no peace, saith the Lord God.

Since Mr. Eden's resignation, the Prime Minister has personally controlled our foreign policy. It is notorious that he takes exclusive responsibility for it: that he trusts the Foreign Office less than anyone in control of foreign policy ever did, that he is determined to go his own way, that he thinks his is the only way to secure peace. Mr. Chamberlain so prides himself on being a realist that it might have made us hope—some of us did hope—that we had come to an end of "make-believe and wishful thinking". But no one can be more sentimental than a hard-headed business man "moving about alone in worlds not realised". Could there be more egregious examples of "make-believe and wishful thinking" than the assumption that Italy can be detached from Germany: that after all that has happened, Mussolini's word can be trusted for a moment: that Italy's intervention is all for the sake of the "beautiful eyes" of General Franco and that she has no design against France and England in her intervention or in her occupation of Majorca: that because Mussolini says so, the recent outcry in the Italian press against France, with its outrageous demands for Tunis, Corsica, and Jibouti was spontaneous and uninspired by the government? What but the simplest "wishful thinking" could make us accept from Mr. Chamberlain a touching belief that if he sent Lord Runciman to Prague, and if he proposed a "reasonable solution" of the problem of the Sudeten Germans and made the Czechs accept it, Hitler would say "Thank you so much. Of course I accept. Now we can all be friends together"? Even Mr. Chamberlain got a shock when he got to Godesberg and found how much more than even the Anglo-French proposals Hitler demanded, if he was to accept. But in spite of having brought the country to the verge of war, his optimism revived at Munich and he returned in triumph to England with peace. The debate which followed showed that the Prime Minister attaches enormous importance to the document to which he and Herr Hitler put their names. In the face

of Herr Hitler's record, it seems a still more fatal example of "wishful thinking" to put all that trust in the word of a dictator. Compared with such a wishful thinker, the most simple supporters of the League have been stark realists.

The world's judgment about Munich has not been Mr. Chamberlain's. That is pretty clear. That it was another surrender to blackmail, and another victory for Germany, is becoming more evident every day. Since Munich, Hitler has done nothing to make it easier for his co-signatory of this precious document which was to usher in a new era of peace for the world. The notorious Dr. Goebbels explained quickly that Mr. Chamberlain had had to do as he was told. The German demand for the return of the colonies increases daily. Herr Hitler has made repeated attacks on British statesmen who venture to criticize him. He has quite lately objected to Mr. Chamberlain's remonstrance concerning press abuse of Lord Baldwin. There are ominous attacks on British rearmament. Worst of all, there has come this astounding outrage against the Jews, showing that those who now rule Germany think they can throw off all restraint and all decency, and defy the public opinion of the world. The partners of this axis are pursuing a game which is so transparent that it would seem capable of deceiving no one. Italy abuses France, and makes new and outrageous demands for her possessions, and professes friendship with England. Germany covers England with abuse, and makes at the same time a pact of friendship with France.

Yet in this crisis, when we need to be united, the country is still divided. Opinion is slowly moving against the government. The rigidity and wooden nature of our party organizations are partly to blame for the fact that it is not moving more quickly. The official view of the Labour party still holds that the formal purity and integrity of its official doctrines are more important than meeting effectively the grave threat to all liberty which is now hanging over us. But the local Labour parties are full of revolt, and they will soon stir the official party. The movement for a union of the progressive forces is steadily growing in strength. Many Conservatives in Parliament and outside are becoming more and more restless at Mr. Chamberlain's policy, though party discipline still holds them.

At the same time, if you find opponents of the government in the most unexpected places, you also find supporters of Mr. Chamberlain where you would least expect them. The idealist forces of the country are still disunited, and on the other hand

there are the most strange alignments amongst people of hitherto opposed camps. The explanation of this continued division of progressive forces and the continued trust which many non-Conservatives still have in Mr. Chamberlain is, I think, this:—

In spite of all there is to be said against Munich, the Prime Minister's determination in the crisis had one great and remarkable effect. It provoked that uprising by the ordinary people of all nations, including the people of Germany and Italy, in favour of peace. We all suddenly had a vision, in this world of international anarchy, of the world's longing for peace. Mr. Chamberlain's dogged determination did that, however mistaken we may think the policy he has pursued and is still pursuing.

There is a wonderful passage in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, where the shepherds on the Delectable Mountains, after giving the pilgrims a sight of the Celestial City "through a perspective glass", warned them of the danger that lay before them "if they slept on the Enchanted Ground". We had such a vision at the moment when the crisis was suddenly averted, and in that uprising of the peoples' longing for peace we had a sight of the Celestial City. And now many of us have gone to sleep on the Enchanted Ground, and are still indulging in "wishful thinking". Some of us have scarcely awakened, even though the German government has run amok and is encouraging the Italians to do the same.

We must wake up, and we must again have a foreign policy which we know, in which we believe, and on which we can unite. How are we to get it? Not, assuredly, by trusting in the Prime Minister's trust in the dictators. But the policy in which we were united, that of collective security through the League of Nations, has not only been abandoned, it has been destroyed by the present government. We must rebuild the League by acting on its principles wherever we can outside the League. That means that if we are to negotiate with Germany and Italy, who are members of the anti-comintern pact, we must co-operate actively not only with the other democratic countries, but with Russia. The ignoring of Russia has been one of the strangest parts of the government's policy. The practical folly of this disregard has done more than anything else to make the working classes of this country believe that the present government is romantically pro-Fascist. We must also make non-intervention in Spain a reality. The government still withholds belligerent rights from Franco. That is something, but not much, to set

against its implementing the agreement with Italy while Mussolini shows himself more determined than ever that Franco shall win, and acts in flagrant contempt of a non-intervention policy.

How are we to secure the adoption of a foreign policy which could again make us a united nation, a policy which would be neither pro-Fascist nor pro-Bolshevist, but for democracy and peace? Who is to lead the country in such a policy of world peace? Is there any leader who can take Mr. Chamberlain's place? I was asked that question when I was fighting the by-election at Oxford, and I venture to conclude this article by quoting from the answer I gave:—

There are three ways, and three ways alone, in which this country can be again united, recover its faith and spirit and find its salvation. They all involve miracles. Two of the miracles are possible, and one is not.

(1) Mr. Chamberlain may see the error of his ways. He may realise that the opposition to his conduct of foreign affairs is not ordinary political opposition: that it represents something deep-seated and invincible in the mind of England, and above all, of working-class England. Once he saw that, he is too big a man and too much of an Englishman to go on attempting to drive the country along a path which a large section of it so abhors.

He could then return to Mr. Eden's policy or at least to the principles of that policy, pursue it with his own vigour and determination, get rid of the defeatist members of his cabinet, and then in spite of all that has happened the country might be rallied and the situation still saved. The acid test of his return to Mr. Eden's policy would be the adoption of an entirely different attitude to Russia. That is miracle number one.

(2) If Mr. Chamberlain continues as he has done so far, refuses to trust the country, persists in boycotting Russia while he yields anything to Italy: and if his supporters continue their campaign of evasion, secrecy and complacency in his favour, there may be such an uprising of popular opinion that the divisions and rigidities of all opposers of his policy will disappear: there will be new alignments, and that there is an effective alternative Government will become clear. That is not so impossible as it may appear to the National Government. The Conservative Government in 1906 resigned rather than dissolve, because they were sure that the Opposition could not form an alternative Government. They gave way to what turned out in fact to be the strongest Government in personnel and ability of modern times, led by a hitherto despised man called Campbell-Bannerman.

That is miracle number two.

The first miracle looks the easier, but I think the chances between number one and number two are about even.

(3) Some people expect a third miracle, namely that the country—not the present docile House of Commons—but the whole country may rally to Mr. Chamberlain. That miracle cannot happen, so long as Mr. Chamberlain is in his present mind and acts as he does.

And this miracle we shall never see, because miracles are wrought only by faith. You cannot fire a nation with faith in a policy which is never wholeheartedly confided to us, glimpses of which fill us with dismay; and I am convinced that an ever-increasing number of men and women in this country are losing any faith they ever had in Mr. Chamberlain as the director of our political fate.

But if number three is impossible—and without faith and recovered hope a united nation is not possible—then we cannot meet this crisis as a united nation unless we can bring about miracle number one or miracle number two. Without that we shall remain dispirited, disillusioned, divided, confused.

Our only hope of salvation is to welcome faith and courage again in our hearts, and unite to work for the victory of the united forces of progress, democracy, and peace.